

Chapter 21

Evaluating Student Perceptions of Using Blogs in an Online Course

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on an exploratory study on the use of blogs to support learning in an online MBA school. In this paper, the authors examine students' perceptions toward blogs and their effectiveness. The study finds that although students are open to the idea of using blogs to enhance presentation and reflection of their learning, concerns exist on their suitability for threaded discussions in the presence of other platforms like threaded discussion boards. Therefore, what is less clear is the learning value and potential of blogs, especially that subset of learning that is orchestrated (and credentialed) by formal learning organisations.

INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of blogs, as they have intrigued many in the education field.

A blog is a read-write web educational application in which a target audience can freely share insights, experiences, recommendations, or comments on the topic or blog post of another peer

in that audience group. In other words, a blog needs to be treated as an active participant in the discursive process (Cameron & Anderson, 2006).

While there have been studies on blogging and its use with learning communities, sharing of resources, and ideas (Oravec, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004), it seems that little focus has been given to how students perceive blogging in

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the context of online education. Williams (2004) suggested in his paper that blogging can be a transformational technology for teaching and learning, and so universities should consider setting up blog facilities within their learning management system (LMS).

Blogs are one of the many applications provided by Web 2.0, a latest technology being talked about today in the field of education and learning. Web2.0 allows for vivid networks of participation (O'Reilly, 2005), with value added by user action (Jones, 2006). Realising that Web2.0 technologies bring wonderful networking, collaborative, and support opportunities to Higher Education (Instone, 2005; Weller et al., 2005), we felt that using Blogs, next to Discussion Boards, as an additional pedagogical tool may just be another way to enhance and enrich student participation, as well as enable deep reflective learning for our students.

Blogging isn't just a part of the recent Web 2.0 technology, but also an element of Enterprise 2.0, enterprise social software that is used in various organisations and includes wikis, and collaboration/groupware to name a few (Zhang et al., 2009). A blog does not restrict the reader or writer to time (Flatley, 2005), it is as asynchronous as DBs and like in DBs; everyone has an equal voice in the blogging forum.

Blogs have also been considered communication tools (Flatley, 2005; Poling, 2005) and as online journals enhancing online classroom comprehension (Poling, 2005). The nature of blogging engines allows for the creation of a legitimate warehousing of captured knowledge, and archiving for later retrieval (Bausch et al., 2002).

BACKGROUND

Apart from the obvious benefits that blogs allow for more expressive and informal writing, it has also been lauded as a knowledge management tool

in organizations. They provide the potential for relatively undifferentiated articles of information that pass through an organisation to be contextualized, in a manner that adds value hence generating 'knowledge' from mere 'information' (Williams & Jacob, 2004). Comment systems and democratic posting privileges allow employees in an organisation to give voice to ideas and provide feedback on procedures in a manner not previously possible in a distributed office environment.

Further, personalised responses to news and messages are a simple means of developing an understanding of the collective knowledge of an organisation. It is a means of broadening that knowledge, thus creating 'intelligence' from 'knowledge' (Pór & Molloy, 2000). Therefore, in a business context, blogs provide a forum for learning. It logically follows that the experience of collective knowledge generation can and should be applied to traditional educational environments.

Another observation one might make of the existing academic literature on blogging is related to educational applications of blogs. This literature tends to be concentrated in the areas of teacher training and other professions. Here, the use of reflective journals as a learning tool is an accepted custom and practice. As a consequence, there is an increased likelihood of a favourable disposition to blogs in these communities (e.g., Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Wagner, 2003).

Despite the fact that both students and faculty, over the years, have become very comfortable with the use of discussion boards (DBs), we thought it would be a good idea to introduce blogs as a new pedagogical element into some of our online classes. This article will address the questions of how students who are used to communicating and discussing through DBs in the Learning management system (LMS) would perceive the use of blogs in their learning. Specifically, how its use would enrich their learning and knowledge creation. The article will also examine whether or not they would like to use blogs in their classes.

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