

USING BLOGS (WEB LOGS) IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOYS OR TOOLS

Turgay Demirel

*Atatürk University - Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education
Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies, 25240 – ERZURUM*

Duygu Duman

*Atatürk University - Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education
Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies, 25240 – ERZURUM*

Sara İncesu

*Atatürk University - Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education
Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies, 25240 – ERZURUM*

Yüksel Göktaş

*Atatürk University - Kazım Karabekir Faculty of Education
Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technologies, 25240 – ERZURUM
yuksekgoktas@atauni.edu.tr*

ABSTRACT

In this study, we tried to describe prospective teachers' perceptions and experiences of using a Blog in a web-based supported ID course in order to identify the critical factors for designing successful courses with Blogs. Participants are 30 prospective teachers from a web-based supported ID course, in Atatürk University, Turkey. We collected data through open ended questions in a questionnaire from 25 prospective teachers and through interviews with 5 prospective teachers. We determined general trend of prospective teachers regarding using blogs in a web-based ID course. Consequently, prospective teachers enjoyed the experience of blogging and they felt complemented and enriched their preservice education. But they have negative perceptions about some limitations of blogs like templates and memory field.

Keywords: Weblogs, Blogs, Blogs in Education, Educational Blogs

INTRODUCTION

Today's educational approaches have demands from teachers' to have effective skills for communicating with colleagues, students and parents. In a technology-based and information society, both teachers and students are facing a variety of technologies in their daily life. As well, technology is changing the role of learners and instructors. So, teachers have a different role as an instructor who integrates technology into teaching and learning process (Göktaş, 2006).

The Need for New Learning Environment

Today's students changed radically. They are growing up together in digital environments. They have spent their entire lives surrounding by computers, videogames, mobile machines which they use for entertainment, communication and even shopping. Increasingly, net generation learners will demand that educational institutions provide technology-rich learning environments (Prensky, 2001). In this aspect, educational institutions have needs for their students to provide technology-rich learning environments.

Current learning theory values interactivity, activation of prior knowledge, connecting the theoretical to the experiential, and using relevance and efficacy to assess information. In this constructivist approach, there is a fundamental shift in the educational paradigm from instruction to construction and delivery. According to Harada (2003) learning is not simply assimilating knowledge transmitted by textbooks and instructors but personally building and communicating knowledge. In learner-centered environments teacher's role has changed as the learning approaches shifted from instructivist to constructivist. From this constructivist approach teacher is the person who creates the challenges for students (Coutinho, 2007).

Web 2.0: An Increasingly Arising Solution for New Learning Demands

Web 2.0 means that users of the web are also contributors to the Web. In education, that means that educators and students have the capability of providing content to the web (Asmus, Bonner, Esterhay, Lechner & Rentfrow, 2005).

Weblogs, wikis, podcasts and further collaboration platforms as Flickr or YouTube shocked the traditional e-learning world. "Internet is about people", "the user is the content", "not a technological, but a social revolution" or "Web2.0 is about us" are only few examples which are pointing out the currently change of what the web is like today" (Ebner, 2007, p. 1). Web 2.0 technologies allow us to connect or hyperlink to worldwide information and global learnig environments. These technologies also allow us interaction within students or between the students and instructors. With the creation of these new emerging technologies the web is now transforming itself into a fully interactive space. These new technologies remove technical barriers and provide a user-friendlier interface for interaction on the Internet (Asmus, et al., 2005).

Weblogs: Emerging as a New Web-Based Learning Environment

Blogs are the common word to describe weblogs, or websites where people post thoughts and information about news or topics of interest. They are new media that has risen out of web culture. They were designed to provide a simple way for individuals to post ideas to the internet, providing the opportunity and function for others to read and post comments on the site (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Martindale & Wiley, 2005). Using web logs, or blogs has allowed people a regular access to publishing on the Internet (Asmus, et al., 2005).

Applications of blogs has a scope of keeping a personal diary with reflections, to a platform for journalism. Blogs have been used as a channel within a discipline where experts exchange and reflect ideas and works. The number of active weblogs are increasing significantly within the past few years (Chan & Ridgway, 2005).

One of the reasons for blogs' rapid increase in popularity is that limited technical knowledge about HTML or other webpage authoring tools is required (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Martindale & Wiley, 2005). Another advantage derived from blogs is that publishing is not limited by profits and audience size. Blogs make it inexpensive and realistic to publish for small or niche audiences (Martindale & Wiley, 2005).

According to Dickey (2004), blogs may provide new strategies for overcoming feelings of frustration and isolation by offering more captivating and interactive content and by supporting the emergence of individual voices in a distance-learning environment. Poling (2005) wrote, "Blogging as a classroom application allows for enhanced comprehension and communication among students as well as the ability to build deeper understanding across the curriculum. Blogging is a wonderful way to enhance student understanding" (p. 12). Educators are also eager to see how blogs can impact learning activities, either by allowing teacher to communicate and interact more easily with students, or by encouraging students to communicate with each other, forming collaborative learning communities (Ganley, 2004). Kennedy (2003) thought that, blogs encourage themselves to exploratory topics or enhancing creative writing skills within an audience. Aimed at distance educators, the blog is a multimedia repository of professional resources and information related to online collaborative learning products (Roberts, 2006). Weblogs also are the best tools for students as portfolios that record of an individual's progress, accomplishments and reflections (Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005). According to Richardson (2006), an advantage of blogs is the organization of discussions as personal publications enabling communication (cited in McPherson, Wang, Hsu & Tsuei, 2007, p.25).

The internet and ICTs caused a change on definition of literacy. To become fully literate in today's world, students must become proficient in the new literacies of ICTs. McPherson, et al, (2007) defined the new literacies and strategies of blogs as new ICTs like writing, collaborating, communicating, problem solving, comprehension, sharing ideas, reflecting, expressing individual voice, using web for publication legally and ethically. And the main strategies used in instruction are authentic apprenticeship experiences in interactivity and exchange with global peers and production and publication of ideas creative works, perceptions, and reflections and expressions of voice.

Purpose of the Study

As indicated aforementioned literature, the importance of using blogs in education is increasing worldwide. However, the number of research studies done in this field is limited in Turkey. The purpose of this study is to examine and describe the prospective teachers' perceptions and experiences of using a Blog in a web based supported ID course in order to identify the critical factors for designing successful courses with Blogs. Consequently, this study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) What are the prospective teachers' perceptions about using a Blog in a web based supported ID course?
- 2) What are the prospective teachers' experiences of using a Blog in a web based supported ID course?
- 3) What critical factors do the prospective teachers of an ID course think to design a successful course with a Blog?

METHOD

In this study, which was conducted to examine and describe the prospective teachers' perceptions and experiences of using a Blog in a web based supported ID course, the researchers used qualitative research approaches within data collection and analysis processes.

Selection of Participants

The sample of the current study consisted of 30 students from an undergraduate Instructional Design (ID) course, which is offered in fall semesters of 2007/2008 at the Department of Computer Education and Instructional Technology in Ataturk University, Turkey. It is offered as a must course and was given in a blended learning environment format. As indicated Table 1, 16 of 30 students are male, while 14 are female.

Table 1. Participants Distribution of Gender

Gender	Questionnaire	Interview
Male	13	3
Female	12	2
Total	25	5

Data Collection

The data were collected through open-ended questions via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews from prospective teachers in an undergraduate Instructional Design (ID) course. The questionnaire and interview guide were developed based on research questions by the researchers. Two experts examined the instruments which were revised in regard to their feedbacks. Then, it was checked by a Turkish Language expert for the clarity of the language. The last version of each instrument consisted of 11-items.

The data were gathered at the end of semester (September 2007-January 2008) from 25 prospective teachers through a questionnaire and from 5 prospective teachers through interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were collected through open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews and analyzed through content analysis which involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification phases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This analysis began after the recorded interview sessions were transcribed into text. Finally, the qualitative data were quantized for further statistical analysis. A synthesis of all the data gathered was reviewed and discussed by the researchers.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Prospective Teachers

A vast majority of participants agree that blogs are useful in order to share documents, knowledge, and comments. Besides, prospective teachers stated the following topics based on their purpose of uses.

Table 2. Aims of Using Blogs

Aims	Frequency
Sharing Knowledge, documents, comments	25
Communicating	11
Storing documents	1
Using web for publication of personal studies	1

Analyses of qualitative responses indicated that, prospective teachers supposed that blogs encourage them to interact between their peers and instructors. They thought also that, blogs could be used as an easy tool for taking feedbacks from their peers and instructors. One prospective teacher says *“Especially it helps me in sharing documents and comments easily. My classmates can reach my studies easily that I published in my blog. Also, I improve my studies according to their feedbacks and comments. So it can encourage me enhanced studies.”*

The majority of participants stated that they use blogs to share ideas and documents. According to prospective teachers’ perceptions, blogs could be used as an environment to enhance their motivation. It could be also used to create rich learning environments. One prospective teacher stated that *“Blogs can be understood as motivating students to learning in a different and exciting viewpoint. If I can not find a more effective tool in the future, I will use this tool”*.

Experiences of Prospective Teachers

Prospective teachers stated the following themes in order to preference of using blogs than other web tools. The frequent statement is that *“blogs are very useful and practical and it does not require technical knowledge about html and advanced computer skills”*. One prospective teacher expressed that *“Using blog is very easy and there is no cost and it does not require advanced technical knowledge and can be updated easily”*.

Table 3. Reasons of Using Blogs

Why did you prefer blog?	Frequency
Practical use	10
Specific purposes	7
Lack of cost	4
Limited computer skills requirements	3
Provide templates	2

The findings of the study also showed that, majority of the participants are using personal blogs aiming the publication of their personal information. It can be concluded that they are open-minded to worldwide; as well they are satisfied about the experience of personal blogs.

Table 4. Preferences of Blog Types

Blog Types	Frequency
Personal blogs	15
Text-photo-video blogs	8
Community blogs	5
Library blogs	4

It is a critical finding that, prospective teachers think blog could be used effectively in higher education than the other levels.

Table 5. Opinions of Prospective Teachers in Which Educational Level Appropriate for Using Blogs

Educational Level	Frequency
Higher education	19
Secondary education	7
All levels	6

The prospective teachers stated following themes related to contribution of blog applications to pre service teacher education according to their experiences.

Table 6. Contributions of Blogs to Pre service Teacher Education

Contributions	Frequency
Prospective teachers can benefit from experienced teachers	7
Blog applications can contribute educational sciences lessons	3
Ensuring communication and interaction	2
Sharing knowledge, documents, comments	2
Feedback	1

One prospective teacher says *“I think experienced teachers can be beneficial for us by sharing their experiences about work life”*. Another prospective teacher states *“I believe that it can improve the productivity of educational sciences lessons which require the communication and interaction among learners”*.

Critical Factors

The statements of prospective teachers about advantages and disadvantages about using blogs and the frequencies are indicated in Table 7. The most frequent advantage of blogs is *“sharing knowledge, documents, comments”* (f=20) and then *“rapid access to information”* (f=7). One prospective teacher says *“I think it is very advantageous for lessons, my first duty is to develop a blog for my lesson in order to form a communication environment. And the progress of lesson can be changed according to comments”*.

Table 7. Advantages of Using Blogs

Advantages	Frequency
Sharing knowledge, documents, comments	20
Rapid access to information	7
Practical use	5
Lack of cost	5
Storing and organizing documents	5
Easy designing	4
Wide communities	3
Earning from time	3
Active learning(student activity)	3
Feedback	2
Basic computer skills is sufficient	2

Prospective teachers often complain the limitations of blogs in regard to designing templates and limitations about memory field. For example one prospective teacher states *“You are limited about designing options and your thoughts are limited. In addition, the memory area is limited”*.

Table 8. Disadvantages of Using Blogs

Disadvantages	Frequency
Limited templates	10
Limited memory field	3

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It can be concluded from the results of the study that majority of the participants believe the importance of blogs in instruction/learning process. However, according to their experiences, contributions of the using blogs in an ID course were limited. For example, the prospective teachers who were using the blogs in their course as a support tool were asked would they want to use blogs again. They were not sure, their reactions were mixed. But they think, perhaps when blogs have more rich templates and preferences like other web tools. They believe that blogs allow us to create a technology-rich environment. According to participants blogs could be used as a tool to communication, motivation, sharing documents, ideas and comments, especially to get feedback from instructors or/and peers.

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