

PROMOTING REFLECTIVE THINKING THROUGH JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT IN EDMODO

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Abstract

This research was an investigation to explore the use of Edmodo as a reflective platform in the learning processes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The students made use of Edmodo as a platform to critically reflect on their learning processes. Thirty-five students in Information and Technology class in Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta participated in this research. One lecturer created an Edmodo account for use as a journal assignment so that the student could engage in and examine their own reflection process. The data collected were qualitative, consisting of students' posting messages and comments on the Edmodo, surveys on the students' reflective experiences using Edmodo as reflection tools, and group reflective dialogues recorded by lecturer in class meetings over the implementation of Edmodos during the course. The positive implications for the use of Edmodo as a medium to provide and promote critical reflection for EFL students were also investigated.

Keywords: Edmodo, reflective thinking, journaling

Edmodo is a free and safe learning platform designed by Jeff O' Hara and Nick Borg for teachers, students, parents, schools, and districts, and is available at www.edmodo.com (Chada Kongcham, 2013). This website looks similar to Facebook, but is much more private and safe because it allows teachers to create and manage accounts and only for their students, who receive a group code and register in the group, can access and join the group; no one else can participate or spy on the group (Jarc, 2010). The site offers a simple way for teachers and students in a virtual class to connect and collaborate. Borg and O'Hara assumed that a social networking geared towards the needs of students could have a reflective impact on how students collaborate and learn in their world, rather than the school setting their teachers grew up in (Gushiken, 2013). Teachers have noted that Edmodo even supported the relationships between students, and led to a stronger classroom community (Mills, 2011). Students can also share content, submit homework, assignments and quizzes, receive their teachers feedback, notes and alerts as well as voting on polls (Jarc, 2010). Therefore, Edmodo can be seen as Learning Management System (LMS) which can facilitate teachers to set up and manage their online classes easily (Witherspoon, 2011).

Research Questions

The aim of the research is to investigate the reflection process through journal assignment in

Edmodo. In order to see if students can critically reflect on what they have learned and enhance the effectiveness of their learning, three specific research questions serve as guides in the data analysis:

1. What types of reflection are involved in students' reflection?
2. What are the lecturer's roles in the process of journaling?
3. How can Edmodo promote critical reflection and thinking?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Reflection

Reflection is a conceptual process of learning used in everyday life. It is more than just common sense knowledge. John Cowan (1998:16) states that, 'A student is reflecting when she notes that there is something different about the case that she is considering, in comparison with the examples she has encountered in class; and when she also identifies what the difference is, and what she should do about it.' The concept of reflection may also be observed in several ways. Reflection can be seen as being intimately involved with the process of learning and the representation of that learning. Reflection here requires giving consideration to the details. Reflection can be in the direction of a purpose, processing information that leads to a useful outcome.

Reflection, as a form of thinking process, is difficult to identify. Reflection journal can assist as

indication from which we can understand more about a student's progress. Moreover, writing can even help to assist reflection. According to Luidens (1997:141), writing is a manifestation of thinking, and the written piece is the artifact that reveals the thinking. Writing fosters the learner to think so as to clarify and modify his ideas. The learners need to characterize knowledge that was gathered in a different form. In writing the reflection journal, students construct bridge and extend their own experiences. They build on their understanding of the knowledge, through bridging between old and new knowledge, and they extend by reflecting how they can further use the skill in their other courses and in their everyday life (Woods, 1995).

Because of the fast expansion of technology, learning platforms have become commonplace in education. Learners of all ages have increased access to technology such as the World Wide Web, which provides apparently limitless amount of information. With the successful growth of technology, Edmodo has become another learning platform for language teaching. Edmodo (co-founded by Nick Borg and Jeff O'Hara) is a new learning tool to present the course content, for many reasons, first, the appearance of Edmodo and its functionality closely similar to that of Facebook. Students, by using Edmodo as virtual language classrooms, can share opinions and express ideas by using a language they all understand. The students can utilize Edmodo as discussion forums to increase time and opportunities, and also to reflect upon their learning process.

Journal

A journal is a popular learning tool for a student to record his or her ideas, thoughts, experiences and reflections on a given topic. Journals go further than the demands of typical written assignments as they stimulate the integration of personal thoughts and expressions with course material. In other words, journals provide a systematic means of documenting learning and collecting evidence for self-evaluation and reflection. The detailed form of the journal depends on the goals and purpose of the assignment, but journals are generally categorized as either structured or free-form. As with any instructional or learning activity, selecting to use reflective journals or learning logs as part of a course should fit your teaching style and also connect with the course learning goals and objectives (Bean, 1996). In a structured journal, students are given a specific question, target, or set of procedures to base their writing, while free-form

journals require students to record thoughts and feelings with least direction. Nevertheless of the form, there is indication that the art of reflection can help boost students' critical thinking skills, encourage students to think about their own thinking (meta-cognition), and help students prepare for assignments and examinations (Homik, M. & Melis, E., 2007; Johnson, S., n.d.; RMIT, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, both the content and depth of reflection as exhibited in Edmodo were analyzed. Messages on Edmodo were sorted into five categories and then analyzed with other sources in relation to the same five categories. The five categories were adapted from Lee (2005), who investigates the themes of dialogue journals written by 18 teacher candidates and also Ho and Richards' (1993) framework for qualitative research on students' journals. Since messages in the journal assignments would be further analyzed for the level of reflectivity, with reference to the categories, a number of categories would facilitate data interpretation and hence suit the purpose of the research better. Five categories were developed for the study, which was a result of combination of some of the themes in Lee (2005) and Ho and Richards (1993), and rephrasing afterwards. The five categories are defined as follows:

1. *Describing and recalling*: Describing and recalling teaching/learning issues presented in class; sharing language learning experiences.
2. *Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring*: Discussing issues related to topics covered in class / other professional issues; asking questions about ELT/professional issues.
3. *Evaluating*: Evaluating oneself, peers or different aspects of the course.
4. *Expressing personal voice*: Extrapolating what has been learned—making resolutions; personalizing and sharing insights; expressing feelings and concerns; asserting beliefs.
5. *Interacting with lecturer*: Seeking advice regarding personal development; responding to lecturer's feedback.

In respect of the nature of reflection, since the purpose of the research is to explore the characteristics of reflectivity in the students' journal assignments in Edmodo, an analytical framework that describes the developmental qualities of reflection is considered to be suitable. The frameworks proposed by Lee (2005) and Ho and Richards (1993), which characterize reflection in terms of the depth of reflective thinking, are combined and modified as follows:

Topic category	Descriptive	Critical
Describing and recalling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A belief/ conviction 2. How a theory was applied 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A justification 2. A personal opinion
Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approaches and methods 2. The content of the lesson 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teachers' knowledge in teaching
Evaluating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom context/ management 2. Solutions to problems: from experts 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Evaluating lessons 2. Diagnosing problems 3. Solutions to problems: alternative ways
Expressing personal voice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Perceptions of self as a student: style and comments on language proficiency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognition of personal growth 2. Setting personal goals
Interacting with lecturer	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asking for advice 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asking for reasons 2. Problem atizing

FINDINGS

The findings of this research are arranged by the three research questions presented earlier in this paper.

What types of reflection were involved in students' reflection?

Table 1 shows the topics reflectively addressed on the journal assignment in Edmodo. In general, there were both descriptive and critical reflections on the students' reflection and on other students' messages after class discussion. Table 1

shows the topics and number of students' messages posted on Edmodo.

Table 1. Topics and number of student teachers' discussions on the blog

Topic category	Total number	Descriptive	Critical
Describing and recalling	75	45	30
Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring	35	25	10
Evaluating	70	25	45
Expressing personal voice	30	20	10
Interacting with lecturer	35	15	20
Total	245	130	115

Number of students = 35

As seen from Table 1, it is clear that there are more descriptive reflections than critical ones. Additionally, there is evidence that students were more comfortable evaluating themselves than evaluating others. During the research, students often questioned the applicability of the information and technology applications used in the classroom. Students brainstormed a lot of solutions and changes for their classrooms. Some agreed that students should combine the advantages from those information and technology application and create a new improved use of the application for the classes. Some even complained about the use of information and technology applications for learning the target language in the class. They pointed out the fact that once learners do not use the applications and step out of the language laboratory, they do not speak or practice the target language. In addition to writing, because everyone could access and read the Edmodo messages, many students pointed out that their English writing skills improved greatly. Because they were afraid of losing face, they would double-check the content and grammar before posting on the Edmodo.

What are the lecturer's roles in the process of journaling?

Table 2. Numbers of students' critical reflection in each category and the increased number of reflections after the classroom discussion

Topic category	Before classroom	After classroom
Describing and	30	30

Topic category	Before classroom	After classroom
Interpreting, analyzing and	10	10
Evaluating	30	45
Expressing	10	10
Interact	15	20
Total	95	115

During the research, every time the students posted their messages in the journal assignment on the Edmodo, the lecturer would go to Edmodo and read those reflections. Sometimes, the lecturer would challenge students' thinking by posting questions and asking for further reflection in order to increase students' critical reflection. Twenty students reported that due to such challenges set by the lecturer their thinking went deeper and became more critical. Table 2 displays the number of students' critical reflections in each category in the class and the increased number of reflections each time after the lecturer get involved.

During the course, the lecturer not only challenged the students to think further but also encouraged them to express more. When the lecturer was not satisfied with evaluation and interaction displayed in Edmodo messages, the lecturer proposed some questions, such as "What do you feel after having seven meetings in IT class?", "Is it useful for your? Why or why not? Explain!", and "What can we improve from our IT class so that it will suit your needs better?" to foster their students' thinking. Table 2 shows that initially 30 messages were critical for the third topic and 15 messages for the fifth topic. After given some guiding questions from the lecturer, this percentage rose to 45 messages for third topic and 20 messages for fifth topic. The lecturer also provided explanations when students received or posted misinformation on Edmodo and said that Edmodo was a good platform for students to share ideas with each other and exchange thoughts.

It is possible to see that lecturer played a crucial role in promoting these students' understanding about journal assignment in Edmodo. The lecturer gave feedback and developed their students' own understanding and a capacity for self-critique and self-reflection. In this research, the role of the lecturer was like those of directors and counselors. When lecturer found the discussion not active enough, the lecturer took initiative and wrote reflections on their own teaching for this particular class in order to model the process. Thus, students perceived the lecturer

as an active learner and lecturer who continuously reflected critically. The lecturer served as role models to demonstrate to what extent critical reflection can lead to more thinking. The lecturer also built a bridge for the students to communicate with each other by working on Edmodo without the restrictions of time and space.

How can Edmodo promote critical reflection and thinking?

Lecturer encouraged critical reflection on the part of their students' learning process by using Edmodo, but the types of this critical reflection and its length remains challenging. The students expressed many problems and asked a lot of questions to each other during the semester. Many of them pointed out that due to the use of Edmodo for discussion, there were no limitations of time and space, and discussions were therefore easier and more inviting. Generally speaking, nearly half of the 35 students expressed very positive attitudes toward the use of Edmodo as a platform to reflect their learning and teaching. Twenty students said that it was easy and comfortable to post comments and challenge their peers on the Edmodo instead of discussing the issues in a face-to-face situation, allowing comments to be more critical. The students in the classroom could exchange thoughts and ideas as well as sharing experiences in the Edmodo.

During the course, the students in the class participated actively. All students appreciated the opportunity to use technology to communicate with other students. Many students wanted to post concerns about their problems to other lecturers. In addition, the lecturer sometimes made reflections and comments or posed questions in class meetings. The lecturer also asked the students to pay attention to others students' writing styles. The lecturer spent a little time giving comments on students' grammatical errors and basic writing structure. By so doing, the lecturer believed their students could reflect not only what they learned but also practise basic English writing skills through the course. Furthermore, students could examine their reflections and thinking by looking at dates on Edmodo. They could see their learning process and perspectives on certain issues at different periods of time. Therefore, the Edmodo was considered a great tool for these students to record their growth and changes as well as build a learning community.

INTERPRETATIONS

This research indicates that the Edmodo facilitates the students to nurture their critical

thinking as well as a discussion forum. It was a forum that prepared each of the students to relate the materials they got in the classroom by learning from each other and showing to each other how they would learn in the classrooms. Edmodo is a platform for these students to voice their doubts, struggles, discomforts, and successful and unhappy learning experiences because the students shared very similar experiences of being EFL learners. Dewey (1993) claims that if we want to make our experience educative, it is critical to support ongoing growth in a process of continuing new inquiry. As Short, Burke, and Harste (1996) propose, 'As we work through inquiry, we do not usually end with one answer or even a set of answers. As a result, students generated more understanding that would take their understanding better. The classroom discussion stage made it possible for the students to make sense out of the new knowledge and ponder its potential utilization in their learning contexts.

SUGGESTIONS

Further research needs to be conducted to explore the benefit of journal, especially in relation to the role of technology in the learning process. Much of the journal writing literature in the language learning field ranges from specific articles about grading and assisting with common problems or difficulties to general guidelines for using journal writing for students in the class. Although this information is useful and often written by professionals speaking from years of experience, more qualitative and quantitative research is needed. Specific research questions include the following:

- How can technology be integrated in the process of students' reflection?
- How does journal writing, using the help of technology, affect the learning of material?
- Does the type of feedback given to the student affect what is written in journal writing?
- How do students learn to use technology to help them reflecting on their experiences?

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