

Blogging In An Online Course: A Report on Student Satisfaction Among First-time Bloggers

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Abstract: Decision Making for Information Professionals was a ten-week, online masters-level course taught during summer 2003 to twenty-nine students geographically dispersed across North America. Weblogs were introduced as an additional communication tool to the course's threaded discussion forums and chat room. Assessment data was collected at the course's conclusion examining the students' experiences, attitudes, and overall satisfaction with the weblogs. This presentation will report on that assessment data, provide the instructor's observations on the students' use of the course weblogs, explanations for possible barriers to their acceptance, and recommendations for successful implementation. Conclusions drawn from this information should be helpful in determining if using weblogs as a communication tool in a given online course has potential.

Note: the use of the words weblog(s) and blog(s) are used interchangeably

Introduction

People familiar with weblogs, more commonly referred to as *blogs*, associate them with online personal journals that are frequently updated. Because they "publish" to the Web, blogs have been intended largely for general public consumption as "web diaries," reflecting the author's personality. Topics tend to include brief philosophical musings, commentary about the Internet and social issues, and links to other sites that the author favors. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry each day, and its informal style. Popular commercial blogging sites such as Blogger^{TM1} and Radio Userland^{TM2} have made publishing to the Web through a weblog easy, affordable, and convenient. In addition, weblogs commonly feature an open function to post comments to weblog entries. Unless otherwise prohibited, this means that anyone with Web access can click on the comments link, open a dialog box, and comment on that blogger's post. So long as the appropriate netiquette is observed, virtual communities can develop around a given blog.

During the past year, more serious uses of weblogs have surfaced. Weblogs were credited with maintaining the controversy in December 2002 around then incoming Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott's praise for outgoing Senator Strom Thurmond at Thurmond's 100th birthday celebration. Lott remarked, "we wouldn't of had all these problems" if then-segregationist Thurmond had won the presidency in '48 as the Dixiecrat candidate. Largely overlooked by mainstream news media, weblogs kept focusing on Lott until the national press corps brought the story to national attention. During the war in Iraq, some embedded journalists from both the broadcast and print media kept personal weblogs, renamed *warblogs*, in which they entered observations not conveyed in reports by the major news media covering the war. In some cases, these journalists were, in effect, censored by their parent organizations for compromising the integrity of that company's reports. Democratic party presidential candidate Howard Dean has introduced a weblog, Blog for America, as a key tool in his grassroots campaign. A candidate's presence on the Web is not what is new. Rather, it is the level of interactivity and accessibility to the candidate that the Blog for America had delivered.

Educators and information technologists, including those working in distance education, have begun using blogs to share ideas with colleagues and solicit feedback through the comments function. *elearningspace*, a website "intended for users, managers, developers, and facilitators of elearning," maintains a list of learning and technology blogs at <http://www.elearningspace.org/edutechblogs.htm>. The opportunity to create virtual

¹ <http://blogger.com>

² <http://www.userland.com>

communities of like-minded persons questioning, interacting, and sharing on a blog is superceding the more traditional text-based email and listservs prominent for the past two decades. Given the demonstrated value of this evolving technology, what are the advantages of applying it to an online course?

The Context

Decision Making for Information Professionals was a ten-week, online masters-level course taught during summer 2003 to twenty-nine students geographically dispersed across North America. Content was developed around nine thematic modules, online readings, threaded discussion forums, and written assignments. Most students had taken at least one other online course and used a course management system (CMS). For this course, a CMS new to all the students was being used. Also introduced for the first time in any of their courses, were two weblogs: *Technology News*³ and *IRLS613*⁴.

Technology News was developed for students to post blog entries about such things as news reports about new technologies, applications being touted for their potential in their discipline -- librarianship, information science and education -- cautionary tales, and personal experiences. Students were encouraged to include URLs in their entries and to follow links posted in other entries so that they could read about the information in the entry and add a personal comment. *Technology News* was intended to parallel a number of the content modules and it was expected that as the students learned more about such topics as technological evolution, information architecture, integrated library systems, and content management systems, the quality and quantity of their weblog entries would improve.

IRLS613, so named because that is the course designation, was initially intended for posting entries that could be helpful to other students about using the course's different systems and resources. For instance, one student's entry called for instructions on how to create a link to a URL within the discussion forum. Another student shared how to open documents such as PowerPoint presentations in separate windows rather than embedded within a CMS page. One student stepped fellow students through using the page and email functions in the new CMS. Postings such as these, however, proved few and far between. Shortly after the course began, students began using the *IRLS613* blog as the place to create entries about topics they wanted to write about but did not find any of the discussion forums or the *Technology News* blog as the appropriate place. Halfway through the course, the purpose and description of *IRLS613* changed to accommodate this apparent student-driven need.

Assessment

Students were asked to respond to three anonymous surveys given through the course management system. One assessed their experiences and acceptance of using blogs during the course and in the future. Following are the questions and responses assessing weblog use in the course.

1. The weblogs in this course were the first weblogs I have ever used.
20 True 1 False
2. The *Technology News* weblog was a good way for me to learn more about technology.
19 True 2 False
3. I would like to continue using the *Technology News* weblog.
16 True 5 False
4. Since the course started, I joined at least one other weblog.
6 True 15 False
5. I plan to join at least one weblog in the next 6 months.
14 True 6 False

³ <http://thales.ltc.arizona.edu/mt/technews/>

⁴ <http://thales.ltc.arizona.edu/mt/irls613>

An open-ended question asked students to answer: "What I liked most about using the weblogs were ...". There were eleven entries, most focusing on being able to learn new things by using the blog, using a new technology, experiencing the sense of community that it developed around the topic, the relative informal nature of sharing information found on the blog, and its use as a current awareness tool.

Observations

It seems from the responses of the students who completed the survey that the majority had a positive experience with the *Technology News* blog, felt that they learned useful and relevant material, and most planned to join at least one new blog in the coming months. This is quite encouraging.

It was interesting to watch the students (virtually) as they used the *IRLS613* blog for a purpose other than what it was initially intended. Once that blog's revised purpose was formally announced to the students via email, its use greatly increased. In fact, a number of students expressed interest in having a new blog created for the entire student body enrolled in the School of Information Resources and Library Science.

In a recent article about integrating blogging in courses, Sarah Roberts wrote: "offering students space for creating personal content and commentary is the primary application. But the number of uses for blogs are limitless. As a tool for extending learning and encouraging communication and community, blogs are expertly designed to seamlessly integrate the endeavors of many students and faculty" (Roberts, 2003). At the University of Arizona, blogs are being used Fall Semester 2003 in two sections of Freshman Composition (English 101) and in Learning, Reading and Culture (LRC551), a masters-level course in the College of Education. Initial indications are that the students find the blogs easy to use and appropriate for their respective courses. Both courses are constructed around writing, which may account for student acceptance.

An extremely useful extension to this discussion is how weblogs use Extensible Markup Language (XML) formats that "syndicate" content -- that is, make the content easier to redistribute. Commonly referred to as news aggregators or content aggregators, it is an easy way to bring together to one access point many different blogs. As one explores this highly useful and practical technology, one will also see it referred to as RSS feeds. RSS is an XML format that stands for Rich Site Summary and has become more commonly referred to as Really Simple Syndication (Brandon, 2003). It is through the RSS channels that aggregating services are possible. News aggregators periodically read sets of news sources appearing in one of these XML-based formats and display them in reverse-chronological order on the webpage presenting ones subscriptions. Instructors who have different blogs for a course, such as one for each student, or who have multiple topical blogs for more than one course will find the capability to "subscribe" to them through an aggregator extremely valuable.

Readers interested in learning more about weblogs and aggregators are invited to visit the informal webpages maintained by this author at: <http://www.elearn.arizona.edu/weblogs.html> and <http://www.elearn.arizona.edu/aggregator.html>

References

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