

Chapter 44

Teacher Training and Social Media: Using a Multi–Author Blog for Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

The chapter deals with the implementation of a multi-author blog which was launched during the post-lauream course Online Tutor, promoted by the University of Macerata (Italy), and which aims to train teachers (both pre-service and in-service teachers at different school levels), to acquire the necessary skills to manage tutoring tasks for online courses. The description of the development of the blog from a course related tool to a lifelong community environment, aims to highlight the possibilities of the social online environment for fostering teachers' reflections related to an online university training course and to provide an action strategy to create a participatory space for their lifelong learning. The key aspects of the project were the roles played by the blog in conveying and socializing the students' personal experiences during the online learning process and the awareness that developed of the potential for a community blog to become a constantly-updatable educational space which can be used beyond the boundaries of the specific course it was designed for.

INTRODUCTION

The term blog, which refers commonly to a personal online environment used to publicly post self-reflections with a hyper- and inter-textual structure, was first used by Peter Merholz, and derives from the word weblog (Loving, Schroeder, Kang, Shimek, & Herbert, 2007). The first

example of a weblog was that of Jorn Barger in 1997 (as quoted in Wee Sing Sim, J. & Hew, K. F., 2010), when blogs “were literally Web logs or lists of sites a particular author visited on any given day that would be revised by changing the HTML code and updating the file on a server” (Richardson, 2005, p. 17).

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However, over the last decade, several blog hosting services (e.g., *Blogger*, www.blogger.com; *WordPress*, www.wordpress.com) have been developed by letting users quickly create a personal updatable environment without any prerequisite for knowing how to use mark-up languages, or carry out programming or server maintenance. Today's blogs can be managed by any internet user and, thanks to their intuitiveness and ease of use, they are increasingly spreading in the educational context as a teaching/learning tool, acquiring new values for the lifelong learning process.

Reflection and professional growth are the background motivations of the experimentation presented here and are related to the creation of a class blog for teacher training. The blog *Tutor online: formazione, ricerca e condivisione (Online tutor: training, research and sharing)* (<http://tutoronline09.wordpress.com/>) was launched in January 2009 as an element of the fifth edition of the online *post lauream* course *Online Tutor*, which was organised by University of Macerata (Italy) in the 2008-2009 academic year, in order to train teachers and educators in the field of e-learning and online supporting tasks.

The same blog was also used in the academic year 2009-2010 and will be integrated into the current edition of the online "Online Tutor" course.

The last two editions of the online course, in which the blog originated and was fully developed, were entirely run by using a Learning Management System (LMS) with the additional use of external web 2.0 tools such as the blog.

The general aim of using a class blog in the course is to provide students with a hands-on approach in an environment that can be useful both as a tool to be used in their teaching contexts and as a strategy for their learning/training lifelong process.

This paper will underline not only how the blog was used within the training course and its relevance for acquiring a practical, hands-on experience of how online tools, commonly used by "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), work, but

also how a contextualised class tool can become a learning strategy. The training course normally gathers an audience with diverse cultural backgrounds and professional contexts, but all participants share the same need to progress in their professional/vocational career and are engaged in pursuing the objective of enriching their expertise in managing online interactions in formal and/or informal educational settings.

The four-month online course emphasises the basics of e-learning, and its main goals are for learners to:

- Acquire the proper relational skills to understand and manage the social and psychological dynamics of online interactions.
- Experiment and practice with the main didactical tools and strategies in online teaching and training (such as wikis, blogs, forums, chats).
- Be able to select and manage online tools and resources to mentor and scaffold learners according to specifically designed learning paths in different educational contexts.

The entire learning path is structured into three main modules in which web 2.0 tools play a relevant role in the training. Since e-learning often implies the use of social media such as blogs and resource sharing services for photos/videos/bookmarks, online tutors need to learn how to set, use and interact with students in such environments. The blog was designed and introduced in one of the course modules to make students familiar with its features and for them to experience, as a class group, the value of a joint effort to publish educational resources, exchange ideas and opinions and interact with peers through blog comments. The general purpose of building a public blog was to make participants comfortable with a web 2.0 tool that can play such a relevant role in education. The blog is, in fact, one of the effective examples of how the dynamics of

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