

## Educational Blogging: The Case of Graduate MLIS Students in Kuwait

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### Abstract

Blogging has been well-established as a communication tool, yet the literature documenting its use in education is still developing and lacks the theoretical underpinning to back it up. Blogging in education and for education has critics as well as promoters. This research is a phenomenological study that aims to create a framework and rationale for the use of blogs in higher education. It is a comparative descriptive analysis of two educational blogging experiences in Kuwait: one is a blog used by a faculty member in the Library and Information Science Department at Kuwait University that is shared with graduate students attending the courses of that faculty. The second is administered by a former graduate student of the MLIS program at Kuwait University and is open to both faculty and students. A comparison of the two experiences is the basis for the analysis and generalizations provided about the use of blogs as an educational tool and for drawing a framework for using blogs in education.

### Introduction

The educational landscape on the Internet is increasingly becoming integrated with education. Students' mastery of interactive Web 2.0 skills places them at

the vanguard of technology, and some teachers may lag behind their students. When teachers and students collaborate using technology, their roles are conjoint, and education is enhanced immensely. This research supports this notion and builds on the use of blogging for managing information and knowledge dissemination throughout the course.

The following study attempts to draw a framework for using blogs in education by investigating two blogging experiences in higher education at Kuwait University. The first is a course-centred blog created by a faculty member and used to share posts about class assignments and reactions to class material. The second is administered by a former graduate student and is a student-centred blog, on which faculty and students share their posts and comments. Even though they are different, they complement each other. The two blogs are evaluated against attributes cited in the literature.

The paper at hand uses the phenomenological study method, which uses a variety of techniques. Lester (1999, 2) described phenomenological research methods as those “including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings, and analysis of personal texts.” He further explained:

If there is a general principle involved, it is that of minimum structure and maximum depth, in practice constrained by time and opportunities to strike a balance between keeping a focus on the research issues and avoiding undue influence by the researcher.

Lester (1999, 1) furthermore explained that the phenomenological research approach's purpose is “to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation.” He further proceeded to explain phenomenological research as the type of study that is conducted by “gathering ‘deep’ information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s).”

In the research at hand the phenomenological approach is used to further shed light on a phenomenon that needs to be investigated fully. Lester (1999, 1) explained:

Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action.

## **Blogging in education: Relevant literature**

### **Blogging in education: Theoretical framework needed**

Epistemological shifts in learning toward constructivist theory, in which knowledge is constructed and learners are active participants in their own learning, has supported the argument for use of blogs in education. However, there are sceptics who still question the use of blogs in education.

As every technology's history has brought its own debate, blogging in education has both advocates and opponents. Larsson and Hrastinski (2011) reviewed research published prior to 2009 on blogs and blogging within the social sciences and the humanities and found that research has been on the rise in the years between 2002 and 2008. Moreover, they found several disciplines within the social sciences and humanities represented. Those disciplines in descending order are: business, politics, communication, library and information studies, education, technology, sociology and psychology, and social medicine. Larsson and Hrastinski's research points to the need to develop a theory on blogs in education, one that synthesizes and integrates the research results of various types of studies.

Historical development of a blogging community and the application of blogs and blogging in the full range of industrial and social contexts are the subjects of work by Bruns and Jacobs (2006). The chapter entitled "Blogging from Inside the Ivory Tower" by Jill Walker (2006) identifies three types of academic blogs: those of public intellectuals, research logs, and

pseudonymous blogs about academic life. The multiplicity of uses of blogging can impair a deep understanding of those uses and can impede the ability to draw a theoretical framework for use of blogs in education (Bruns and Jacobs 2006, 3). However, the authors emphasize that it is the specific use of a blog that determines its value.

Duffy and Bruns (2006, 31) reiterate the importance of a framework for the study of blogs in education, "The focus within this paper will be what conceptual understanding is necessary for the authentic implementation of these collaborative and co-constructed technologies within education." Moreover, Duffy and Bruns point to the importance of the teacher possessing an understanding of their basic use and the possibilities that blogging holds. The paper concludes with the importance of educational institutions making it possible for students to experience these technologies and provide similar opportunities so they can develop the "critical, creative, collaborative, and communicative capacities that graduates will require in their future professions" (2006, 37).

### **Blogging in education: Possibilities and potential**

Williams and Jacobs (2004) point to the lack of referred academic literature on the use of blogs in education, even though the characteristics of blogs make them a very good fit for education. The study emphasizes the ease of use of blogs, and that blogging can lead to higher-level thinking. Furthermore, this research points to academics' slow adoption of blogging as an educational tool, a fact that hinders the development of a body of knowledge that is needed in this area.

Wang, Bock, and Chuang (2004) stress the importance of more studies to affirm or refute the potential of blogs' use in formal and informal learning. They additionally explore the potential role that blogs play in promoting a culture of critical reflective learning, constructing knowledge, improving skills, and performance assessment.

Farmer, Yue, and Brooks (2008) re-emphasize the importance of more writing on and experimentation with blogging in education in a case study of the authors' experience developing an educational blog with undergraduate students. Drawn from the theorists Ferdig and Trammel (2004, 124), four central pedagogic benefits that students glean from blogging are outlined:

1. Assisting students to become subject matter experts through a process of regular scouring, filtering, and posting.
2. Increasing students' interest in and ownership of learning.
3. Giving students legitimate chances to participate, therefore acculturating them into a community of practice.
4. Providing opportunities for diverse perspectives.

Pedagogical reasoning and learning outcomes for the use of blogging in education are emphasized by Williams and Jacobs (2004, 232), who cite Hiler (2003) when describing blogs as a "disruptive technology" that can best be characterized as one that "has the capacity to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate where complex expensive technology has failed to do so."

Downes, in a 2004 study, listed five roles for educational blogging: ordering material by date, linking Internet items to course content, organizing class discussion and class material, and contributing to students' grades.

Another early work is Bartlett-Bragg's "Blogging to Learn" (2003), in which she encourages educators to consider the value of using blogs as technological tools for education and learning. This article was published when blogs were first being used in education. Since then their use has been spreading. The informality of blogs is a characteristic cited by almost all writers who write about blogging, Bartlett-Bragg included. She stresses blogging activity as an opportunity to share new, raw ideas with other users and to seek comments before submitting final academic papers. Blogs changed the world of online communication and influenced the writing of all types of academic papers. Bartlett-Bragg's study presents a five-stage process for those involved in learning through blogging: establishment, introspection, reflective monologues, reflective dialogues, and knowledge artifacts.

Huffaker (2005) writes about how the presentation of identity is carried online, people's use of language and online behavior, and how they interact. The article advocates educational technology initiatives and considers them an addition to the educational sphere. They promote interactive collaboration, provide immediacy of access, and have cross-discipline application. Even though this research focuses on school children, it is applicable to any educational level.

Duffy and Bruns (2006, 37) present an overview of benefits and opportunities for using blogs, wikis, and RSS feeds as evolving teaching technologies. They emphasize the use of each technology in relation to "the specific pedagogical needs of [the] teaching situation." The article further emphasizes that social media tools are most beneficial when they are "strongly social and community based."

### **Blogging in education: Shortcomings and weaknesses**

Dickey (2004) provides insight into how the use of blogs as tools can enable or marginalize learners in a Web-based learning environment. His article tackles learners' feelings of isolation, alienation and frustration, even though new interactive features of Web 2.0 technologies provide a range of tools that can help alleviate learners' feelings of isolation. Dickey investigates students' perceptions of using blogs in a Web-based course for K-12 pre-service teacher education. His findings indicate that use of blogs helped prevent feelings of isolation and alienation of learners. However, the article continues to discuss how blogs may affect learners' perceptions of isolation and alienation by looking at observations of students' use of blogs and learners' perceptions of using blogs for on-line journaling.

Krause (2005) decries the use of blogs in education. Krause's experience seems not to have been positive. He cites three reasons. First, the dynamics of exchange that he was hoping for did not materialize. He also notices a difference between wanting to blog and blogging because one has to. And, Krause believes, blogging does not help interaction when students barely recognize each other online. However, Krause had different observations when blogging was a requirement and when all students participated in the same blog. Blogs, for Krause, work better for publishing finished texts and are a viable choice for writing courses.

Lujan-Mora and De Juana-Espinosa (2007, 5) tackle benefits and barriers to using blogs in higher education. Some of the challenges include that, "Instructors may have difficulty in assessing student participation in the weblog. There are several indicators to take into account: group grading, individual posting, quality of posts, etc., as well as subjectivity vs. qualitative appreciations."

### **Blogging in education: Nontraditional possibilities**

Gregg (2009) advocates a different point of view, one that shows blogs as providing support for people working in academia whose positions are marginal, such as new PhDs and junior faculty. Blogs provide an avenue for them away from standard and expected academic discourse. Those bloggers develop their own support and collegial environment. Even though blogging might disconnect them from the real politics of the workplace, it offers them a new avenue to voice grievances and a new way of doing so. Gregg (2009, 473) refers to Walker's three types of academic blogging as "a) emphasize[s] the identity of the blogger; b) emphasize[s] research; and c) emphasize[s] workplace culture."

Kerr (2006) doubts the role of blogs in promoting serious legal scholarship, yet he considers them a good start toward reaching a wider audience. So, Kerr concludes, if blogging can be enhanced and blogs are more structured, their potential in education is promising.

Unlike Kerr (2006), who doubts blogs' role to promote serious scholarship, Nackerud and Scaletta (2008) advocate the use of student blogging and consider blogs a type of academic production. They go as far to as to describe blogs as means of making scholars public intellectuals. Their study suggests that the Web's ease of use has made blogging an essential medium in the classroom.

Wang and Hsua (2008, 81) cite Jeffrey [sic] (Hsu 2007) in asserting that blogs are easy to use, support asynchronous and synchronous communication, and have multimedia elements, all criteria that make them appealing to education. The available literature displays a multitude of educational elements attained by using blogs.

Attwell (2007) looks at how the new generation is using the Internet in learning. He looks at ubiquitous computing and tackles the use of social software as a present and future learning technology. He says social media is an appealing communication tool that allows students to share ideas, create new ideas, become part of a producing and publishing group, and create their own identities. In other words, they create a world of informal learning. Additionally, the author discusses the dilemma encountered by modern education systems when students disconnect from formal learning and how formal learning institutions that have not yet accepted the value of blogs contribute

to this disconnect between students and their formal education. Moreover, the paper discusses how educational organizations and institutions are increasingly testing blogs and other social media applications as part of their curricula and how challenging it is to encourage blog users to continue to participate in a blog after the end of the course. The author asserts that using a blog places more responsibility on the teacher and the organization (or whoever is responsible for the blog).

Davi, Frydenberg and Gulati (2007) assert that blogs can play an important role in education and the classroom. Of students surveyed for their paper, 73% claimed that participating in blog discussions raised their level of participation in significant class discussions, and therefore increased their opportunity to express their views. Furthermore, the study showed that 76% of students included in the survey thought that posting and responding to issues on the blog helped their general learning in the course. And 71% agreed that reading the blog contributed to their learning.

### **Blogging in Education: Active involvement in learning**

Attwell (2007, 2) says, "The promise of Personal Learning Environments could be to extend access to educational technology to everyone who wishes to organize their own learning." Attwell's vision places more responsibility on the shoulders of educators, the educational systems, and learners themselves. Responsibility and accountability become meshed. His research confirms that as learners assume more control over their learning, the line blurs between "producing and consuming." This by itself puts more responsibility on the educational system and educators to provide high-quality education that assures that the minimum standard is met as students become producers themselves. Attwell (2007, 5) adds a cautionary note:

There are also many unresolved issues, including who provides technology services, security of data, and of course the personal safety of students. Notwithstanding these issues, we are beginning to see how these new tools might practically be used in education, especially through wide scale experiments in the use of blogging.

Bartlett-Bragg's study (2003) stresses the fact that blogs are a joint activity through which students enjoy communication with each other and create an informal network. This communication is enjoyed by students and encouraged by academics. It allows a process of 'mind sharing'.

Davi, Frydenberg, and Gulati (2007) stress that reviewing students' posting habits over time shows significant improvements in reading and writing skills, critical thinking abilities, and overall student learning. Furthermore they stress that continuous questions from teacher to students in class or online encourage students to keep developing a more persuasive analysis in their posts. Actually students tend to learn from each other, and very skilled and talented ones actually can end up leading by example.

In the Davi, Frydenberg, and Gulati study, students took their blogging responsibilities seriously. Half the students mentioned that they spent time thinking about what to post before actually posting. Some respondents mentioned that they preferred keeping posting and responding a voluntary activity, while others thought they would have responded more if they did not have to stick to a schedule and seemed to prefer to comment voluntarily when they found a topic of interest. Whether keeping blogging voluntary or requiring it contributes more to students' participation is an issue that needs further investigation. The paper at hand attempts to do so, but more studies over longer periods are needed to ascertain the commitment of students to such activities both on voluntary and required bases.

Kerawalla *et al.* (2009, 31) reported the experience of graduate students in a distance learning course. They identified six factors that affect students' blogging: perceptions of and need for an audience; perceptions of and need for community; the utility of and need for comments; presentational style of the blog content; the overarching factors related to the technological context; and the pedagogical context of the course. The article suggests a framework that can be used to guide students' blogging activities in education.

## Methods and procedures used in the study

To build on the existing literature on blogging in education, this study evaluates and compares two educational blogs used by graduate students of the Library and Information Science program at Kuwait

University. One blog is structured, involuntary, and course-centred informal; the other is not structured, voluntary, and student-centred. The two blogs are compared and contrasted in view of their possible contribution toward establishing a framework for the use of blogs in education. The study hopes to add to the existing and evolving literature on this topic.

The study attempts to draw a framework for the use of blogging in education using a combination of three techniques: quantitative, qualitative, and a phenomenological study group. The literature investigated provided theoretical underpinnings for the framework to be realized.

Participants were frequent users of the blogs concerned. They were current students or alumni of the Library and Information Science program. Blog1 is a course-centred blog developed and administered by a faculty member who guides the discussion weekly based on class topics. Blog2 is a student-centred one developed and administered by a former graduate student who maintains it as a forum for current students and alumni. Participation is voluntary, and over the years it has become a forum for students and some faculty about events in the profession.

Seven participants of each blog were chosen randomly, based on their willingness to participate. A total of 14 participants answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire is composed of 27 questions with mostly short answers. The open-ended questions were preceded by a closed-ended question meant to probe thinking in a topical question to follow.

## Results

### Quantitative analysis (closed questions)

The closed questions were as follows:

- Questions 1 and 2 identified which blog the participant used and whether it was the first blog they had used.
- Questions 3–10 were meant to ascertain if the blogging experience contributed to concept building, thinking, reflecting, and reacting.
- Questions 14 and 15 were meant to ascertain if the blogging experience contributed to building management skills or not.
- Questions 16–26 (except for 19, 20, and 21) were meant to ascertain preference for the blogs' lan-

**Table 1:** Summary of quantitative data

Blog 1, Course-Centred	Blog 2, Student-Centred
First blogging experience 1 out of 7 (no) 6 (yes)	First blogging experience 4 out of 7 (no) 3 (yes)
Increased interaction and communication among group members 4 out of 7 (to some extent) 2 (little) 1 (very much)	Increased interaction and communication among group members 7 out of 7 (very much)
Contributed to learning 4 out of 7 (very much) 2 (to some extent) 1 (little)	Contributed to learning 4 out of 7 (to some extent) 3 (very much)
Contributed to networking abilities 4 out of 7 (yes) 2 (no)	Contributed to networking abilities 5 out of 7 (yes) 2 (no)
Blogging improved technological skills 5 out of 7 (yes) 2 (no)	Blogging improved technological skills 5 out of 7 (no) 2 (yes)
Blogging created a thinking environment 6 (yes) 1 (no)	Blogging created a thinking environment 7 (yes)
Blogging forced them to manage class and assignments better 5 (yes) 2 (no)	Blogging forced them to manage class and assignments better 5 (yes) 2 (no)
Blogging motivated them to manage class assignments 5 (yes) 2 (no)	Blogging motivated them to manage class assignments 6 (yes) 1 (no)
Would participate if optional and voluntary 5 (yes) 2 (no)	Would participate if optional and voluntary 6 (yes) 1 (no)
Worry making spelling and language mistakes 7 (all yes)	Worry making spelling and language mistakes 4 (yes) 1 (no) 1 (sometimes) 1 elaborated
Worry discussing cultural issues 6 (no) 1 (yes)	Worry discussing cultural issues 4 (no) 3 (yes)
Blog in Arabic or English or both 4 (English only and not bilingual) 3 (bilingual)	Blog in Arabic or English or both 3 (English only and not bilingual) 4 (bilingual)
Blogging a voluntary activity 4 (yes) 3 (no)	Blogging a voluntary activity 7 (yes)
Have informal blogging activity to voice their opinions and share thoughts 5 (yes) 2 (no)	Have informal blogging activity to voice their opinions and share thoughts 6 (yes) 1 (no)
Would be willing to participate in a group discussion to further talk about the issue 7 (yes)	Would be willing to participate in a group discussion to further talk about the issue 7 (yes)

guage; voluntary vs. involuntary status; whether Blog1 (course-centred) is considered formal, given that participation is required and is for a grade; whether Blog2 (student-centred) is considered informal as participation is student-initiated and current students and alumni participate out of personal initiative and the urge to stay connected with the profession.

- Questions 19 and 20 were meant to ascertain language, spelling, and grammar skills of participants.
- Question 21 was meant to ascertain cultural limitations self-imposed by the participants when blogging.
- Question 27 was meant to ascertain participants' readiness to pursue the discussion in a phenomenological study group to investigate the subject

**Table 2:** Summary of qualitative data

Blog 1, Course-Centred	Blog 2, Student-Centred
How did blog contribute to learning? Share, discuss, understand, reflect, and interact.	How did blog contribute to learning? Share, communicate, exchange.
How did blog contribute to networking abilities? Interact.	How did blog contribute to networking abilities? Networking with colleagues from other sex; engage in conversations and feedback gatherings, meetings, events, and in discussion of assignments. Information about different aspects of program.
Exchanges on blog, contribution to skill building and concept building Mostly course-related; forced reading and reflecting; asking questions of others.	Exchanges on blog, contribution to skill building and concept building Variety of topics; information about accomplishments, research, new babies; meetings, and announcements.
Worrying about spelling mistakes, language, and sentence structure Visibility of posts forced time management, language correcting/checking, and reflecting (use of spelling).	Worrying about spelling mistakes, language, and sentence structure Most worry; caused hesitation to participate sometimes because of fear of making mistakes.
Blogging contribution to culture building Checking others' posts. Voluntary? Commitment, so being part of class grade does not make it an option. Language competence and lack of familiarity with blogging in addition to apprehension about its use. Once confidence was built, a more relaxed atmosphere followed.	Blogging contribution to culture building Sharing and reflecting before writing. Voluntary? Online cross-gender communication that is physically not allowed in this cultural setting. Formality decreases with familiarity with the blog and the active people on it. So over time, a community is built.

more in lieu of answers provided to the questionnaire.

The responses to these questions are summarised in Table 1.

### Qualitative analysis (open-ended questions)

Answers to the short open-ended questions were content analyzed to see what recurrent theme words were used. The results are summarised in Table 2.

### Phenomenological discussion group

Seven students participated in a 2 1/2-hour session as a follow-up to the questionnaire they had answered. By analyzing the students' words during the phenomenological study group discussion, we found that they touched on several relevant issues in addition to factors that contributed to their hesitation to participate in blogging or to start their own blogs. Hesitation to

start blogging involved several factors. Comments included:

Lack of skills and knowledge about blogging mostly.

Not as interactive as Facebook (for the ones already familiar with it).

Blogs are formal to some; they are a journal, but Facebook and Twitter are informal and like a newspaper.

With a blog, one is open and exposed to the whole world, while Facebook's participation is based on being invited to the group.

Williams and Jacobs (2004, 233) stress this idea by describing blogs as "a means of communicating with an unknown mass of 'netizens,' ready and willing to respond to opinions and commentaries of bloggers in a manner not dissimilar to that afforded a talkback radio host." In their research, they suggest several

relevant issues that make blogs viable in education. The discussion group brought forth several similar comments:

Blogs pop up fast when searches are done; the interaction is with people all over the world.

It is more professional.

Sponsoring of a blog is important for it to become a news source.

Organization, coordination, concentration, and concept-building.

Actually, Williams and Jacobs (2004, 233) see the blogging experience as one that generates “knowledge from mere information.” Additionally, level of privacy and cultural issues seem to be topics that suggest themselves for further study as well. Women’s hesitance to participate propels them to use fake names and write what they think. Even though classes are co-ed, there is a level of cultural conservatism that both females and males practice. Hesitance in the traditional classroom tends to wane as time passes and familiarity with colleagues is gained. Eventually the classroom adopts a cooperative, collegial atmosphere. This issue by itself is worthy of being pursued in future studies that would consider how blogs may supplement and substitute in cultures where co-education is not allowed.

## Discussion

Most students using Blog1, the course-centred one, did not have any prior blogging experience, in contrast to those using Blog2, the student-centred one. Those participants knew about blogging and posted their comments voluntarily with no immediate benefit from their participation except staying in contact with the profession and its students. They were driven by their interest in communicating and connecting, and their answers revealed this clearly. On the other hand, the Blog1 group’s participation was driven mainly by the fact that use was a requirement of the course and awarded them a grade for participation. What could be explored in further studies is whether their participation continues when the course ends.

The Blog2 participants perceived their participation as contributing to networking more, which is their reason for blogging. As for their technological skills, they did not see blogging as contributing to them; they are already skilled enough with technology that they feel confident participating. However, results of Blog1 are the opposite; the student participants did not have technological skills, they were required to blog and blogging did improve their skills.

All student participants of Blog1 and Blog2 agreed that blogging created a thinking environment, helped them manage class and assignments, and motivated them to do so. Both would stop if the activity was optional—more so with Blog1. One of the challenges raised in the literature is how to keep the commitment when the class stops and the direct benefit ceases to exist. The fact that participation is for a grade might explain why all of them said they worry about making spelling mistakes. The Blog2 participants’ answers were not uniform, and they did not worry as much; two of them went as far as to consider it a chance to improve their language skills and a way to express themselves in just a few words. Wang, Fix, and Bock (2005) reiterated this in their study, too. Only one participant worried about cultural issues in Blog1, while fewer than half from Blog2 worried, and more than half of them did not worry.

Creating a bilingual blog (in Arabic and English) is an idea that seems to resonate with both blogs’ participants. Blog2 participants seem to have a high commitment; they seem to want it to remain a voluntary activity. Blog1 participants do not seem to be as uniform in their responses, but more than half of them want participation to be voluntary. Because the sample used in this research is small, more research needs to be done on level of commitment of students after finishing the course and after graduation. Results of this study need to be validated by similar further studies.

Blog1 members mostly wanted an informal blog to voice their opinions. One participant wanted the experience to be less formal because of his/her inadequate language skills. Another participant thought that if contributing to the blog were voluntary, participation would be low. As for Blog2 participants, one thought that because of the abundance of informal blogs, the institution should sponsor formal blogs. All participants in both blogs were ready to meet and engage in further discussions. It was apparent that they were committed to the issue and believed in the

importance of exploring the value of blogs in education.

Analyzing the content on a deeper level in the qualitative analysis revealed some interesting and very supportive ideas. The issue of how the blog contributes to learning seems to be uniform. The word “sharing” was usually used in both blog groups, but other, nearly synonymous words like “discuss, understand, reflect, interact, communicate, and exchange” were also used. For one of the Blog2 participants, the blog was her way to collect information about the program before entering it. This brings to the forefront the issue of marketing of programs using social media, which is an area that needs to be more investigated. Wang, Bock, and Chuang (2004) stress these ideas, too.

One student described blogging: “Sometimes I read more about the topic or the subject before commenting to add value to the conversation.” The ability of blogs to contribute to a thinking and reflecting atmosphere leads us to conclude that social media, and blogging in particular, is a viable choice to lead to reflective and interactive thinking, which is prerequisite to higher-order thinking.

Contribution to networking seems to be another issue; Blog1 and Blog2 participants used the word “interact” repeatedly. This is an activity that promotes culture and community. Blog2 seems to be promoting informal networking with colleagues from the other sex (a task that seems to be easier when done online), and the participants used the blog to engage in conversation and feedback, to discuss assignments, and to learn about gatherings, meetings, and events. Furthermore, students used the blog to gather information about different aspects of the program from those who had gone through it. This also supports the viability of using blogging as a marketing tool.

Participants seem to use Blog2 to learn about events. “Some posts were to remind us about certain gatherings or meetings. There were some posts dedicated to students’ personal life (e.g., some had a baby; some did research). There were posts talking about meeting an old colleague in a library or a public place. Some students shared their personal feeling toward certain issues or events; this brought them closer to us.”

As for the blog’s contribution to skill and concept building, Blog1 seems to have increased participants’ confidence in relation to their use of social media. Blog2 participants seem to have gained a variety

of information and news about different members, meetings, gatherings, and so on. A sense of community is built when participants come to a social forum and share experiences involving their courses. Blogs have changed online communication, and the writing of all kinds of academic papers has changed. Bartlett-Bragg’s 2003 study and her five stages of educational blogging – establishment, introspection, reflective monologue, reflective dialogue, and knowledge artifacts – seem to be very clear in this study as well.

As for the issue of the participants’ worry about spelling and language mistakes, Blog1 participants reflected that the visibility of posts forced them to undertake time management, language correcting/checking, and reflecting, while a few of the Blog2 participants said that fear of making mistakes caused them to hesitate to participate. As for blogging and its contribution to concept building, Blog1 participants mostly worried that fear of making mistakes would cause people to hesitate to participate, while Blog2 participants said they shared and reflected before writing and posting.

Blog1 participants revealed their fear that there would be a lack of commitment if the blog was on a voluntary basis, but also expressed that they did not favor having the blog be part of the class grade. Additionally, lack of language competence and lack of familiarity with blogging led to apprehension about blog use. Yet, once confidence was built, a more relaxed atmosphere evolved, and a sense of community grew. Formality decreased as familiarity with the blog increased. As Bartlett-Bragg (2003, 4) states, “It was this interaction and personal opinion or knowledge publishing that produced the initial attraction for the inclusion of blogging into the e-Learning subjects that I teach, with the intention to provide the potential for alternative expression and a pathway for reflection leading to deep learning.”

The two educational blogs are studied as a phenomenon worthy of further consideration. Explicit and implicit goals of the study of the two blogs are described. Davi, Frydenberg, and Gulati (2007) advocate the use of blogging across disciplines. But Krause (2005) does not think blogging promotes communication online, as he thinks students barely recognize each other’s presence. Kerr (2006) takes it further and does not seem to believe that blogging fosters serious scholarship. Both Krause and Kerr believe students engage in it just because it is a requirement. Our experience is different. Our experience in

Blog1 one indicates that blogging leads to a higher level of scholarship in spite of the fact that students often do things they do not want to do but do because they have to.

Davi, Frydenberg and Gultai paper (2007) asserts that improvements in reading and writing skills, critical thinking abilities, and overall student learning occurred over time in class or online, and the research at hand agrees with these findings. Students actually enhance their persuasive analysis with time. They tend to learn from each other and exceptionally skilled and talented ones can lead by example. As in the Davi, Frydenberg, and Gulati study, which found that students took their blogging responsibilities seriously, our research shows that half of the students mentioned that they spent time thinking about what to post before actually posting.

Dickey's research (2004) dealt with alienation among students in a long-distance course. The experiences discussed here are different in that they occur in a traditional classroom setting where use of blog is a supplementary activity, making the experience one that combines attributes of both traditional and long-distance education.

The research of Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) was done among undergraduate students. The research at hand is done among graduate students, and further research needs to be done among both graduate and undergraduate students to enrich the theoretical framework and enable conclusive evidence and generalizations.

Social media seems to offer an exhilarating new experience for students of today, so-called digital citizens. If used properly, it can make up for the lack of engagement that formal education is suffering from. Attwell (2007, 7) asserts "The argument for the use of Personal Learning Environments is not technical but rather is philosophical, ethical, and pedagogic." His research concurs with the study at hand.

Dickey's study (2004) tackles students' feelings of isolation and lack of immediate feedback and how feelings of stress follow. Alienation from a real classroom and classmates might be true in a long-distance learning environment and where blogging is used as a substitute for the classroom, but this is not the case with the study at hand, in which blogging is used as a supplementary activity. However, feelings of stress do come up in the world of blogs and in the physical world, usually at the end of the semester. The ability of bloggers to solicit advice and feedback, thus re-

ducing stress, is another of our observations. Blogging is positive in that it creates an atmosphere of empathy, which feeds into creating a community and shared culture.

Blogging as a technology enables collaborative creation of content. It enables and improves formative evaluation of student work. It encourages individual and group reflection on learning experiences. The euphoria experienced when bloggers are actively collaborating to create their spaces, making them fashionably up-to-date, and experiencing the feeling of owning their own learning makes it a truly authentic learning experience.

O'Donnell (2006, 6) seems to agree with this, saying "We need to look at blogging, not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a broad palette of cyber-cultural practices, which provide us with both new ways of doing and new ways of thinking."

This study confirms the existence of explicit and implicit benefits to the use of both blogs. Blog1, course-centred, seems to offer a semi-formal experience that is required as part of a class grade. It offers a reward in the form of a grade and over the course of the semester it facilitates enhancement of technical skills and language and writing skills, and reduces fear and apprehension associated with social media use. It is a monitored and guided experience. On the other hand, Blog2, student-centred, offers an informal experience that is not required, and participation is initiated by students themselves. It offers possibilities for networking, information sharing about assignments, tests, teachers, experiences, and benefits on the job. On a secondary level, it offers a venue for improving technical, language and writing skills and helps overcome fear and apprehension of social media use.

On the implicit level, both seem to improve skills, offer networking opportunities, foster cooperation and trust, and interestingly enough, help cross gender lines, as formality decreases with familiarity, something not usually feasible in the traditional classroom. Blogs seem to foster freedom of expression personally and in public affairs, too.

Both blogs had a varied level of control. Blog1, administered by the teaching faculty, had one administrator. It offered a slower pace of publishing as it depended on faculty time and effort. Because it is part of a course requirement and an official, formal experience, the level of interaction is imposed but visible. Blog2, on the other hand, is administered by one

administrator who can share the administrative role with any number of active students. This experience offered a fast publishing venue, an informal experience that can be described as simple and straightforward. Interaction and participation is voluntary and can be anonymous at times if the participants want, as there are no guidelines to prevent it.

### Implications for future studies

An abundance of elements were looked at during the evaluation of the two blogs. These need to be considered in further studies of educational blogging. More studies need to look at ways of assessing these elements to help establish a framework for the use of blogs and other similar social media in education. The elements to consider are:

- Implications for resources. Blog1is course-centred and the faculty involved were involved even though it meant commitment of time and effort. Reasons and objectives for doing that suggest themselves as viable questions to be studied. The literature investigating uses of blogs in academia (Bruns and Jacobs 2006) needs to be further validated. More investigations also need to ascertain reasons and the academic status of faculty engaged in blogging in academia and the uses of their blogs. Gregg's study (2009) does apply here and suggests that further studies of faculty status and reasons for blogging need further study.
- Ability and commitment of faculty and teaching staff to communicate with students at any time and offer extra resources and guidance is very much desired by faculty and students alike, but is it feasible? Does it have further implications for resources and can faculty and staff involved in these activities be compensated, either financially or academically? Questions like these put responsibility on academic institutions. They furthermore raise questions of possible conflict in academia between faculty who are using the technology to gain expertise and improve methods of teaching and those who might rely on seniority and have no academic or financial incentive to seek further compensation for engaging in online activities.
- How can unwillingness and lack of commitment of students to get involved in blogging be tackled? This poses questions of challenge to faculty and

ability to keep students engaged. Can institutions offer help in that regard, whether through assistants who can follow up or through investment in tools and resources that can ease this new responsibility on academics?

- Commitment of faculty to incorporate blogging and other interactive tools in education is becoming a necessity but how can faculty continue to do it? And what makes students go the extra mile and commit to writing more than the bare minimum required to award them the grade? Ramifications on educational tools and methods need to be investigated as well.
- How to deal with students' hesitation to share information and risk posting good ideas? This sheds light on issues of trust and confidence building among students as prerequisite to a culture of sharing.

### Blogs' added value

- *Contribution to Critical Thinking*: Both blogs are designed to assess students' critical thinking skills, enable students to increase out-of-class instructional and interactive time, and provide an authentic performance assessment for administrative purposes. Student blogs in subjects relating to courses offer a forum where students can "think aloud" and receive feedback in a collaborative environment, as (Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Oravec 2003) assert. This interactive channel through which students and faculty can debate, think, and discuss is invaluable to the critical-thinking process.
- *Networking*: The student-centred blog started because of the MLIS students' need to network outside the classroom. A faculty member suggested to a graduate student starting a blog in 2007. Within two years, the blog became a gathering "space" for students and faculty to record their reactions, observations, and academic and non-academic experiences.
- *Link Driven*: Students' need for networking led the blog administrator and other students, at the suggestion from another faculty member, to link the blog to a Facebook account, which was originally created to be a forum for the MLIS program alumni group.
- *Continued Engagement in Public Affairs*: Recent events in Tunisia and Egypt proved the power of

technology and social networking in keeping participants engaged and in shaping their opinion. Downes (2004) noted the immediacy of blogging as a forum when the September 11 events occurred. The news in the Middle East continues to prove blogs as a place to stay engaged and participate with immediacy. Huette (2006) adds more to the discussion of the benefits of blogs and their ability to provide a combination of solitary and social interaction.

- *Information Communication and Technology (ICT) Skills*: Both students and faculty using blogging or other social networking tools feel connected, with no apprehension about technology. Continued engagement, exchange of ideas, and expertise improve their confidence level and encourage them to learn various applications and skills. The engagement itself creates a “ripple effect” of a growing desire to experiment with other applications.
- *Develop Analogical Thinking*: Huette (2006) notes that blogs promote creative, intuitive, and associational thinking. Organizing class and student comments provides information on any relevant topic in an organized manner.
- *Course Planning and Design*: Course-relevant information posted by students can be used to sensitize policy makers and decision makers to the opinions that students might be hesitant to voice in the classroom or before graduation. Ultimately, it helps in the planning of course offerings and design.
- *Technical Skills Practiced*: Technical skills are practiced, and confidence in practicing them is a by-product of the blogging experience. Blogging enhances time-management skills for bloggers and participants and imposes a specific organization and order.
- *Confidence in the Experience*: It breeds more confidence in one’s skills and persuades students to keep venturing into and using the Internet’s various and endless applications.
- *Informality and Lack of Self-Discipline*: Critics who are against the use of blogs in education consider its informality a cause of mediocre contributions that are effortless and worthless, even though blog administrators can monitor the blog’s activities and apply formality to the discussion. Ultimately, the experience provides its own discipline and formality. Even though blogs can be addictive and present challenges to those lacking self-discipline,

most blog participants unconsciously become self-disciplined and observe their language and behaviour.

- *Cultural and Language Considerations*: Any culturally specific issues or language-related issues that affect blogging as it relates to cultural settings are worth considering. Further analysis is needed on the role of blogs in different educational settings around the globe.
- *Quantitative and Qualitative Assessment*: Posts and counter-posts provide an avenue for discussion and a valid measurement of student learning activities. Furthermore, searching for answers, interpretation, and analysis constitute valuable information that institutions can use in evaluation and accreditation processes.

## Conclusion

In an educational blogging experience, several stakeholders stand to benefit. Blogging for students provides a means by which they integrate lecture, reading, and discussion into personal written responses, and consequently, blogging can lead to higher order thinking skills. Furthermore, blogging provides students with an extended audience beyond the instructor and their class colleagues. Additionally, blogging enables shy students by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinions. Often students who are silent in class do speak loudly and openly on the blog. Furthermore, teachers acquire – through the material on the blog – tangible evidence of students’ comprehension. Finally, the blog is a collaborative process involving students and their peers.

For the instructor, blogging offers an additional out-of-class tool to authentically assess students’ work and performance. As for the institution, blogging provides evidence of students’ critical thinking processes and validation of the institution’s objectives as it promotes task-oriented skills and seeks to maintain accreditation.

As Williams and Jacobs (2004, 235) asserted, “blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning, and universities ought to give strong consideration to setting up blog facilities.” The literature surveyed shows academics’ slow adoption of blogging as an educational tool, a fact that hinders research in this area. This study contributes to the literature on blogging in education.

This study endorses the use of blogs as interactive tools for students' university life. "Directed autonomy" is what we choose to call it, in which students have the autonomy to write, reflect, think, present themselves, and engage with other students under the supervision and guidance of a faculty member, mentor, or coach, but with minimum interference. This level of autonomy forces higher-level thinking and this is what is needed in higher education. However, the study endorses the use of both formal and informal blogging to supplement each other.

As Web 2.0 and even 3.0 technologies offer interactive features, more experimentation is needed in the use of Web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies, especially in educational settings. The collegiality, informality, and solidarity in virtual space can form a basis for a real supplementary world that can engage students, involve them in the creation of their learning, and allow them to own their learning, ultimately enhancing their educational experiences.

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