

Blogging as Adult Learning: Meaning of Adult Bloggers' Experiences

Young Y.Park, Ed.D.	Gyeong Mi Heo, Ph.D.	Romee Lee, Ph.D.
<i>OIC LanguageVisual Ltd.</i>	<i>Education Consultant</i>	<i>KyunginWomen's College</i>
Yp85@columbia.edu	Gyeongmi.heo@gmail.com	romeelee@hotmail.com

Abstract.

This study identifies a blog that can facilitate adult informal learning practice. The study is based on an online survey with 70 adult bloggers in Korea undertaken to understand the nature of adults' blogging and its meanings in terms of learning. It investigates (a) adults' blogging experiences related to learning, (b) bloggers' perceptions of the usefulness of blogging in terms of four perspectives on learning processes (i.e., learning as an acquisition process, a reflection process, a practice-based community process, and an embodied co-emergent process), and (c) the link between adult informal learning and blogging. The findings show that the majority of participants became aware of positive changes, including learning experiences, in everyday life after blogging. Bloggers perceived blogging mainly as knowledge-acquisition and/or reflection oriented learning process and defined the characteristics of learning through blogging as 'self-directed,' 'practical,' 'situative,' 'unlimited and accessible,' and 'self-regulated.' These characteristics are distinguished from those of formal education in schools. This study therefore implies that the blog can be a meaningful learning environment facilitating the informal learning for adults more enriched and fulfilled.

1. Introduction.

This study intends to explore blog as a meaningful environment for adult informal learning. Blog, a social phenomenon for the last decade (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) functions various with the latest development in web-based technology. Today, more people are reading and keeping blogs (Universal McCann, 2008). For example, as of February, 2007, 2.5 million blogs posted at least one tagged post; 1.5 million blogs are posted per day; 1.4 new blogs are created every second (Masternewmedia, 2007).

For the perspective of teaching and learning, some studies prove that the features of blogs are used for educational purposes, particularly for various kinds of classroom instruction (Boling, et al., 2008; Glass & Spiegelman, 2008; Haramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Kajder & Bull, 2004; Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Quible, 2005; Ray, 2006; Wassell & Crouch, 2008). In these studies, researchers argue that blog is an effective instructional tool

in which instructors and students can communicate with each other to discuss issues raised in class. While most of studies have dealt with the usefulness of using blog in formal classroom settings, the self-directed use of blog by bloggers and its embedded meaning has still been an area of exploration. Also, less research has been conducted to explore blogs as a newly emerged space where learners can gain learning informally. This study aims, therefore, to explore the nature of adults' blogging and its meaning in terms of their everyday learning. It investigates the reasons of adult bloggers' use of blog, conception of learning, and the interpretations of the linkage between their blogging and learning. Therefore, the research questions were:

- (a) What are features of using blogs and the adult bloggers' perceptions of the blogging experiences related to learning?
- (b) What are potential uses of blogs for the learning in relation to the perspectives of adult learning processes?
- (c) What are characteristics of the blogging as the adult informal learning in distinction from the formal education?

2. Theoretical Framework.

2.1. Characteristics of adult informal learning

To respond to the accelerated changes in a society, lifelong learning has been considered as a required and essential one. Since adult learning has become a major part of lifelong learning discussion for the last few decades (OECD, 1996), contemporary adults have been encouraged to find learning opportunities in diverse spaces they reside including home, educational institutions, workplace, community, and even cyberspace (Kwon, 2001).

Unlike children or adolescents who are supposed to learn in formal educational settings such as schools, adults learn more in diverse and flexible settings. Adults may learn significantly in more incidental and spontaneous learning situation even inside educational settings. They also plan and conduct learning without any direct reliance on teacher or instructors or just gain learning as serendipity. These cases correspond to informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). In broader sense, informal learning includes the experiences of everyday living from which we learn something (Merriam & Cafarella, 1999).

Informal learning has a formidable merit, in that it has wide flexibility that makes people involve freely and voluntarily in learning without the presence of instructors and externally imposed curricular criteria (Livingstone, 2001). With less restriction, it can be more learner-centered when learners can actively decide important things from time and place to learn to purposes and outcomes of learning.

This flexibility in informal learning has been favored by adult learners. Empirical studies regarding adult informal learning have shown that the overwhelming majority of adults spend a substantial amount of time in their pursuit of informal learning (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Tough, 1971, 1978; Livingstone, 2001). For example Tough's study found that over two-thirds of adults' intentional learning occurred outside schools or educational institutions (Tough, 1971). According to these findings, informal learning can well be

defined as one of the important and predominant form of learning in adult lives.

Informal learning, however, is hard to distinguish it from life experiences since it occurs in every part of the lives of the learners. So much of it is invisible and easy to be underestimated. Either visible or invisible, comparatively less studies have been conducted on how effectively informal learning enriches adults with tangible learning outcomes (Livingstone, 2001; 2002). According to Schugurensky (2000), informal learning can take different forms due to the non / existence of intentionality and awareness of learning. He defines informal learning in three forms - self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization (see Table 1).

Table 1. Three forms of Informal Learning (Schugurensky, 2000, p.3)

Forms	Intentionality	Awareness
Self-directed	Yes	Yes
Incidental	No	Yes
Socialization	No	No

In Schugurensky's classification, self-directed learning refers to 'learning projects' carried out by individual learners. This type of informal learning is intentional because the learner intends to learn something. It is also conscious process in the sense that the learner is aware when the learning is happened. Incidental learning, meanwhile, refers to the learning experiences that occur when the learner may not intend to learn something. After the experience, however, she or he becomes aware of it. Thus, it is unintentional but conscious process. Socialization, which is also referred as tacit learning, refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors or skills that occur in everyday life. It is very hard to research due to its nature. Therefore, socialization or tacit learning is hardly discussed in this present study.

2.2. Processes and outcomes of adult informal learning

Adult informal learning takes different process and yields diverse outcomes. No single theory of learning comprehensibly explains various learning processes. For example, adult learning not only includes the acquisition and accumulation of information, but also embraces "making sense of our lives, transforming not just what we learn but the way we learn, and it is absorbing, imagining, intuiting, and learning informally with others" (Merriam, 2001, p. 96). To address the adult informal learning processes and outcomes through blogging, this study depends on Fenwick and Tennant's (2004) categorization of adult learning process. Adult learning process, according to Fenwick and Tennant, can be grouped as four different perspectives: learning as (a) an acquisition process, (b) a reflection process, (c) a practice-based community process, and (d) an embodied co-emergent process.

First, "learning as acquisition" understands knowledge as a substantive skill or competency, concept, or new language, which a learner can acquire. Second, learning takes a reflection process. "Learning as reflection" interprets learning as a meaning-making process. Third, learning can also be viewed as a social activity embedded in real social relations. The fourth perspective views adult learning as a co-emergent process. From its perspective,

learning viewed as participation in a community of practice is criticized that it still separates individuals from group, humans from environment, subject from object (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004). The meaning of this classification of adult learning in terms of its process can be connected to the issue that this study focuses on - adult informal learning. As addressed, adult informal learning takes place very often in adults' everyday life and holds high value. In this study, various scholarly definitions and classifications regarding adult informal learning are used to conceptualize the meaning of blogging as adult informal learning. Schugurensky (2000)'s categorization of informal learning is helpful to elicit an argument that blogging can facilitate either self-directed learning, incidental learning, or socialization depending on whether there is intention or awareness. By using Fenwick and Tennant (2004)'s categorization, blogging activities are to be understood as learning activities which take uniquely different processes to yield various outcomes of learning such as acquisition of knowledge, reflection of experience, formation of identity by participation, and co-emergent change of both learners and the system.

3. Methods.

Along with a mixed model research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) approach, an online survey questionnaire was developed to explore the ways in which adult bloggers use blogs, their general understanding on the usefulness of the blogging, and the meanings of blogging in their everyday life and learning. The survey questions were generally grouped into three categories: demographic background, personal experiences with blogs, and the perceptions of learning in relation to blogging experiences. As a part of the survey, a set of questionnaire (see Table 2) consisting of twelve items on a Likert scale (from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree) was developed specifically to investigate bloggers' perceptions on the usefulness of blogging for certain types of learning. Items of the questionnaire were designed based on the four perspectives of learning process identified by Fenwick and Tennant (2004): Learning as (a) an acquisition process, (b) a reflection process, (c) a practice-based community process, and (d) an embodied co-emergent process.

Table 2. Questionnaire for the usefulness of blogging for learning

Learning perspectives	Items
Learning as an acquisition	1. Blogging can be useful in acquiring various kinds of knowledge and information.
	2. Blogging can help me develop my own expertise on some areas.
	3. Blogging can help me engage more actively in my fields of interests.
Learning as a reflection process	4. Blogging can help me experience the 'a-ha' moment that my old views transform to a new one.
	5. Blogging can provide me opportunities to grow by looking back on my own thoughts, views and experiences.
	6. Blogging can be useful to describe and/or express my thoughts and views.

	7. Blogging can help me gain new awareness and set up plans on the basis of it.
Learning as a practice-based community process	8. Blogging can be useful to build up some social networks around me.
	9. Blogging can help me realize the influence of other bloggers on me.
	10. Blogging can help me realize the importance of it as a collective activity in a community.
Learning as an embodied co-emergent process	11. Blogging can make me communicate with the world and can influence every area of my life.
	12. Blogging can help me create new knowledge and I can share this with others as an expert.

3.1. Data Collection

Seventy Korean adult bloggers (i.e., over 20 years of age) were finally recruited for the study. They were users of Naver (<http://www.naver.com>), which is one of the representative blog service providers in Korea. Bloggers who were enrolled in any formal education programs (e.g., college, university, graduate school) were excluded because their uses of blogs could be influenced by formal education, which may influence unnecessarily to the focus of the study, adult informal learning.

The majority of survey participants were in their 30s (57.2 %), female (75.7 %), and office workers (40.0 %) or have professional jobs (20.0 %). Forty-three participants (61.4 %) had used blogs for more than two years.

3.2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate any feasible correlations among the various aspects of the relationships: the participants' demographic information, their patterns of using blog, the blogging experiences, their descriptions of learning, and their perceptions on the usefulness of blogging for learning. The data obtained from the open-ended survey questions were qualitatively analyzed using microanalysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to fully understand their blogging experiences by "coding the meaning found in words or groups of words"(p.65).

4. Findings.

4.1. Blogging experiences related to learning

In terms of the behaviors of bloggers, the statistical analysis of the survey responses did not offer any meaningful correlations between and within variables: the participants' demographic information and their patterns of using blog. The results show that it would be difficult to articulate the behavioral patterns of using blog in short. Hence, it is required to investigate more qualitatively regarding what various features would be found from their blogging experiences.

Out of 70 survey respondents, 61.4 % had used blogs more than two years, 68.6 % indicated that they engaged in blogging about two hours per week, and 13 bloggers (18.6

%) had spent more than five hours. Regarding the purposes of using blogs, 43 participants (61.4 %) indicated that they had used blogs for the sharing of information in relation to general issues. Other reasons of using blogs were to satisfied personal interests and hobbies (40.0 %). Based on their blogging experiences, forty-six respondents (65.7 %) gave positive answers on any changes in their life as below:

(a) Ways to deal with information and knowledge (23%),

“I got a habit that I searched and collected information like collecting different coins. I became sort of expert-minded on certain topics.”

(b) Personal ways of thinking (23%),

“I reflect myself by sharing thoughts with other people.”

(c) Self-development (40%),

“I could see myself more objective while writing a blog. And I could arrange and organize the things around myself better.”

(d) Social relationships (15%),

“My relationship with friends and colleagues is more extended and deepened since I could stay in touch with them using blogs.”

Meanwhile, 24 participants (34.3 %) reported that the blogging had no influence on ways of thinking or on their life. No matter whether they recognized any changes in their life, the majority of the participants (90.0 %) agreed that they had experienced some kinds of learning through their blogging activities. For further discussion on this issue, the following section will illustrate their perceptions on the relationship between blogging and learning based on the perspectives of adult learning.

4.2. Perception on the usefulness of blogging for learning

To understand bloggers' perception on the usefulness of blogging for learning, the results of the questionnaire asking the relationship between blogging and learning (refer to Table 2) were analyzed. In Figure 1, X-axis indicates four perspectives of learning process: Learning as an acquisition process, a reflection process, a practice-based community process, and an embodied co-emergent process. Y-axis shows how strongly the survey participants agreed to each perspective of learning process in relation to blogging.

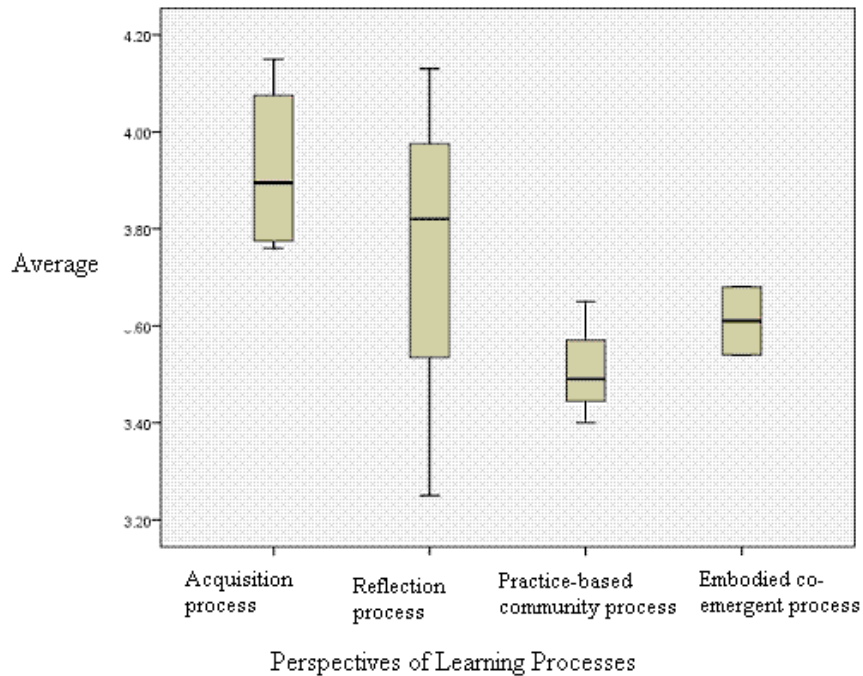


Figure 1. The degree of agreement on blogging as learning process in relation to four perspectives of learning processes

The result revealed that blogging is perceived as the most valuable in acquiring specific knowledge, expressing thoughts and opinions, and maintaining their interests. At the same time, the participants were not sure of the value of blogs on other perspectives such as community-based learning and co-emergent learning process. Overall, most of participants agreed strongly that blogging would be the most useful in knowledge-acquisition.

4.3. Link between adult informal learning and blogging

To clarify some characteristics of blogging as informal learning, the survey participants were asked to compare it with learning at schools, namely formal education. The foremost expressions were identified, characterized, chunked into groups, and organized as seen in figure 2.



Figure 2. Descriptions on the characteristics of informal learning through blogging

These characteristics were largely categorized into three themes: (a) learners' role, (b) contents of learning, and (c) learning process. Speaking of learners' role in blogging, 'self-directed' was mostly highlighted. Bloggers believed that blogging facilitates users to be active, learning process also to be self-regulated and open to any direction. The contents of learning are, meanwhile seen as more practical information generated from individuals' own experiences, or views, thoughts which although were not yet authorized as approved facts or truths. In sum, the findings show that the characteristics of blogging match well with the characteristics of adult informal learning, such as self-directed, self-regulated, and learner-centered learning. The adult bloggers seem to understand the notions of informal learning and to gain the benefits through blogging.

5. Discussion and Conclusions.

In this study, the majority of participants became aware of positive changes, including learning experiences, in everyday life after blogging. The changes indicate the ways to deal with information and knowledge, personal ways of thinking, self-development, and social relationships. In examining the usefulness of blogging in learning process, many participants believed that blogging is valuable in acquiring specific knowledge, expressing thoughts and opinions, and expanding their interests. Yet the blogging was not perceived as an activity which can play an important role in creating membership in communities or building new fields of knowledge/expertise. Third, adult bloggers identified the learning through blogging largely as 'self-directed', 'practical', 'situated', 'unlimited and accessible,' and 'self-regulated'. The participants seemed to agree

that blogging would generate ideal learning environments, particularly for adult learners who aim learning informally.

Even if the study has a few limitations, its findings provide us several fundamental insights. First, blogging may be useful helping learners' knowledge acquisition and reflection process. It is not a surprise since bloggers can access easily unlimited resources through the Internet and express their views and thoughts without any structured regulations. Next, the findings of this study indicate that blogging is a significant factor in having the informal learning for adults more enriched and fulfilled. Adults learn more efficiently if learning can be self-directed, practical, and reflection-oriented and blogging helps for adults have that kind of learning. Moreover, with the current emphasis on multi-skilling and continuous professional development, the meaning of adult learning becomes more important. Blogging can be used to empower adult learners from across the spectrum of different backgrounds and skill-sets. Blogging can be used to teach and share specific knowledge and help promote a deeper learning by linking multiple ideas and concepts together within a personally engaging environment. The proliferation of social networking in society will aid these notions of blogging from merely one of the alternative learning environments to the one that integrates to the core learning across the disciplines, age, or types of learning. Overall, the further guidelines and studies in the broader context of learning and social networking and technology are suggested.

References.

- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>.
- Boling, E., Castek, J., Zawilinski, L., Barton, K., & Nierlich, T. (2008). Collaborative literacy: Blogs and Internet projects. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(6), 504-506.
- Fenwick, T., & Tennant, M. (2004). Understanding adult learners. In G. Foley (Ed.), *Dimensions of adult learning: Adult education and training in a global era adult education and training* (pp. 55-73). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Glass, R., & Spiegelman, M. (2008). Incorporating blogs into the syllabus: Making their space a learning space. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 36(2), 145-155.
- Haramiak, A., Boulton, H., & Irwin, B. (2009). Trainee teachers' use of blogs as private reflections for professional development. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(3), 259-269.
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2004). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (2ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://www.southalabama.edu/coe/bset/johnson/lectures/lec2.htm>
- Johnstone, J., & Rivera, R. (1965). *Volunteers for learning: A study of the educational pursuits of American adults*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Kajder, S. B., & Bull, G.. (2004). A space for "writing without writing." *Learning & Leading with Technology*, 31(6), 32-35.
- Kwon, D.B. (2001). *Pyeongsaeng Gyoyukui Daseot Madang* [Five Places of Lifelong Education]. Seoul: Hakjisa.

- Livingstone, D.W. (2001). Adults' informal learning: Definition, findings, gaps and future research. *NALL Working Paper #21*. Human Resources Development Canada.
- Livingstone, D.W. (2002). Working and learning in the information age: A profile of Canadians. *CPRN Discussion Paper*. Retrieved January 14, 2010, from http://www.cprn.com/docs/work/wlia_e.pdf
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 25-34.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). Something old, something new: Adult learning theory for the twenty-first century. In S. Merriam (Ed.), *New directions for adult and continuing education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Martindale, T., & Wiley, D. A. (2005). Using weblogs in scholarship and teaching. *TechTrends*, 49(2), 55-61.
- Quible, Z. K. (2005). Blogs: A natural in business communication courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 68(1), 73-76.
- Ray, J. (2006). Welcome to the Blogoshere. The Educational Use of Blogs (aka Edublogs). *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 42(4), 175-177.
- Wassell, B., & Crouch, C. (2008). Fostering critical engagement in preservice teachers: Incorporating weblogs into multicultural education. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 16(2), 211-232.
- OECD (1996). *Lifelong learning for all*. Paris: OECD.
- Schugurensky, D. (2000). The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field. *NALL Working Paper #19-2000*. Retrieved January 14, 2010, from <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/19formsofinformal.htm>
- Tough, A. (1971). *The adult's learning projects*. Toronto: OISE Press.