

Chapter 9

A Users' Perspective on Academic Blogging: Case Study on a Romanian Group of Students

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ABSTRACT

There has been much research dedicated to the use of blogs in higher education, but a great deal of its enthusiasm is based on data that have the potential to be distorted by social desirability. The current chapter attempts a more balanced look at the use of educational blogs, taking into account the shortcomings, as well as the benefits of their proliferation amongst students. The authors write from the perspective of the blog users. Although their feedback is mostly positive, user behavior is also affected by fear of peer appraisal, lack of engagement, lack of trust, or unwillingness to share knowledge or to debate. In order to support our argumentation, the authors use traffic data from the educational blog “blogdeseminar,” survey data from a convenience sample of Romanian students, and qualitative data from 11 interviews.

INTRODUCTION

As technology moves towards more and more integrated solutions for using the web, the telephone or the computer, there is a natural tendency to decrease the amount of time and attention people

give to conventional ways of reading, studying and communicating. The development of Web 2.0, social media, e-books and phone applications for using the internet means that nowadays, the difference between an internet user and an administrator of content is virtually inexistent and also that online communication has become accessible

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to everybody, from anywhere, at any time. Actual dialogue, rather than reading what others publish, is now, more than ever, possible. To add to this, the fact that the web and new media are more likely to be used by members of the younger generation is also difficult to debate against.

In this context, academic teaching is bound to be one of the areas where new media of all kinds would make an impact. Using it for learning and for directing student's preoccupation with the internet towards online platforms where they can actually find relevant information, where they can try collaborative studying and sharing their knowledge and resources, is vital for having an interested and informed group of students. Blogging can be one of the best tools to be used in such a direction.

While there has been some interest towards the use of social media and Web 2.0 within universities, the focus has been mainly on the way lecturers and students use social networks such as Facebook (Bosch, 2009, Akyıldız & Argan, 2011). Studies predictably show that students do not primarily use such tools for collaborative learning but rather for pleasure. Yet, they use the network in a variety of ways, some of them being more active than others. Some of Bosch's subjects even report that using the social network makes their lives easier, as checking academics on the same platform they use on a daily basis, for social reasons, turns out to be very practical. Also, using Facebook for academics enables students to help each other with learning resources, advice and administrative information, such as assignments, course venues, and time-table changes. There is also a discussion on benefits that teachers might draw from being able to contact students more efficiently, and in a more informal, comfortable environment.

New communication technologies greatly increase the possibilities for individuals to interact with others in the public sphere, but the question remains: how much does ITC contribute to the development of a culture of dialogue and debate

within the educational environment? This question is legitimate since socio-psychological studies have underlined both positive and negative aspects regarding the use of academic blogs for learning purposes.

The educational blog, although under-exploited, occupies a strategic position within the current communicational landscape. The acknowledgment of this position is given by the combination of psycho-social, cultural and cognitive roles it fills and by the fact that it promotes both relational activism and reflexivity, stimulating consumption of the productions posted by others and inviting to ones' own content production. On that same note, the educational blog provides heightened interactivity by exploiting the connectivity existent between groups of individuals with common interests.

Finally, perhaps the most important aspect is that the educational blog could represent a model for continued social learning. The empirical studies that we quote further on, though not many, and sometimes not very detailed, underline the academic blogs' central attribute to be its' social value. They also point to aspects that should be improved, that should lead to better learning and various forms of collaboration.

Scholarly blogging has been the focus of some innovative research, as early as the first few years after blogs were developed. Even though the technology had been available since the late '90s, blogs had become large-scale online instruments only a few years after the turn of the millennium. Some of this research has been provided from the perspective of teachers and scholars (Flatley, 2005, Gregg, 2006). It is revealed that the teacher's job was, in some concerns, much more efficient. Professors were able to evaluate the level of involvement in group work and discussions in a much easier way. It is also argued that academic blogging can support the creation of a truly efficient system of scholarly debate between professors.

However, for this chapter, we engage on the endeavor to study academic blogging from a

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