

Contributing to the E-Community: an evaluation of the role and level of usage of weblogs to support teaching and learning in higher education

Justin Lance
Course Leader BA Events Management
Department of Business and Service Sector Management
London Metropolitan University

Keywords: *weblogs, blogging, learning community*

Introduction

Since its inception, the World Wide Web (www) has offered users the opportunity to view and share information within a global community. However, it is only comparatively recently (1998) that relatively unsophisticated publication facilities have been available that allow personal webpublishing enabling people with little technical knowledge to use the www as a medium for publishing, social networking and collaboration (Fielder 2004).

A Weblog, or Blog, is an interactive journal that is available 24 hours a day on the Internet. A person who creates a blog is a 'blogger', whilst updating a blog by writing new posts is called 'blogging'. Blogs allow the sharing of information in real time amongst many people simultaneously, and they allow visitors to submit comments on the blogger's entries creating an interactive experience. Blogging is about reading, 'reading about what is of interest to you, your culture, your community, your ideas'; blogging is reflecting, criticising, questioning, reacting (Downes 2004).

Weblogs have become a very popular technology for quickly and easily updating and publishing personal websites (Blood 2000, cited by Wilder). The weblog author can set up his/her own private, semi-private or public weblog and create an online journal that can be easily added to. In an educational context, Blogging can enhance student writing skills (Bernstein 2004, cited by Wilder & Merritt), give a voice to inner-most thoughts and concerns (Nussbaun 2004, cited by Wilder & Merritt), enhance traditional paper-based journal/portfolio assessment tasks, encourage timely reflection, promote deep learning, and offer an alternative method of teacher-to-student and student-to-student communication; leading to the development of an online learning community.

This paper aims to investigate and evaluate the extent of adoption and use of Weblogs by students in their assessments during their Intermediate year of study at London Metropolitan University and to identify student attitudes towards Blogging and the characteristics of Blogging technology within a teaching and learning context. In addition, the extent to which Weblogs can help to develop a Learning Community shall also be investigated. Two student groups were involved in the research, one group studying a module called Planning & Management of Events, and the second studying Communications and Technology. Both modules incorporated the creation of an individual weblog as part of the student assessment for each module.

Research Rationale

On a personal level, the motivation for this research was associated with a desire to incorporate an innovative assessment method within the BA Events Management curriculum. The use of a weblog supported a student centred, portfolio-based written assessment that afforded the opportunity for students to record and reflect upon, in the form of a learning log, their learning experience of organising a fictitious event throughout a semester of study. Students had been prompted in the first Week of Semester to create a weblog at www site www.blogger.com that offers free access to weblog facilities. Students had further been prompted to interact with their blog at least once a week.

Within the wider context of the University and the education community, the use of weblogs within Higher Education has even greater significance to current issues such as e-learning and the use of learning technologies, reflective practice, deep learning, independent study, Learning Communities and collaboration, portfolios in assessment, and feedback methodologies.

Methodology

In this investigation, both qualitative and quantitative data was captured from two Intermediate Level student groups using both questionnaire research and focus groups to generate data. The student group studying the module called Planning & Management of Events were canvassed using a questionnaire, whilst those students studying Communications and Technology participated in the focus groups.

Findings from the Questionnaire:

Of the 28 respondents (24% of the students registered for the module),

- 68% confirmed that they had created a blog to support the assessment of a Learning Log.

Of these respondents,

- 11% interacted with their blog at least twice a week,

- 68% once a week
- 16% fortnightly,
- 4% had not interacted at all with their blog.
- No student interacted with their blog on a daily basis.

Students were asked about their perceptions and feelings towards the blog through inclusion in teaching and learning.

Item	Percentage of students
Agreed or strongly agreed that blogs enhanced their level of learning	37%
Agreed or strongly agreed that blogs improved their understanding of lecture content	42%
The inclusion of a blog in the module is a good idea*	53%
The blog was interesting	53%
Interacting with the blog was easy	42%
The blog was a useful tool	74%
The blog was annoying	26%
The blog was threatening to use	11%
The creation of a blog was a good form of assessment	74%
Blogging is an unthreatening method of expression.	68%
I support the use of blogs in future assessment	42%
Students intending to start a personal blog	5% (1 student)
Students possessing a personal blog that they used for their own webpublishing	0%

* no-one thought it was a bad idea

Student activity in terms of developing a learning community was also questioned.

Item	Percentage of students
Students creating an additional blog to enhance group work activities that took place during seminars throughout the semester	79%
Students using their individual blogs as a form of communication between peers	18% (2/3 felt an enhanced feeling of peer support)
Students who created a blog agreed or strongly agreed that interaction within the student group had been enhanced	26%
Students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt secure about sharing their work with others	74%
Students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt secure about anyone being able to read their work online	21%
Accessibility problems relating to the online technology (generally, these problems emanated from the host site, the server or were password issues and are therefore beyond the control of the University)	32%

Findings from Focus Groups:

Students were asked to highlight what they considered to be the most beneficial aspects of Blogs to today's society. Students particularly highlighted the benefits of 'freedom of speech', the freedom to express an opinion and to publish work. In addition, the benefits of being able to interact, discuss, comment and share ideas were also considered important. Time saving was also identified.

When asked how they felt about having to create a blog as a form of assessment, students considered blog-creation as challenging, stimulating, and 'participating in a new revolution'. One student identified that creating a blog; 'takes time'; which contradicts earlier assertions that blogs 'save time'.

Students were further asked to identify the benefits to themselves of creating a blog; the predominant response confirmed that students saw benefits in interaction and the sharing of information. The downsides identified by students focused upon the difficulties of finding other-peoples blog sites on the www, the weight of information already published, the time consumed in producing blogs, and the subjectivity of the information blogs contain. Finally, the issues of access that segregate those people who do not possess the relevant technology to access the www was also identified.

The issue that 'anyone' could access, read and comment upon the student blogs was highlighted by the focus group chairpersons, and students where asked how they felt knowing that their information was accessible. Although students felt that this was not of significant enough of an issue to stop the creation of a blog, the dominant feeling amongst both focus groups was that blogging was best suited to business, rather than personal publishing. One student commented that the blog was 'my space...I like it because it is my walled garden', implying that personal blogs should remain secret.

With the knowledge of public accessibility, students were asked to identify the writing styles and methods of expression that have been employed to suit the blogging environment. Students identified that personal blogs should be written informally, whilst academic, professional or business blogs should be written in a more formal report style, using short sentences, and avoiding jargon.

The groups identified that insufficient progress had been made at that time on writing the blogs amongst the student groups to allow for third-party contributions or comments about the individual blogs. It was agreed by all students that third-party postings or comments regarding their blogs would not be considered authentic or credible. In addition, students considered it 'rude' or impolite to view and make comments about the blogs belonging to their peer group. The current level of interaction and discussion using blogs restricted student comments concerning the development of a learning community; and whilst students

acknowledged the benefits that blogs could afford in terms of sharing information and collaborative learning, it was felt that the current assignment project design limited opportunities for collaboration.

Implications for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

This research demonstrates that students are prepared to interact with weblog technology, and it is perceived by students that this interaction enhances their level of learning. Blogging appears to promote deep learning, and offers opportunities for reflection and the interaction and collaboration with peers to develop a community of learners.

At an institutional level, the use of blogs within the curriculum raises a few issues. The first is the conflict with institutional policy. For example, the use of a www service that is external to organisation control may raise quality issues, unlike the use of internal Virtual Learning Environments such as WebCT or Blackboard. Secondly there is the issue of the academic rigour of posted materials, and the possibility that students will post copy-righted or protected information' (Downes 2004) or even, perhaps post some libellous content. Finally, the continuing involvement of academics in managing the blog activity, and interacting with the students raised the need for significant resources for summative and formative assessment (MacColl et al).

At course level there are a number of operational issues to which the tutor must adhere in order to maximise the beneficial characteristics of blog technology. Chen et al (2005) suggests the encouragement of student interaction with their blog from 'day-one' of their learning experience. Students should also receive regular feedback from their tutor, by engaging the students in conversation about their experiences.

Web access and online socialisation within the blog environment at an early stage is important to increase the numbers of students interacting with the media, and, on a continuing basis, tutors should visit student blogs and post comments upon them, whilst students need to be regularly prompted to access their sites, with tutors initiating activity and nurturing ongoing interaction. It is vital that students understand the point of the blog, i.e. the blog should have purpose, otherwise students may commit the 'ultimate blogging sin', that of losing interest in it themselves (Downes 2004). In addition, the inclusion of an incentive for taking part by creating a blog, and posting on peer blogs may be considered necessary. Additionally, students should be encouraged to interact with peer blogs in order to support the development of a community of learners.

In closing, it must be highlighted that tutors are unlikely to gain 100% satisfaction and interaction amongst their student cohort within the blog environment. Blogging is yet to be truly ingrained into the fabric of UK society to make this activity second nature. However, the role of a blog to support group working and a community of

learners is not to be underestimated. In this respect it is worth highlighting that 79% of the Events students who created a blog, created, unprompted by the tutor, a second blog to support ongoing group seminar activities as a method for discussing, communicating and the dissemination of group information to solve a Problem Based Learning activity. This incidental occurrence suggests that the future role of weblogs may lie within the group interface of Problem Based Learning activities by providing a platform for systematic enquiry, a publishing space for transacting and archiving information and support for co-operation between group members.

References

- Brandon B (2003) *Using RSS and weblogs for e-learning: An overview*, The e-Learning Developers Journal [online], May 2003, available at <http://www.elearningGuild.com>
- Chen et al (2005) *Using Wikis and Weblogs to support reflective learning in an introductory Engineering Design Course*. In American Society for Engineering Educational Annual Conference & Exposition 2005
- Downes S (2004) *Educational Blogging*, Educause Review, September/October 2004
- Farmer J (2004) *Communication dynamics: Discussion boards, weblogs and the development of communities of inquiry in online learning environments* [online], Ascilite, available at <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/farmer.html> [accessed 28/03/2006]
- Farmer J, (2005) *Blogs@Anywhere: High fidelity online communication* [online], Incorporated Subversion, available at <http://incsub.org/blog/2005/blogs-anywhere-high-fidelity-online-communication> [accessed 27/03/2006]
- Fiedler S (2004) *Introducing disruptive technologies for learning: Personal Webpublishing and Weblogs*. In L Cantoni & C McLoughlin (Eds), Proceedings of Ed-Media 2004, Lugano, Switzerland
- MacColl et al (2005) *Reflections on Reflection: Blogging in Undergraduate design studios* [online], available at <http://localhost/Users/morrison/Library/Mail%20Downloads/reflectionsonreflections> [accessed 28/03/2006]
- Roberts S (2003) *Campus Communications & the wisdom of blogging* [online], Syllabus Media Group, available at <http://www.campus-technology.com/article.asp?id=7982> [accessed 28/03/2006]
- Schneider et al (2002) *Community, content and collaboration management systems in education: A new chance for socio-constructivist scenarios?* In 3rd Congress on Information and Communication Technologies in Education, Rhodes, September 26-29 2002
- Sharma P & Fiedler S (2004) *Introducing technologies and practices for supporting self-organised learning in a hybrid environment*. In K Tochtermann & H Maurer (Eds), Proceedings of I-Know '04, pp 543-550

Tosh D & Werdmuller B (2004) *ePortfolios and weblogs@ One vision for ePortfolio development*, citation of unpublished documents

Weller et al (2005) *Use of innovative technologies on an e-learning course*, *Internet and Higher Education*, 8, pp 61-71

Wilder H & Merritt T, *Weblogs in Language Arts instruction*, citation of unpublished documents

Willaims J & Jacobs J (2004) *Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector*, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 20, 2, pp 232-247

Xie Y, *Students' experience of using weblogs in a class: An exploratory study*, citation of unpublished documents

Biographical Note

Following fifteen years in publishing, exhibitions, shows and management consultancy, Justin Lance has been course leader of BA Events Management for the past two years; and he has recently become course leader of MA Events Marketing Management, a newly devised curriculum to be launched in September 2006.

His research interests focus upon the relationship between Learning Technologies and teaching and learning, and Social Construction and the development of learning communities. He is currently planning to investigate the role of mobile phone technology in the delivery of group presentation assessment tasks within a Masters curriculum, and hopes to write his Masters in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education on the use of Weblogs to support the PDP, and how this might improve student self-efficacy.

Email j.lance@londonmet.ac.uk