WEBLOG AS A LEARNING TOOL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

New technologies have an important effect on changing higher education. Using technology also has effect on improving learning and teaching in education and especially higher education. Now some universities and institutes use these technologies to apply virtual and distance education but there are another approaches to use them. Weblog is one of them. Weblogs can be used in conventional universities along side the traditional classroom. This paper review the importance and advantages and results of using weblog in universities by surveying the projects and researches that conducted in this subject all over the world. Using weblog because of easy to learn and apply is growing up every day. And this is a good opportunity to develop using weblogs in traditional universities. Weblog provide a good opportunity for collaborative learning and communication between students and teachers even among the students.

This approach is based on constructivism theory. Knowledge rather than being transmitted through instruction is constructed or created by learners as they build their own cognitive structures. Teacher's role is not giving the information to students but is guiding them during the instruction. Usage of the weblog helps to this aim. Results of research have shown that using weblog help users to develop literacy skills, critical thinking skills, knowledge construction ability, cooperative learning, academic development and etc.

Keywords: Weblog; higher education; technology

INTRODUCTION

Appearance of new technologies has a enormous effect on all levels of humans life and education also have been affected by these technologies. Internet and its facilities have the most effect in relate to other technologies. Weblogs are one of the popular technologies that have been developed in these years. In the first time, it didn't developed because of education, but it also have been applied in education and higher education and today many of the teachers use them to improve their teaching and maybe we could call that as a teaching tool in education. Constructing weblogs could motivate students to write and do research and also read other person researches, then these activities giving students a platform to explore and analyze the various internet materials they gain both independently out of the class and in the classroom (Oravec, 2003).

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Applications of these technologies have encountered higher education with new challenges, anymore it is not sufficient that course curricula and syllabus are covering the right topics and students pass their courses and got the mark (Du&Wagner, 2005). Students need to learn "How to learn" in stead of "learning certain subjects and materials" and I think using weblogs in higher education have a potentials to achieve this aim by providing students to write and publish their ideas, read other experts writings, create a cooperative and collaborative environments and so on.

Using weblog in higher education will also change the roles of teacher and in these environments teachers anymore are not represent of texts and materials but they have to guide students in this environment and help them to do works themselves. This is not meant that the roles of teachers in conventional classrooms are representing texts but is that using weblog could help to do this in a better way. In a learning environment, weblogs enable students to easily maintain online learning logs to represent their activities on learning in a reverse chronological order.

DEFINITION

Mortensen and Walker write in their report "blogging thoughts" that to date there is no published research on the topic and there are few academic writers of weblogs. The media has the tendency to speak of weblogs as belonging to popular culture or being a form of folk journalism (Anderson, 2004). Weblogs are not easy to define in one sentence. Neal Conan defined the term in a 2004 Talk of the nation broadcast as a contraction for Weblog, an online journal that publishes thoughts, opinions, and events by users or groups of users in reverse chronological order and that is archived and searchable through a database.

The term blog or blogging also describe the act of posting material to these online Journals (Wang&Bock, 2004). Most authors agree that weblog or log is a frequently updated web site consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first –typically published by individuals and having personal and informal style (Walker,2003) . The difficulty of defining weblogs has something to do with the fact that they could have different goals, uses, or writing styles with only one thing in common: format. There are different weblogs in relate to their writers; such as group blogs, family blogs, community blogs, corporate blogs and etc. Most weblogs are written by individuals that known as webloggers or bloggers, although group weblogs can be found as well.

Also there are various weblogs with their content, such as war blog that has contents about war, Lib blog (Library blog) that have used for summarizing books and articles, edublogs that have been used by educators , teachers and students. "Most weblogs are written informally, often as a narration of their authors' browsing, thinking and reflecting" (Effimova&Fiedler,2004,p491) . Weblogs have been used in higher education by students and lecturers.

USES OF WEBLOGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As soon as weblogs developed, using them in higher education is stated. "A number of universities round the world have commenced with the use of blogging tools including, for example, the University of Iowa, Rice University and RMIT University in Melbourne" (Williams&Jacobs, 2004, p. 236) .

Weblogs can be used by professors to follow students learning process and it can be used by students themselves. One possibility is the use of weblog as a learning journal, where students reflect about what they are learning, what they are reading, what they are working on with colleagues, etc.

Students can share this space and learn from each other, and this tool lets professors know how they are doing, what are the problems of students, where they have difficulty to understand, what the learning rhythm of the class, etc is.   Weblogs also could be used to have a give some guidance and some extra information about the course during the semester.

It is not recommended that using weblog to be mandatory in university to motivate student, but it is better to be   understood students the advantages of using weblog. We can invite the students to presents their activities in their blogs, so that their work can be shared, evaluated, etc. the important thing is to use the blog as a tool not as a aim.

WEBLOGS AS LEARNING SPACES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Learning is started when the condition is ready; according to constructivism learning is made by students not transmitted by teachers. weblogs provide this opportunity for college students. The intention of a blog is to share with others and to draw them into a conversation about what the blogger has written. In essence they are inviting feedback on their thoughts, ideas and reflections. The blogger just views the blog as a form of publishing, but over time this view changes as it begins to resemble a conversation (Dovnes, 2004). One of the key criteria for these developing conversations to be successful is that they have a clear purpose and they needs to remain unconstrained.

Richardson (2004) writes that blogging is a new genre of writing in learning, which has:

> *"...great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy among other things. Blogging, however, offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a life time, c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking and d) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance. This just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I see those things sorely lacking anywhere in traditional education."*

WEBLOG AS A COOPERATIVE LEARNING TOOL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is not unclear for every body that cooperating with other students is better than competition, and this supported by constructivism. Sharing the ideas with other students provide opportunity to criticize ideas and improve the ideas and this lead to develop new ideas. Weblogs are the best tool to provide the condition that students work to each other while they are separate. Piaget emphasized that interaction in groups could be helpful in progressing the learning process, but that it is the individual itself that reformulate and embody the knowledge.

Vygotsky is turning this thinking around when he stress that it is the social expression of the mental processes that come previous to the others. Weblogs help students to work and think with each other out of conventional classroom and separate with each other they also could attract the expertise in all around the world.

Students in higher education are not dependant to classroom, they have to work themselves and with their classmate cooperatively but in the conventional classroom doing this is very hard but in new age and by using new technologies such as weblog doing this is easy and everybody could do this. Students could share their ideas with friends without any fear, even students with disorders and disability could cooperate with students, while this is not possible in conventional classrooms.

Learning is cooperative when it involves a group of people working together on a particular issues or task and it arises from collaborative interaction between participants. Research has shown that cooperative learning has benefits over and beyond those of more traditional models, which tend to be more individualistic and competitive; among these are higher levels achievement and greater productivity (Johnson&Johnson,1994) ,as well as outcomes that are generally not considered academic, such as competence in working with others, self- confidence, and personal insight (McConnell,2000) .

Campbell study (2003) "The experience of computer supported cooperative learning using weblogs in the university classroom: a phenomenological case study" showed that:

> " the authenticity and sense of ownership provided by running a weblog taps into a learner's intrinsic motivation and encourages deep, reflective, autonomous learning strategies. Although initially engendering a sense of exposure and feelings of anxiety, cause insight into the way identity is constructed online, and gives learners direct experience with learning outside the confines of the formal institution." (p. ii)

Clara Coutinho (2007) study about cooperative learning in higher education using weblogs also showed that individual and group accountability and interpersonal and group skills were the dimensions students valued more in the blog learning activity.

WEBLOG AS A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL AND AS A KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION TOOL

Knowledge management is a process of drawing out, codifying and disseminating knowledge for sharing and reusing. Four major purposes of knowledge management include knowledge repository creation, knowledge access improvement, knowledge environment enhancement, and management of knowledge as a asset (Davenport& Prusak, 1998) . Turban and Aronson (2001) illustrate a broad perspective on the cycle of knowledge management as follows.

> *"the first, an organization must create knowledge which can be done in many ways such as problem solving, observing, experimenting, and learning from experiences. Second, an organization must capture knowledge or extract tacit knowledge from various sources such as written articles, conversations, and practices.*

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Third, both explicit and tacit knowledge must be collated, organized, and presented in a usable format for easy access and dissemination. This process is called refining knowledge. Fourth, an organization must create knowledge repository or store knowledge in an accurate, up-to-date, consistent, and identical manner. Fifth, knowledge must be managed. The essence of this process is to keep knowledge current and verify its relevancy and accuracy. Lastly, knowledge management cannot be accomplished if knowledge itself is not shared. Traditional channels e.g., newsletters and memorandums and online channels via Internet and corporate intranets e.g., blogs, emails and Web boards can be made available to disseminate knowledge."

Weblogs are a useful tool for knowledge management in higher education according to knowledge management process said in above. Table in blow indicate blog features that useful for knowledge management.

	Knowledge management process	blogs as knowledge management tool
1	Creating knowledge	Writing blogs to express knowledge
2	Capturing knowledge	Reading blog contents and mining knowledge from blog archives
3	Refining knowledge	Categorizing blogs and mapping blog relevancy
4	Storing knowledge	Archiving blogs as knowledge repository
5	Managing knowledge	Arranging blog contents into categories and a chronological order
6	Disseminating knowledge	Posting personal or professional blogs in offline and online media and referring to blog contents of others

WEBLOGS AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Weblogs could have a main role in university student's learning by providing them opportunity to engage with course materials and supplementary materials. Weblogs could be used at all levels but I think that it could be more effective at university. Using weblogs in blended education could help to students to get suitable information about their course materials. Good teachers encourage students to participate in weblog and discussion groups and to draw information from sources other than the textbook, this can helps students thinking. Weblogs are a dynamic place that students could make communities on it with their friends and other students and experts from other countries. According to Wang, Jeng, Huang and Wang (2007) "learners make use of the blog-based learning aid in a positive way."

Mortenson and Walker (2002) wrote about their personal experiences of using weblog for research purposes. This is a good example of the role of blogging in a reflective learning context. Both women were undertaking their PhD and a considerable amount of their research was done online. They start to blog as a way of focusing while online but they soon developed beyond digital ethnographers' journals and into a hybrid between journal, academic publishing, storage space for links, and a site for academic discourse. They found that their blogs became tools which they utilities to think about their research, its values, connections, and links to other a aspects of the world.

Blogging influenced Mortensen and Walker's approach to online communication and it also influenced the way in which they each wrote up their dissertations.

Research is a critical part of the student's educational journey and the ability to take notes, record material and crate a library of resources is a fundamental part of the research process. Learning takes place however, when the student begins to analyize material, comparing, discriminating and formulating opinions and theories about the material they have researched (Hollingworth&McLoughlin,2001) .

With their emphasis on recording and annotating urls, weblogs, it has been argued, can act as a significant enhancement to the learner's research process:

> "...they (weblogs) work wonderfully as personal post-it note systems, since most weblog tools have bookmark lets that let you grab a url and annotate it as you go. They are useful if you work in a distributed environment (in whatever form) and it is useful for students to be able to write about their work and to have that writing accessible in different places in different contexts" (Miles, 2002, cited in Dickinson,2003,p6) .

The very nature of weblogs then, lends itself to the demands of self-directed research and the utilization of the resultant knowledge in a flexible and simple way.

WEBLOGS AND REFLECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

people don't learn merely from observing an action conducted by someone else, or simply from a deposit of knowledge from one person to the other. Individuals need to engage in the activity and in a communicative dialogue to learn and create meaning of all new information whether it concerns every day life issues or the articulation of complex academic papers. It is not until we bring our ideas to our consciousness that we are able to evaluate them and decide how we want to use them (Boud, Keogh& Walker, 1985) . Individual reflection is an important educational strategy to assist in developing the intellectual insight of students, and to promote the critical thinking skills that are necessary in order to fully comprehend novel information (Fernheimer, Wendy and Nelson, 2005) . In our idea using weblog assistant to student thinking by engaging those in content and by encounter them with problems.

Robertson and Whiting (2006) in their study in North Georgia College found blogs to be vital in building relationships between the students, and the social dialogue that is triggered through posts and comments in weblogs showed evidence of deep reflection and creativity.

Xie and Priya (2004) conducted a phenomenological investigation at a graduate instructional system design course with the lived experience of nine doctorial students who utilized weblogs as a reflective tool during the course of the semester.

In concluding and summarizing the course they found most of the students positively inclined toward their experience with the weblogs, claiming that being provided them with a space to organize their reflection and commentary helped them to learn and think, as well as it offered them an extended communicative learning space where they could socialize and interact outside of the classroom context.

USING WEBLOGS TO COUNTER PLAGIARISM AND EMPOWER INDIVIDUAL VOICE

Plagiarism is a big problem for teachers and educators (Ardito, 2002); some commentators have called it an 'epidemic' (Fialkoff& Stilife, 2002) . It is increasingly facilitated by the internet since students can easily buy or otherwise obtain full papers or other academic writings online.

In contrast with many term-paper generation efforts in which papers can be exchanged across campuses over periods of years, weblogs as a genre are rooted in the personally tailored critical evaluation of relevant internet material. In order to produce a post, students read various web resources, possibly extract a sentence or two along with a URL, and then add a description and their own critical commentary for their teachers and peers to view. Often the blogs are available on the web for all to view, so the audience for the students' efforts can be quite larger. Hence, the very notion of 'plagiarism' is hard to formulate in this environment (Oravec, 2003) .

Posting student's work in weblog format also has the potential to reduce plagiarism through peer pressure since students have ready access to each other's productions.

The incorporation of new technological approaches is often taken as a panacea for educational ills. (Cuban, 1986) Certainly, introducing weblogs into classrooms will not mitigate all of the basic problems involved in plagiarism. Plagiarism is often related to deep issues involving lack of trust and understanding between teachers and students (Howard, 2002) . However, weblog may indeed provide educators with innovative new approaches to foster students' senses of intellectual integrity and respect for others' work. Discussions about social construction that are facilitated by the weblog format can themselves inspire new respect for the efforts of others.

CONCLUSION

Weblogs offer a significant potential benefit to learners, by accelerating the learning processes and by providing opportunity to work and activity as a group and out of conventional classroom. The technical and social nature of weblogs enables them to be used in a number of pedagogically useful ways, the simple act of posting to a weblog satisfies a number of educational criteria such as semantic analysis and metacognition. The technical infrastructure of weblogs assists knowledge sharing and gathering and this help to read information and judge about their importance, and then this process helps to students' intellectual development. Using weblog in higher education help students to do collaboratively and cooperatively and it also helps to develop student's reflective thinking and it also helps to encounter plagiarism.I believe weblogs are ideal in blended weblog and face-to-face learning environments if both educators and students embrace the medium with curious and explorative enthusiasm. In addition, the educators have to enforce enough structure, rules, practice, and prior information to give the students an opportunity to familiarize with the medium as quickly and effortlessly as possible.

Blogs and other social software are enabling us to integrate learning as a natural part of everyday life. The boundary between formal and informal learning is slowly becoming blurred as a result. At the end the power of this new communication technology is not the tool itself but those of us that choose to use it and participate in the wider community of users. "It is the people who make learning happen, not the technology" (Mejias, 2005, p4).

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