

**Weblogs to support learning in business education: Teaching the virtual generation**

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## **Weblogs to support learning in business education: Teaching the virtual generation**

The internet has significantly changed the landscape of higher education (Baer, 1998; Pittinsky, 2003). American colleges and universities are investing heavily to employ the internet in undergraduate and graduate education and to promote web-based learning among students. Almost every teacher, student, and administrator in higher education in the U.S. has an email address to communicate with others on campus and outside of campus. A large majority of universities and colleges in North America as well as other developed countries have their own websites, which are frequently used by those studying, working, or visiting there. Internationally, in emerging countries, like India and China, where internet connectivity is rapidly increasing, internet usage is gaining popularity in higher education. Compared with other types of information sources and channels, the internet contains a large amount of data, can be customized, provides highly tailored content, and is more interactive (Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2007). When higher education institutions seek to improve instruction and provide students better access to educational resources, the internet has become an, if not the most, important technological tool available to them.

Past research has shown that an increasing number of people worldwide are relying on the internet to get information, from which movies to watch to which stocks to buy. In fact, the internet may have become the most widely used source for information, at least in the developed world where internet connectivity is widespread. The use of the internet is even more common in the 18-24 age group, with more than 80% of the people in this demographic having regular internet access. This new virtual-generation (“V-Gen”; Proserpio & Gioia, 2007) uses the internet for networking, chatting, and accessing news and information. Though the quality of information, trustworthiness, and authoritativeness of the various information sources available

on the internet may vary, there is no doubt that the internet has changed interpersonal communication as people exchange information online asynchronously, and even anonymous posts have the potential to reach millions of viewers across the world. The rise of a new generation in the prime demographic age bracket most associated with higher education has led the internet to become an important resource for teaching and learning (Martindale & Wiley, 2004).

The internet continues to generate new applications that foster online communication and information exchange across organizational, state, national, and philosophical boundaries (Huffaker, 2005). One of the latest development to emerge in the virtual world is weblogs (popularly referred to as 'blogs'). Blogs have become increasingly ubiquitous in recent years. Initial evidence suggests that blog users judge information available on blogs as more credible than traditional sources of information, such as books, encyclopedias, and newspapers. The use of blogs as a mode of computer-mediated communication providing a different type of educational environment and learning space has also begun to receive attention (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), though little is understood about this new and flexible technology. Despite the popularity of blogs in many other domains, the role of blogs in higher education has yet to be determined. Even though blogs created by academics exist (some refer to them as "k(knowledge)-logs"; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004), most educators and teachers wonder how blogs can help further learning goals in their courses. Blogs may be a viable tool for higher education, but there is a lack of research on how blogs can be used effectively. Given the potential for impact, this study examines the use of blogs as an educational tool in undergraduate business courses.

The goal of this paper is to critically comment on the potential for blogs to enhance student learning in business schools. To this end, we discuss the literature on blogs and the use of blogs for learning and teaching. The third section discusses the use of blogs in the business school of a metropolitan, mid-western public university. In the last section, we discuss our findings, highlight research directions, and provide suggestions for further use of blogs in higher education.

### **Academic literature and application of Blogs**

The internet, particularly the worldwide web, has significantly changed how people search for information and learn (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007). One reason for the popularity of the web in teaching and learning is that anyone can contribute to the information available there (e.g. wikipedia). Tools like HTML and FTP made web publishing easily available to many teachers and educators (Martindale & Wiley, 2004). However, the challenge to using these tools has been a major obstacle for many people (including the authors of this paper) who are not literate in computer languages and lack programming skills. The emergence of blogs (technically “weblogs”) has significantly lowered the technical barriers to effective web publishing.

What on earth is a blog? In plain English, a blog is a publicly available personal journal written by an individual, not unlike a conventional paper diary (Wu, 2005). The important features of a blog include instant publishing of text or graphics to the web without sophisticated technical knowledge, stamping of content entries by date and time, archiving of past content for easy search, ways for people to comment or feedback to each content entry, and hyperlinks to other blogs and websites. These features not only encourage individuals to express themselves, but also allow for interactive community development (Huffaker, 2005). Blogs encourage

interactive discussions between people without the limitation of geography or time (if you can get on the web, you can read or write blogs).

The popularity of blogs on the worldwide web seems to have captured the attention of many scholars who have started using them. For these academics and scholars, blogs offer a platform for self-expression as well as to promote global connectedness. The entry barriers to blogging are low, encouraging many scholars in various disciplines to share their work with colleagues, scholars, and other writers worldwide (Martindale & Wiley, 2004). Some of the more prominent blogs include [www.organizationsandmarkets.com](http://www.organizationsandmarkets.com) (started by a team of two organizational scholars, one from the U.S. and the other from Europe) and <http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/> (by a world-renowned scholar of economics). The primary purpose of these k(nowledge)-blogs is to share scholarly ideas with a broader community of scholars.

The reasons that make blogs suitable for sharing knowledge among scholars and researchers also make them a potentially useful tool for teaching. Blogs provide an excellent opportunity for education through storytelling and dialogue, where learning is not limited to the classroom as blogs can be accessed from anywhere where internet connection is available (Hussaker, 2005). Carraher (2003) believes that blogs enable students to be active co-producers in knowledge, willing to explore and interact with a much broader environment beyond the typical classroom. Stiler and Phillko (2003) discuss how blogging increases student enthusiasm in journaling, improves quality and quantity of student-output, allows greater teacher-mediated input, and provides a platform for web-based learning. Blogs enhance students' writing skills, increases their confidence in voicing personal opinions, and promotes reflective thinking (Chan

& Ridgway, 2005). Thus, blogs offer exciting new opportunities to promote student communication, writing, and reflective skills in higher education.

Krause (2005) observed that the use of blogs has been quite limited in higher education where methods of teaching have typically changed at a “glacial pace”. Educational application of blogs is concentrated in areas of teacher training and other professions where the use of reflective journals as a learning tool is accepted custom and practice, and consequently there is a more favorable disposition to blogs (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Another area that has been more receptive to blogging is library studies, where information search and retrieval are integral to the job, and one may expect a greater predisposition to the use of blogs. Most academic areas in higher education, including business, have not seen much use of blogs in teaching and education.

Blogs are superior to using educational web platforms like Blackboard or WebCT because of their easy accessibility. Students from various courses and even multiple universities can easily communicate via a blog. Educational web platforms are far more limiting and permit only students enrolled in a course to use features such as discussion boards. Further, blogs are interactive with all users having the capability of posting weblinks, embedding files, and other content. An instructor could use one blog that crosses several course sections; thus allowing his or her students to correspond with other students not in the same classroom. This rich interchange among students can provide for a lively, highly interactive supplement to the classroom experience.

### **Setting up the Scene**

The first author became familiar with blogs in 2007 when he came across an online article that discussed the rising popularity of blogs worldwide. It was at some point during the fall semester of 2007 that it occurred to him: Why not use blogs to extend the classroom

experience? Students would be engaged in active learning around the clock, instead of only three hours a week for class lectures. There would be interactive discussions between the teacher, students, and the global community without anyone having to leave the comfort of their homes. Internet connectivity in our school, university, and community is good and all our students have access to computers on campus as well as off-campus. Blogs are popular with young people who make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the *blogsphere* (Huffaker, 2005). Given that most of the students in our undergraduate courses tend to be between the ages of 20-25, blogs seemed to be worth trying.

The first issue was getting started. The first author started by discussing the use of blogs with some other faculty members in the department and college and found that none of them kept a blog or had considered using it for professional use. The next conversation was with some professional colleagues in business schools in other universities, which revealed that either people did not know much about blogs or were not sure how it would improve the educational experience for them or their students. It was obvious to the first author that if he wanted to use blogs in his courses, he was going to have to learn on his own.

The emergence of many commercial services, such as *Blogger*, *Wordpress*, and *Blogspot*, have made blog creation free and simple, which has increased the number of blogs on the web at a very rapid rate (Martindale & Wiley, 2004). Of course, new users like most of us do not know of these websites. The first author started with using *blogspot*. It is important to note that the decision to use *blogspot* was not based on any perceived usefulness or ease of use of this particular website over others (as suggested by the Technology Acceptance Model; Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 1989) or because of its perceived superiority. Rather, *blogspot* was chosen by serendipity as it was the first website the first author stumbled across. Starting a blog at this

site was an easy three-step process- (1) Create an account by filling in basic information such as user name, password, and email etc., (2) Name the blog by identifying a unique user name before the generic domain name (blogspot.com), and (3) Choose a template from the various options available on the website. When the three steps are done, you are ready to start writing your thoughts and sharing them with others on the worldwide web. You are now the administrator of your web-based blog and own all rights to create, edit, and delete postings.

Soon after successfully creating his first blog, the first author was faced with the next important question: What to do with it? In what some may consider as typical of academics, the next intelligent step seemed to be to check out the local *Borders* bookstore to read and learn about blogs. Browsing the bookshelves led to the realization that most how-to books about blogs used *Wordpress*, rather than *blogspot*. Reading through *Wordpress for Dummies* led to what the academic literature in consumer research labels “buyer’s remorse” (Bell, 1967). Fortunately, switching from *Blogspot* to *Wordpress* was relatively easy. Most popular blogging services offer an ‘export’ feature that allows users to move their blog from one service to another. The *Wordpress for Dummies* guide provides a step-by-step explanation of how to ‘import’ blogs from other web services, including *blogspot*, to *Wordpress*. Once again, the choice of using *Wordpress* was not based on any thoughtful analysis of its technical features, but rather the availability of help-resources associated with it.

Once the new blog was created on *Wordpress*, the next decision was to think about how it would be used in class. To make a long story short (and save the reader from having to meander through the “effectuative” process (Sarasvathy, 2001) of how the blog evolved), the blog had three sections ready for student use before the semester started:

1. One section discussed current news. The idea was that the first author as the course instructor would add news stories about business with his analysis of them and students would comment on these stories throughout the semester. The criterion for any news story to be included in the blog was that it had to be about a business topic (such as leadership, entrepreneurship, compensation, workplace sexual harassment) and could be related to some theory or concept the students may be exposed to in school. The first author knew, but did not really understand at the time, how much the identification of stories would be influenced by his own interests.
2. The second section presented a summary of business books. Some of these books were required reading for students in that semester (e.g. *The World is Flat*, *Den of Thieves*), while others were just books that were related to the business world (e.g. *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*). The idea with this section was that students would comment on the book as they read through it. They would be able to read the comments written by others in the class as well as be able to critique the comments posted by others.
3. The third section summarized movies related to business. Some of these movies were assigned in the course curriculum in that semester (*Corporation*, *Gung Ho*, *Blood Diamond*), while others were just movies related to business topics (e.g. *View from the Top*). The idea with this section was that students would comment on the movies they watched. They would be able to read what other students thought about the movie as well as be able to critique the comments made by others.

Popular blog services provide features that help users create sub-categories within the blog. This helped organizing the blog posts in different sections, titled *Movies*, *Books*, *Musings* etc. Blogs also allow users to permit readers to comment on the blog, to audit reader comments

before displaying them, and to show or hide reader comments. As the purpose of this blog was to encourage open discussion, all comments (whether posted by students or others) were set to display on the blog without any prior approval.

## **Findings and Results**

Students in three courses, two sections of the undergraduate capstone course and one section of the undergraduate entrepreneurship course, offered in the business school participated in this semester-long exercise. A total of 88 students participated. Most (about 80%) students were seniors and the others were juniors. All students were very familiar with computers and the internet before starting the course and all of them used the internet as part of their daily college experience (to email professors, access Blackboard etc.)

The blog address was provided in the course syllabus. The internet connectivity available in the classroom allowed for opening the blog webpage in class and introducing the students to the different sections. Students were told that this is the first time the instructor is using blogs, and so the look and design of the blog may change as the semester progresses. Though blogs are interactive, the interaction involves one or more people posting an entry on the blog and others commenting on it. The model followed in this initial use of blogs was to publicly post the entries on the blog and ask students to comment on them. Students were also given clear instructions that the use of blogs was not optional, but was required in the course. They were not promised nor provided any credit for commenting on the blog entry. The decision to not award credit points to commenting on the blog was not based on any research evidence about the (in)effectiveness of such incentives, but was because of the first author's inability to figure out a fair way to award any credit for posting comments online.

We did not collect any survey data specifically about students' blog experience in the semester reported here (we plan to collect survey data next semester). The findings reported here are based on informal conversations with students during the semester and the qualitative comments collected as part of the university-mandated teaching evaluations. We adapt the four dimensions proposed by Wu (2005) to organize our results.

### ***Visibility of blogs***

It seems blogs are not well-known or much-used with the college students in mid-western United States. When asked if they have used (written or commented on) blogs before, all students in the class replied in the negative. None of the students had their own blog. Many students hadn't heard much about blogs before they were introduced to it in class. Some students had heard about it, but had only a rough idea what it was.

### ***Operation of the blog***

Most students felt it was quite easy to get started with commenting on the blog. After students were introduced to blogs in class and walked through where and how to comment, the majority were able to get started easily. The biggest challenge some students reported was their inability to find the particular entry to comment on the blog. Wordpress, like many other web-based blog services, provides every blog with a search engine service. Even after students were shown how to find specific blog entries using the search engine, some of them had trouble doing so. A few students did not understand that commenting on blogs requires them to have a valid email address only, and does not require them to set up their own blog. It was about 3-4 weeks into the semester that all students reported feeling sufficiently comfortable using the blog.

### ***Application of blogs in business courses***

As far as the quantity of comments on the blogs is concerned, the result was quite satisfactory. Approximately 876 comments were posted during the semester (5 comments were posted by non-student visitors to the blog). Non-student visitors to the blog brought a fresh and critical perspective to the comments, but were far fewer than hoped and expected. Students had been encouraged to read other comments before posting their own comments. They were also encouraged to comment on other comments to make the discussion more interactive. Very few students commented on other comments. During class discussions, students reported reading other comments, so it was not clear why they did not comment on other comments.

Most students posted thoughtful/high-quality comments on the blog. It was apparent that a few students saw posting comments to be like having to do a chore, and these comments usually lacked any meaningful observation. Two students made very few comments during the semester, and posted many comments together at the end of the semester “to make up for not commenting earlier”. At the end of the semester students were asked if they favored continued uses of blogs in these courses in the future. Most students seemed supportive of the idea, which provides encouragement to using blogs next semester.

### ***Effectiveness of blogs in business courses***

Prosperio & Gioia (2007) identified three learning goals to measure effectiveness of new teaching technologies among business students of the virtual generation. First, they argue that a valuable use of the technology is the ability to help students make content connections via hyperlinks. In the students who participated in this study, we found that many visited other websites using the links provided in the blogs. Visiting other websites using the hyperlinks provided in the blog demonstrates that some students are curious to learn more about the topic. However, the external visits were not as frequent or common as we would have expected. A

cursory reading of the blog comments indicates that students did not explicitly bring back any new information from these external visits.

The second goal Prosperio & Gioia (2007) identified was that new technologies can help students engage in lively computer-assisted communication with friends, with whom they can be virtually in touch 24/7. A casual analysis of the date and time log generated by Wordpress revealed that students posted comments all days of the week as well as at all different hours of the day. Interestingly, the number of comments posted on Friday and Saturday appears to be lower than the other days of the week. We speculate that Friday and Saturday are perceived as academically-lite by most business students, and so not much course-related work gets done in those days.

Discussions with students in this study suggested that many of them read the comments posted by others. As reported earlier, we did not find many students commenting on comments posted by other students. Though students were encouraged to comment on other students' comments, it is possible that they did not feel it was polite to comment or criticize the comments posted by other students. Some scholars have suggested that most students usually "lurk" on blogs (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Nonnecke and Pearce (2001) argue that 'lurking' is a common part of online behavior and should be regarded as a form of passive or vicarious participation that increases the understanding of the lurker, and provides a sense of belonging to the community. Lurking helps readers observe the behavior of more active participants and become more familiar with the content of the topic and the ways of sharing views with others.

The third goal of using new technologies for the virtual generation that Prosperio and Gioia (2007) identified was the ability to enhance students' understanding of connections between various domains, while framing the learning as play rather than work (similar to Tom

Sawyer convincing his friends that whitewashing the fence is play, not work). Blogs helped make connections between multiple domains because of the evolutionary aspect of the interaction online. For example, on the blog entry about the book *The World is Flat* some students commented on the example of 'Ireland' that Thomas Friedman uses in his book. Reading these comments encouraged one student who had spent a few months in Ireland to share his experience in his blog comment. The first author then posted a comment about the current state of the economy of Ireland and included a link to the then-recent New York Times article on the Irish economy. Consequently, the conversation about globalization, which is the main focus of the book *The World is Flat*, extended to cover other topics such as the Irish economy, Irish culture, the housing crisis in Ireland, and the global housing market. Of course, all these 'heavy' topics as well as other topics (e.g. corporate fraud, executive compensation, strategic alliances, regulatory organizations) were being discussed out of class using the world wide web, that the virtual generation uses regularly to relax and socialize.

Thus, it seems that blogs may be an effective teaching tool to meet some important learning goals of business students.

## **Discussion**

Our findings are quite similar to those found by Wu (2005) in her analysis of use of blogs in an English language classroom in Taiwan. We found that initial awareness of blogs among undergraduate students in our mid-western business school was low, but most students were able to quickly learn how to use them, which was similar to Wu (2005)'s Taiwanese student sample. We also found that student activity on the blog was satisfactory, at least when using blogs was mandated such as was the case for students who participated in this study. Lastly, our study

suggested using blogs can be effective in meeting the unique learning goals of the new virtual generation, as Proserpio and Gioia (2007) discussed in their research.

It was exciting and refreshing for the first author to use blogs in his courses. However, with 88 students commenting regularly, it was quite tiring to read the comments, follow the ongoing conversations, and include fresh news on relevant topics. Some have observed that use of blogs in traditional university teaching “appears to be still in its infancy”. Like with many other computer-mediated communications (e.g. emails), this infant may grow up fast and become an adolescent soon. Teachers and instructors using blogs will need to figure out efficient ways to keep track of students’ blog activities without manually reading each comment.

A relatively new feature in blogs is the facility to add audio and video clips from cell phones. This service was not used in the courses discussed here, but may be a useful tool for teachers who can add short audio and video lectures for students on contemporary issues related to the course material. Of course blogging is “a moving target” (Krause, 2005). New features like photoblogs, subscription technologies are emerging all the time, changing the very nature of blogs.

One of the major challenges teachers using blogs as learning spaces may face is the “lack of participation from readers outside the classroom” (Campbell, 2004). We found this to be true in our situation too. Blogging services allow users to add ‘tags’ to their entries, so other people on the worldwide web who may be interested in the key words mentioned in the ‘tags’ can visit these blogs. Some blogging services also offer ‘interests’, ‘favorite movies’, ‘favorite music’, and ‘favorite book features’ so that users can quickly locate those people who share mutual interests, which may facilitate social interactions on the web (Wu, 2005). We found that though many non-student users visited the blog, only a handful left any comments. With millions of

blogs on the internet and thousands more being created everyday, it is easy to see why people are not willing to spend their time leaving comments on blogs they do not know about. One suggestion is that teachers can link their blogs to those managed by other teachers interested in similar topics so that students can get more actively involved in learning about what other teachers and students around the world think about the same topics. Interactions with the outside world are important to signal to the student that “real people” are reading the published content (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004) as well as to help get comments from people who may be actively involved in some of the activities and incidents discussed in the course (e.g. one outside visitor to the blog who commented on the posting about the Robert Mondavi Wine Company was the author of a book about the wine industry).

## **Conclusion**

Blogs, a technology that emerged in the late 1990s, have become a universally recognized genre on the worldwide web (Herring et al., 2004). Blogs are now universal. The increasing popularity of blogs is evident by the impact they have had on the political and journalism world (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). It is only a matter of time before blogs are better integrated into higher education fields of study. With the admission of a new virtual generation in business schools, teachers and educators may be forced to use blogs in their teaching to meet their students’ unique demands and learning styles.

Even though blogging service is free and user-friendly, whether they can be used effectively in business schools for learning and teaching will likely depend on how courses are designed. Most business students in our study were supportive and encouraging of using blogs. With a well-organized course design, blogs may become the next useful tool for business teachers.

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