

TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH BLOGGING

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Abstract: This paper intends to provide a brief overview to an worldwide known phenomenon-blogging and to present it as an integrational tool into pedagogical practices to enhance learning. According to several studies, the act of blogging develops a sense of voice and foster critical and synthesizing skills. Blogging encourages students to actively and reflectively engage in knowledge sharing. Blogs endow them with a sense of authorship and help them to develop numerous strategies to cope with difficulties encountered in the learning process. This process is intended to increase their motivation, self-confidence, empathy and personal growth. One of the goals in implementing this pedagogical strategy is to offer students more opportunities to develop their soft skills necessary for future employment.

Keywords: blogging, soft skills, experience, survey, strategy.

Introduction

Historically, the word ‘weblog’ was believed to have been derived from the act of logging the web during browsing hence web+log. In the beginning, a blog was more of a personal diary that people shared online, and it goes back to 1994.

Actually, the first possible blog was just listed as a personal homepage. In this online journal, you could talk about your daily life or share things you do. But people saw an opportunity to communicate any information in a new way. So began the beautiful world of blogging, which is very popular all around the world and it continues evolving as much as SEO (search engine optimization).

The teacher’s perspective:

Having to teach the Facebook Generation is becoming increasingly tough. The huge amount of information and free access to it makes our students become less interested in listening to the teacher. That’s why we, teachers, have to overthink the teaching process and review our pedagogical strategies in order to increase their motivation in learning and develop skills like critical thinking, leadership, emotional intelligence etc.

In this context, I had to come up with something new: the challenges was to include the blogging activity in the classroom as a strategy meant to enrich their learning experience and in this way to give learners the opportunity to shift from superficial to deeper levels of learning.

The student’s perspective:

I have never thought courses at university will differ much from lessons in high school. I was expecting the same routine: reading or explaining some stuff, listening obediently, taking notes, boring atmosphere and bored people.

Surprise: from pessimistic expectations to optimistic reality. The teachers have changed their approach to teaching and switched from dictating things to facilitating the learning process. This was the starting point to a new ME: having to learn how to write a blog, how to create the platform - a totally new assignment, a big challenge that pushed me out of my comfort zone. Initially, I doubted whether blogging was for software engineers because usually, we associate this activity with students in social sciences.

While developing blogs in a team, I have noticed I started to live it. For me, as a student, it was essential to become aware of the importance of learning how to blog or how to develop and create a piece of writing. I found blogging a fabulous activity because it is a motivating and engaging one because it is an authentic way of displaying your thoughts, experiences, feelings and attitudes.

1. Subject Research

A research [1] on blogging as a platform to enhance language skills considers blogs are going to dominate blended and wholly online courses. And there are numerous reasons for using blogs in education, such as to provide extra reading practice, to encourage students to participate and be involved, to create an online portfolio written work (Stanley, 2005).

Besides this, knowing a larger audience can read your blogs further can develop critical thinking skills (Faril Mohan 2008). Because ICT is increasing every day more and more, teachers engage students in learning through different technological environments that facilitate the innovative kind of learning.

In order to enhance the learning and gain experience in applying tools for English Language Learning has caught the attention of experiment with blogging.

The goal of organizing such course was to observe the impact of the course, to explore the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and build a more effective practice in the future.

According to a study by Strampel (2007) [2], students perceive that the blog offered them the ability to evaluate their own learning and to revise their thinking.

The results and discussions based on the lectures that blended the traditional method of learning with the technology show that students nowadays prefer the new way of learning because it helps them to improve their thinking skills, encourage them to reflect and study the materials. This blended method is a great tool in information sharing and an easier method of learning.

Another source [3] "Research on blogging as a platform to enhance language skills" has observed the effect of the implementation of this technique to improve students' motivation. Writing for a purpose has encouraged them to produce language more fluently and be more concerned on correctness, which contributes to the development of linguistic skills.

The studies have shown that students were excited when trying to communicate reflections on knowledge recently acquired in specific subjects of their studies and when expressing their opinions on the posts exchanged with other groups and the feedback sent from the blog.

Considering these studies related to blogging in student's life, I can say that it has a huge impact on every single person who has tried it. Besides that, it develops writing skills, it enhances communication skills and it improves design ones. Blogging also helps learners improve important soft skills such as: leadership, organizational, time management etc.

The twenty-first century has focused on social media and has made it possible for people all around the world to share their opinions. The impact of blogging on society has been huge. More exactly, it has been made possible for people with common and uncommon interests to connect with each other. But besides these, there are a lot of sources that mentioned advantages and benefits of blogging:

- *Networking with various people worldwide.*

One benefit from this is to know many people from all around the world and make with them connections, because every time is possible to create something great together.

- *Improve your writing skills.*

Even sometimes you could make some mistakes and receive from this, you will automatically improve your writing skills once you will write more and more.

- *Blogging as a source of income.*

Some of the bloggers, those who take an interest in searching for various ways by which they can earn income, start by implementing search engine optimization techniques combined with the use of advertisements along with the blog.

- *Blog as a source of information*

Some technical blogs are the valuable source of information and people know that they can gain valuable information related to the technical aspects of a computer, software or mobile phone. So they keep coming back to the blog again and again for the valuable information. Here can be more about video blogs where we find a lot of life hacks or tutorials.

- *Blogging may change your attitude towards life.*

Actually, these benefits of blogging turned into an efficient learning strategy and an incredible useful tool for self-development.

Blogging has changed my way of thinking and attitude towards life. As a blogger, you start seeing everything in a different light. You may feel that you are getting appreciated for your work by others. This may lead you to make yourself more equipped and responsible while dealing with the public.

This new learning environment and the meaningful context have raised high motivation in the students and will help them become life-long and more efficient learners.

2. Experiencing Blogging at University

At the beginning of the year, I and my colleagues from Software Engineering study program were challenged to start blogging. We were supposed to work in small groups and each group had to blog about a particular period of time, so that by the end of the semester, to have covered all 4 months of student life in different posts, events etc.

Our experience has started here:

<http://dailyfaf.ml/>



Fig. 1 Blog website (FAF 181)

<https://myfaf.home.blog/>



Fig. 2 Blog website (FAF 182)

There were a lot of ideas on what to write about but it was a whole mess in my mind, I didn't know how and where to start, unless I began reflecting about everything which was happening around me: people I've met, events, I've participated in, feelings I've dealt with etc... Some of my colleagues had already the possibility to enjoy some events and shared about their experiences with us by blogging about it. Then, I was suggested to write about motivational speeches of successful people who visited as guest lecturers within Personal and Professional Development course.

So, finally I had a subject to blog about. The subject dealt with our guest, Ana Nicolăeș, a famous psychologist who shared with us a lot of interesting tips about stress management, how to be empathic, how to control our emotions and feelings and how they actually work. Actually, I don't consider myself a creative person and I thought I didn't have that skill of writing to impress, but after I read what I had written I was really proud of me. I think this has happened because I have found this idea of blogging a very challenging one and pushed me beyond my limits.

The second time I had to blog about, it was an event where we met the Governor of NBM, Cioclea. I felt honored to write about such a person and at the same time it made me become aware of the impact of such events on our lives. Writing about important figures from our country made me both much more proud and responsible. The conclusion we have made is that the banking system cannot survive without the IT domain and its specialists.

Meanwhile, I came across some other blogs that inspired me and motivated me to have my personal blog as a journal where I could write about what happens in my life or something else I want to share with people, and I wish my dream will come true someday.

I have also encouraged some of my fellows to share some ideas from their blogging experience and here I have some of their testimonials.

"What is blogging for me? Each of us has something we want to share with the whole world, but sometimes it's quite difficult to find people that will be interested in the same things as you. What to do then? Yeah, right, let them find you. That's what blogging generally is, you write something interesting and The Great and Almighty internet let people find your article and appreciate it. For me, blogging is a good method to talk about what I'm thinking, and see what others think too. It's like sitting in the kitchen with your friends and discuss about all the things that torment you, from politics to new iPhone that was released and why people buy them even if their old phones still work perfectly." Alex Călugari, student, FAF 181

"Yes, it's hard to find a good start after which to follow a good article, I find it very important to include the reader's attention from the start, write and rewrite if necessary and continue until I find the beginning that surprises me, and somehow everything goes on its own, the fingers and inspiration do not stop. What about my experience I had with writing. I was writing well at school and I cannot say that we often did it, but I always preserved to deliver it to my best and not just to do it." Dominic Flocea, student, FAF 181

"TUM is very fine. Much better than high school. I met many people from whom I can learn a lot and I really feel like I've found my place in this city. My blogging experience was very nice. It has made me analyze things from several parts and teach others. I have discovered my style of communicating charismatically. I also greatly appreciated the support from colleagues. The hardest thing to do was start, but I enjoyed every second of the process. Will do it again, definitely. I still have to find another topic worth documenting." Viorel Rînja, student, FAF 181

3. Survey

In order to find out as much as possible about experiencing blogging as a learning strategy I suggested a short questionnaire to my first-year colleagues from Software Engineering. 53 students were asked to answer the following 4 questions:

1. Have you ever written a blog before coming to university?
2. Tick the most important 3 skills you have developed through this experience at university.
3. What challenges have you faced while writing a blog?
4. Would you keep blogging? Justify your answer.

In table 1 are shown the results of the survey.

Table 1. Results of the survey

	<p>From this pie chart we can notice that the vast majority of students from study program were not familiar with this activity; only a quarter of the participants have blogged before, while for the 75% of them it was a challenge to start blogging.</p>
	<p>Considering the respondents' answers, we can easily identify the most important skills they have developed through this period of blogging (four months) are: critical thinking (67%), communication (53%) and self-confidence skills (51%). Skills that students developed less are: leadership (23%), time management (33%) and organizational ones (36%).</p>
	<p>The third one is about expressing student's challenges faced during this experience. Broadly, participants mentioned that the biggest challenges they have faced were: the difficulty of structuring their thoughts/ ideas, the fear of starting to write a blog and share feelings with others, the fear of getting feedback from others, meeting the deadline, lack of inspiration, ideas and creativity. More than that, there are students who found this activity an easy one.</p>
	<p>And the most interesting question was about whether students would like to continue blogging, we got almost equal number of answers from our respondents.</p> <p>Yes - reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a good way of practicing writing; • possibility to share thoughts (for introverts); • blogging is fun; • a good tool for self-reflection; • a way of earning money. <p>No – reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not passionate about it; • lack of free time; • lack of ideas/imagination; • fear of being criticized or misunderstood

Conclusions

The inclusion of the blogging process as a pedagogical strategy has provided excellent opportunities to enhance reflection and self-awareness. In response to informal discussions about the blogging experience, students have reported greater freedom to comment and to talk freely through writing

We encourage both teachers and students to embrace blogs as it is an efficient platform to enrich and extend students' learning.

It's absolutely impressing how students have faced this challenge of starting blogging, an activity, which hopefully, will inspire others. It is also an important tool that enhances the development of critical thinking, writing and organizational skills.

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