

Using Blogs as a Support to Ideological and Political Education

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ABSTRACT

Ideological and political education is one major course in the universities of China. Because of the large number of students in the classroom, there is rare interaction between the teacher and the students either during the class or after the class. Based on the belief that a blog environment can supplement classroom teaching and lead to an improved learning experience, in the recent five years, I asked every student in my class to set up blogs, in which they can Access course material, ask questions and receive feedback, post their reflections on the books, and comment on each other's contributions throughout the semester. Their blog writing will be taken as one of the assessments in the whole semester. The blogs proved to be a useful bridge between the teacher and the students. Through the analysis of the individual blogs written by 60 students within one semester, I find that by using this educational technology the teacher can exchange ideas with the students about the books and can know the students' doubts and needs concerned with their daily life or the social reality.

1. Introduction

Most educators and scholars agree that our students are undoubtedly of the Internet Generation and blogging has become a familiar tool for the generation of students now coming through the university (Macduff, 2009; Risinger, 2006; Sjoberg, 2013). As a useful type of educational technology, it is suggested that students can use blogs to publish their own writings, discuss group assignments, peer review each other's work, collaborate on projects and manage their digital portfolios (Churchill, 2009). However, to better understand such possibilities, more data from actual classroom implementation are needed. The exploration reported in this paper is an attempt to address this issue. The exploration of blog uses was conducted in the class of undergraduate students over the period of one semester. The following fundamental guiding question was at the centre of this inquiry: in what ways does a blog environment supplement classroom teaching and lead to an improved learning experience? The class under study was attending a course of the "Ideological and Political Education". Teaching the university students to think independently is of vital importance in the process of ideological and political education. To achieve this goal, the essential means is to ask them to read widely in arts and humanity so as to form their own critical thinking abilities in every aspect. The main purpose of this exploration is to know the students' needs in this course, to discuss with them about some books, and to inspire their interest in reading books in arts and humanity.

Among the various means for this goal, modern Internet like blog functions as a good interactional platform in this process for its "digitalization, high speed, interaction, and openness" (Wang Shanfei & Yu Wengang, 2008). Fang Xingdong, the expert in National Internet Laboratory, once said, "blogs will surpass email, BBS, ICQ, to be one important communicative means" (Fang Xingdong & Wang Junxiu, 2003). Therefore it is a new teaching perspective in ideological education to use blogs as a means of interaction between the teacher and the students. Blogs are closely and perfectly connected with university students, functioning among the students as a bridge of "conversing, sharing ideas, discussing, and self-education" (Zhang Jiu hai & Liu Xinghai, 2009), enhancing the students to read, think, exchange ideas and write, cultivating their abilities of self-teaching, self-protecting, self-identification, and self-controlling (Xue Baolin & Wang Yuguo, 2011), and realizing their ideals of enriching ideas, improving qualities, deepening thought, and strengthening independence. Blogs have the following five features: zero edition; zero technology; zero

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system; zero cost; zero formality, and effective use of these features will make ideological and political education on the students easy (Zhang Jiuhai & Liu Xingkai, 2009).

I organized an experimental blog-based environment in which students were accessing course material, asking questions and receiving feedback, posting reflections on the books they have read, commenting on each other's contributions throughout the semester. Each semester the number of students in my class is around 150 to 200, among whom 60 students are randomly chosen as the subjects of this study. Data was collected through the observations and analysis of these 60 students' individual blogs within this semester (February-July, 2014).

2. The problems of ideological and political education in China

To strengthen the ideological education is vital to the whole nation nowadays. Most teachers follow the common way of imparting knowledge of the text book on the students, while the students' basic motivation for this course is to gain a higher mark. The students only regard attending this course as listening to lectures, sometimes boring lectures. There is rare interaction between the teacher and the students during the class and after the class. The final examination is only a test of "rote-memory" or even "the skills of cheating" (taken from the student's blog writing). So what is the real meaning of "ideological and political education"? And what are the serious problems in teaching this course?

Firstly, we put more emphasis on thought management than on ideological education, or sometimes thought management is separate from ideological education. In colleges of China, the importance of management is always put on the top. All the institutions, including universities, colleges, and vocational schools, must follow the requirement of the Ministry of Education to set up one organization to control or manage the students, including both the undergraduates and the graduates. The purpose of these organizations is to achieve the goal of educating through management. However, management is based on power, which results in the students' non-pleasure or anti-action. On the other hand, those staff from the management organizations has a distinct job from the teaching staff, which seems to be in order but hides a potential serious problem. The result is an artificial separation of management from education, that is, management lightens education and education ignores management.

Secondly, in colleges ideological education equals to psychological treatment, that is, whoever has a symptom of this mental disease will receive a persuasion and interference from the teaching staff. This is a psychological treatment of the mental disease and is mostly completed by the teachers working in the psychological counseling office or the (political and ideological) assistants in the departments. It is a typical method of "treating the headache or foot-ache" if the part shows a signal of disease. This method of "considering things in isolation" severely damages the educational goal of cultivating and enhancing the college students' independence, accomplishment, and critical thinking. To persuade the students in thought stresses on enhancing their critical thinking abilities, enriching their cultural life, cultivating their independence, and improving their self-control abilities.

Thirdly, there are few interaction platforms by the ideological and political teachers to influence the students in thinking. In the recent years, "College Students On-line" supported by under the Ministry of Education, organized various programs of competitions of "assistants blogs", aiming to set up a new ideological education platform, but the function of it is confined to students management, for example, they use it as a convenient means to send announcements, organize some activities, and hold some meetings. This has a long way to instructing the students in reading, thinking, interacting and writing. At the same time, those assistants, young and inexperienced, are not fit for this tough job.

The university I am teaching is one of the top 100 universities in China which are regarded as "211 Project Universities" (Here the first number 21 refers to the 21st century, and the last number "1" indicates the 100 top universities). Our university is famous for its colleges of engineering, while the college of economics, the college of management, the college of humanity, and the college of law are not as that popular. The students in my class are mainly from the colleges of engineering. In the whole atmosphere of a major-oriented and job-oriented society, they tend to read those books which are useful to their future work. They are busy everyday learning their majors and obtaining various credentials. The lack of reading in the field of arts and humanity directly results in their narrow-mindedness, shallow thought, irrational cognition, and impulsive

action. This utilitarian tendency is mainly the deep reason for those serious events happened around them. My worry is witnessed more or less from the teachers in the other universities.

Just as one student wrote in her blog, "It is really difficult to form a reading habit in a university like ours. Maybe this is a common phenomenon in the whole society. Many of us couldn't finish one book within one semester." Under this atmosphere, in order to enhance their interest in reading books in arts and humanity, I gave them a long list of the classical books in philosophy, history, democracy, religion, as well as some other fields. Therefore in the recent five years, I ask every student who attends my class to write blogs on some recommended books, which will be taken as one of their assessments in the whole semester. It is a useful and convenient interaction between the teacher and the students. Through the blogs, I can exchange ideas with the students about the books and I can tackle the problems they put forward. They showed great enthusiasm in this interaction, revealing their thoughts and doubts in reading, their anxieties and emotions in life to me. This helps a lot in our communication.

3. The functions of blogs in teaching this course

To make an effective use of blogs, the relationship between the teacher and the students should be equal and harmonious. Without the principle of equality, the students will keep away from the teacher psychologically so ideological persuasion cannot be conducted. Every semester, in the first period of my lectures, I will make public my mobile phone, office number, office hour, email address, blog address, several requirements, the main journals, as well as a list of reading books, mainly through our university's electronic platform. This is done for their convenience to communicate with me.

The deep impression on me during these five years is that the first class is usually the best class, for the students showed great enthusiasm and expectation on this course, which naturally is a basic step for the success of the following classes. My experience of using blogs as an effective means in ideological and political education is witnessed by the students' reflections in their blogs and the messages they sent to me during these years. After an analysis of 60 students' individual blogs in this semester I found the following things are of vital importance.

3.1. To exchange ideas on the books

It is commonly accepted that today major-oriented education dominates the main stream, which influenced a lot upon the students. The university students are at the cross road of material gain and spiritual gain. They are at the dilemma of thought promotion and salary driving. This leaves doubts and worries to many teachers, experts, and scholars: How can they shoulder the social responsibility without first arming themselves with knowledge? How can the future generation under this kind of educational system realize modernization? Modernization is in essence the modernization of human beings.

The main purpose of using blogs is to direct the students to read more good books so as to widen their horizon and enhance their personal qualities. In my class, every semester, I will put a long list of books on my blog for them to choose. Every month, they are expected to write one book report and publish it on their own blog for my reading. So for each student, four book reports are required within one semester. This will be taken as part of the assessment together with the final exam.

Among the suggested books, some are preferred, for example, *Chrysanthemum and Knife*; *Animal Farm*; *Potential Rules: The Real Game of Chinese History*; *The President Cannot be Depended On*; *The Details of Democracy*. Generally speaking, the students' reading is mainly concerned with the following aspects:

- a. American democracy
- b. Chinese politics
- c. Japanese culture
- d. Human nature
- e. Philosophy and life
- f. Confucianism

To be more specific, they began to think about the issues like the cultural differences between China and the western countries, the real meaning of university, the real meaning of patriotism, the importance of reading, as well as something about life. This can be seen from the following blog writings by the students.

(1) Before attending this class, I had some worries about the course. I have no interest in politics and I don't know where to start. I am also afraid the class would be boring. I know there is nothing fresh and new on the text book. To learn it is just to memorize the passages.

(2) I have read some books for one and a half year. Though it is a little bit slow, only 40 books, I managed to take notes and wrote something about the books. Some students were surprised at my reading list, but I know it is not enough. I once saw in our school library's borrowing list that one student at the top borrowed more than 300 books, and I really felt respect towards him.

(3) My father once suggested me read some books in philosophy. But I thought it is a mysterious field so I dare not go into it. Now I bought the book you recommended, *Philosophy and Life*. I hope I can have a glimpse of philosophy. I also hope that you can talk more about philosophy in class.

(4) After reading *The Potential Rules* and *Animal Farm*, I found a serious problem in reality: The university students are extremely free to do everything (playing computer games, chatting on the Internet, wasting time...) on the campus, while the society gives no space to us.

Reading the above passages in the students' individual blogs, we may get a glimpse of their attitudes towards reading. The interaction between me and the students improved my teaching a lot, because they started to realize the importance of reading books and they preferred to talk with me about some tough issues which are not covered in the text book.

3.2. To know the students' doubts and needs

By using the blogs, the teacher can have a better understanding of the students' thoughts, desires, and doubts. University students are more easily to feel lost and their emotions and doubts should be taken into serious consideration. First, they have to complete a series of identity change: from passive reception to active joining; from dependence to independence; from a kid to an adult with lawful right; from the center of attention to paying attention to others and society. In addition, they have to get accustomed to a completely new environment. So it is essential to use blogs to pay attention to the college students' ideals, beliefs, emotions, as well as their desires, to know more about their urgent needs in every aspect, such as learning, love, job hunting, and to explore their potential talents and abilities.

Besides exchanging ideas on the books, my students also express their doubts concerned with their reading or the social reality. The following are some of those questions.

(5) Mr. Sun, what do you think about the activity "learning from Lei Feng" ?

(6) Mr. Sun, what do you think about "Creative Experimental Class" in the 211 universities?

(7) Mr. Sun, do you think there is a class distinction in a democratic society? Is there a distinction between socialist democracy and capitalist democracy?

Through the interactions on the blogs, I came to know the students' trends of thoughts so as to prevent the possible psychological problems timely. The most important thing for the teacher is to recognize their individual needs and desires to provide them with the respective help for a healthy psychological state.

In my interactions with the students about some issues in our university like the selection of the experimental class members, the selection of the Communist Party members, and the competition between the classes, I found they started to think critically. They also talked with me about how to communicate with their classmates, what are their attitudes towards love, and what is their real view of the society. I managed to answer every question they put forwards. For some simple questions I will give an immediate answer, and for some tough questions, I will consult more resources or discuss with my colleagues to give them a delayed answer.

The contemporary world asks for creativity, uniqueness, and critical thinking, which can be obtained through reading and thinking. It is usually difficult for the ideological and political teacher to persuade the students to accept some ideas, because what is claimed in the text book is frequently contradictory to the social reality. This is witnessed by the note in one student's blog: Unlike our textbook, you didn't exaggerate the achievements of our country after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, and you didn't cover up those problems in our society.

4. Conclusion

From the students' individual blogs and the messages they sent to me, I realized their satisfaction and thanks. They commonly agreed that they benefit a lot from the blogs, such as the merits of reading good books, the significance of critical thinking, the basic ways of solving some problems, which together helped them to understand the world properly.

Ideological and political education doesn't mean controlling or managing the students. Its final goal is to improve the students' critical thinking abilities and their independent working spirits. Writing blogs is not the aim, but the means for the students' development. It helps the students to read widely, think independently, exchange ideas, enrich their thoughts, and improve their qualities which are required of a real talented person.

The functions of using blogs in my class can be seen in the following two passages from the students' individual blogs: The last time I wrote my blog is when I was in the second year of my junior middle school. Several years passed and I completely gave up writing blogs. However, I met an unusual teacher in my university who encourages us to publish our reflections of the books in the blog. I hope I can write something systematically from now on; the biggest benefit in this semester is that I started to think about those things which I have neglected in the past years. Maybe my thoughts are not correct, but I think they are convincing than what is obtained from the news, the internet or from the other people.

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