

Chapter IV

Weblogs in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Weblogs are a popular form of Social Software, supporting personal Web authoring as well as innovative forms of social interaction via internet. The potential of Weblogs to emphasize active student participation and collaboration raises great expectations for a new pedagogical quality in higher education. In this chapter, the author explores the value of Social Software, specifically Weblogs, for learning and teaching in institutional education. An exploratory study serves as background for the discussion. Critical issues and areas of research for using Social Software in education are concluding the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The popular term Social Software combines internet applications like social networking sites, Weblogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and others. Applications under that label have become almost ubiquitous among the younger generation – at least in industrialized countries - but they are also appealing to all other generations (PC Magazine 2006; Time 2007). With the advent of ideas like the “100-Dollar-Laptop”, accompanied by the One-Laptop-Per-Child initiative (OLPC 2007), an even bigger and really worldwide audience for Social Software can be expected over the next years, when the technical infrastructure

is in place. It seems obvious that a technology that is so widely used cannot and should not be excluded from higher education. Nevertheless, it is necessary to be aware of the frequent hype in technology cycles, so that expectations and limitations of the technology become clearer. On this ground, administrators and educators should to be able to ponder options and strategies for educational use.

Social Software applications in all their variety do have many characteristics in common, but their appearance, user interface and technical functionalities differ to a great degree. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the expectations, options and limitations of a specific form of Social

Software, namely Weblogs. So it seems necessary to discuss their pros and cons in education from both levels, the general view on new qualities of Social Software and the specific view on potentials and limitations of Weblogs.

SOCIAL SOFTWARE, WEB 2.0, AND WEBLOGS

Social Software provides an easy-to-use technical background for computer-mediated communications between individuals or individuals and groups: “Social Software blends tools and modes for richer online social environments and experiences” (Corante 2004). The quote refers to the enabling character of information technology for building new relationships: Social networks and Social Software are seen to be complementing each other. In contrast to the earlier understanding of computer use, where goal-orientation and purposeful uses were in the foreground, now the voluntary, self-organized distribution of information over the internet and the added value for supporting real as well as virtual communities catch the attention of research and business alike. So the appealing effect of the Internet is no longer driven by the technicality of being logged-in, but rather through the personal participation in the co-weaving of the information texture of the World Wide Web. Unlike earlier activities, this is not only done by writing and reading, but also by representing the interests of oneself through pictures, videos or audio streams.

The basic idea behind the term Social Software can be traced back over six decades to Vannevar Bush and others. Vannevar Bush’s “memex” was an early blueprint of hypertext, although never manufactured. The device was basically intended to store and associate related knowledge and experiences for personal use (cf. Bush 1945). So the idea to enhance the reach of our personal memory and knowledge by using an external device and providing it with all our individual understanding

and experiences as well as that of other people is not so new. Interestingly enough and contained already in the original writing Bush envisioned that other people’s knowledge would be equally important and that the exchange of newly associated knowledge would be the crucial asset (for an extensive discussion of the unfolding of Bush’s idea cf. Allen 2004). The ease-of-use of the current applications and their widespread adoption, though, creates a new quality with respect to users and innovative interactions.

The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O’Reilly, a well-known speaker and writer on issues of the internet (O’Reilly 2005). Rather than trying to define Web 2.0 more precisely some authors distinguish its applications from the presumed world of Web 1.0. While Web 1.0 is supposed to simply present information, Web 2.0 is implying user participation. In popular publications, Web 2.0 is frequently understood as a synonym for Social Software, although it carries a stronger connotation to technical and business aspects. In this chapter, the term Social Software is preferred over Web 2.0, intended to embrace the facets of both terms.

Instant Web-publishing, now embodied through Weblogs, was envisioned since the early days of the internet, e.g. as a “Two-Way-Web” by Berners-Lee (2000). The Web was already perceived of “as a medium for publication, social networking, and collaboration” (Fiedler 2004). With the advent of Weblogs as specific Web-based applications – a term composed of “Web” and “log” file – the vision of an easy way of personal, global publication has come true (Blood 2006, Wikipedia 2007). The easy access via Web-based media obviously hit a real desire. Huge public attention towards media events in 2004 like the tsunami or the US federal election process helped perceiving Weblogs as a way to instantly collect and disseminate the latest news, be it text, picture or video. In journalism, another strong area of applications, Weblogs are credited not only for their capability to quickly spread information but

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