

1, 2, 3, BLOG: THE USE OF WEBLOGS AS AN EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Based on their experiences in a combined 22 business courses over the past three years, the authors believe that weblogs (blogs) can be used as an effective pedagogical tool to increase efficiency by the professor, enhance participation and engagement in the course by the students, and create a learning community both within and outside the classroom. In this paper they discuss their decision to use blogs as an integral part of their course design to contribute to both explicit and tacit knowledge. In addition, suggestions and cautions for using this new technology are presented.

INTRODUCTION

“Technology challenges people's assumptions about what it means to be educated. Technology and globalization have changed the way we do business; as a result, we have seen the emergence of a lifelong learning culture, one in which education allows us to keep pace with change. Moreover...technology changes both the ways in which we learn and the ways in which we conceive of the learning process...We have grown increasingly aware that learning facts is not enough. Knowledge management in particular is leading us to question our focus on explicit knowledge, gained from textbooks, and our relative neglect of tacit knowledge, gained from experience. Tacit knowledge consists of knowing how to get things done, wisdom acquired through years of practice” (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 2).

As faculty, we are experienced in presenting explicit knowledge on a particular subject. However, organizations today want employees who can “integrate both explicit and tacit knowledge into the productivity equation” (Asllani, Ettkin, & Somasundar, 2008, p. 218). As teachers today, we must be “facilitators of knowledge creation instead of disseminators of knowledge” (Bilimoria, 1997, p. 241). In other words, we must create a permeable class environment where students ‘learn how to learn’ and can apply their knowledge and skills in the unpredictable environments they will face in their lives and careers. This permeable classroom, as defined by Sandy (1998), is “one in which the knowledge generated within it is extended beyond its boundaries” and thus students in this setting are more likely to make connections between what they have learned and the “real world” (p. 47). In order for this to happen—for students to become self-motivated, engaged, critical thinkers—faculty will need to “shift away from the traditional-centered class to one that allows students to take responsibility for their own learning” (Costello & Brunner, 2008, p. 63).

We decided to accept this challenge of helping our students gain explicit and tacit knowledge but in a manner that is effective and efficient for both students and faculty. We noted that Whetten (2007) grew to believe that the most important way to add value as a teacher was in the course design, which he identified as the careful planning of how the chosen reading material, assignments, and activities would support learning objectives. We also noted that Fink (2005) believed that, "In order to teach well, one must be competent in both course design [what you will have the students do] and teacher-student interactions" (p. 3). Course design should maximize teacher-student contact, cooperation among students, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse talents and learning styles, and active learning in order to encourage effective student learning (Whetten, 2007; Chickering & Gameson, 1987). This requires setting up a context that facilitates student engagement, including communicating the class agenda to students and maximizing student participation through allowing everyone the chance to contribute their input and experience (Auster & Wiley, 2006).

According to Whetten (2007), our learning objectives need to be enacted through our choices of what we ask our students to do and how we evaluate them. One way to aid our students in their quest for knowledge is to model how to use the Internet to obtain and evaluate information (Harmon, 2007; Wills, 2004). Arbaugh (2008) noted that management education is increasingly incorporating at least some aspect of online technology into classroom content delivery, assessment, and/or management. By using the Internet, we have "opportunities for treating teaching and learning as truly social activities where knowledge is built through interaction and dialogue rather than lectures and recitation" (Deitering & Huston, 2004, p. 273). Research by Terry, Doolittle, Scheer, & McNeill (2004) indicates that meaningful Web-based learning can take place through careful course design and use of multimedia learning environments.

A blended learning approach allows us to augment our traditional classroom instruction with opportunities to continue discussions, analyze cases, and access course documents (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004). This "learning that is distributed across space, time, and various media" involving both face-to-face teaching and online resources has had a "positive impact on student achievement" (Kitsantas & Dabbagh, 2004, p. 120). Birenbaum (2004) concurred that supplementing in-class instruction with a web-based learning community will "elicit individual and group knowledge construction" (p. 148), thus preparing students "to create, apply, and disseminate knowledge and continuously to construct and reconstruct their expertise in a process of lifelong learning" (p.144). Others agree that technology can be a valuable instructional tool that accommodates diverse styles of learning and allows students to be more active in growing their own new knowledge (Brownstein, Brownstein, & Gerlowski, 2008; Watkins, 2005; Salisbury-Glennon, Young, & Stefanou, 2001).

One downside to using new technologies is the time necessary to get up to speed. Bilimoria (1997), as is typical of many management educators, was reluctant to take time away from tenure-earning research to incorporate technology into her courses. Her blending of an online discussion board format with a regular face-to-face format was a relatively small change motivated by the ability to structure learning activities that improved communication between and among students and teacher. Her process goals were to extend the class in two ways: link class content concepts with real-world events, and maximize student participation. By the end of the term, she came to appreciate the importance of providing opportunities for students to

practice the information-gathering and critical thinking skills needed in today's world where electronic communication technologies reign.

Using technology also appeals to our students. Proserpio and Gioia (2007) concurred that management educators need to consider the learning styles and habitual attention processes of the so-called "virtual generation"—the 80 percent of 18-24 year-olds who have internet access and who are familiar with, and varyingly fluent in, such communication expectations as asynchronous downloads, and synchronous and asynchronous one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications. Students who use such technologies have ready access to information and to peers, and so have come to expect connectivity, generous amounts of free information, and fluency with software protocols. However, as noted by Costello and Brunner (2008), it's important to provide guidance when designing a course that involves increased student engagement and responsibility in order to help the students deal with ambiguity and a perceived shift in locus of control.

OUR DECISION TO USE BLOGS AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Three years ago we decided to experiment with one type of technological application, weblogs, as part of our course design in our management classes. We believed that weblogs (commonly known as blogs) would be an efficient way to communicate information on class expectations to our students. We also believed that they would create opportunities for engaging students in conversation with us as professors, with their fellow classmates, and with outside resources. We saw advantages to blogs in allowing us to insist on, and track, 100 percent participation in course discussions, to provide links to timely articles and podcasts, and to invite experts into the conversation, all to create an environment where students not only experience the subject matter but also learn how to find credible sources for learning in the future. This invaluable skill of learning how to read, evaluate, and respond to information found on the Internet would help our students update both their explicit and tacit knowledge throughout their lifetimes. As noted by Asllani, Ettkin, and Somasundar (2008), organizations are using blogs both internally to disseminate information among employees and externally to provide up-to-date and easily accessible information to customers and clients. Thus, a familiarity with how blogs can be used would benefit the students beyond the classroom experience.

However, as noted by Lohnes (2006), little has been written on how to use blogs as an integral part of academic coursework. Du and Wagner (2007) found in a limited study that "weblog performance can be a significant predictor of students' learning outcomes [such as final exams] and possibly a better predictor than traditional coursework measures" (p.10). In that study, students using blogs were more active in seeking external knowledge sources and explicating information from these, and one-third of the students did more work on the blog than was required by the syllabus. Asllani, Ettkin, and Somasundar (2008) found blogs to be more effective than discussion boards when used to communicate tacit knowledge. Hurlburt (2008) did note the importance of building in student accountability in regard to reading and responding to blog content, in order to facilitate student ownership of the learning process.

We came to our decision to try class blogs as part of our course design for a number of reasons. We liked Martins and Kellermanns' (2004) claim that "transferring administrative and purely

informational aspects of instruction...[outside the classroom] frees up class time for students to work on interpersonal and communication skills” (p. 8). We tried using email to communicate critical information to our students between class periods but it seemed that this was not very efficient as we had to respond to the same questions over and over. In addition, email did not seem to be effective either as we had to deal with a number of the students who claimed they never saw or read their email. In addition, we believed it crucial to communicate our high expectations and guidelines to our students and wanted the flexibility of sharing information on an “as needed” basis. Thus, using a class blog allowed us to be more effective and efficient in communicating with our students.

Another reason for our decision to use a class blog was ‘time on task.’ One of the authors began teaching a weekend class that met only once a month and he was worried about the ‘fadeout effect,’ knowing that many of his students wouldn’t think about the material between classes. We also believed it important for all of our students to participate in class discussions but, despite our best efforts, on many days only a small percentage of the students ever had anything to say.

And finally, and most importantly, we wanted to see our students take greater ownership of their own learning, not only for our classes but in their future lives. We fully believed that we needed to help them find ways to gain both explicit and tacit knowledge. Thus, we began our journey of using blogs as part of our course design. Over the past three years, the two of us have used blogs in 22 different classes, both undergraduate and graduate level, and in a variety of ways, as we discuss below.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A WEBLOG?

The term, weblog, is defined as a “frequently updated website, normally with dated entries and usually with the newest entries at the top” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2008). It is estimated that there were only 150 blogs in the late 1990s (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004). However, this number increased to 10.3 million blogs in 2004 (Quibble, 2005) and to over 70 million in 2007 (Sifry, 2007). According to Technorati, an Internet site that tracks and indexes blogs, this number had grown to 112.8 million by July 2008, with 175,000 new blogs being added each day (Technorati website, 2008). Blogs are no longer just for teenagers or for those wanting to rant about politics or the doings of Hollywood actors. Blogs are beginning to have an increasing presence in both the educational and business worlds. Even churches have embraced the technology, using blogs as one way to reach out and attract new members (Sagarrio, 2008).

Weblogs differ from traditional websites in several distinct ways (Quibble, 2005). Websites tend to be static and do not change often; blogs are dynamic and usually added to frequently by the author (or authors). Also, the readers of the blog can respond to the writer’s text by making comments that can then be read by other readers. In addition, blogs are much easier to add content to because they do not require the expertise and special programming software to start or update as websites do. In fact, the major reason for the growth in blogs is that “software companies created the database-driven content management tools needed to run blogs so that non-coders could start their own blogs” (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004, p. 61). In other words, blogs

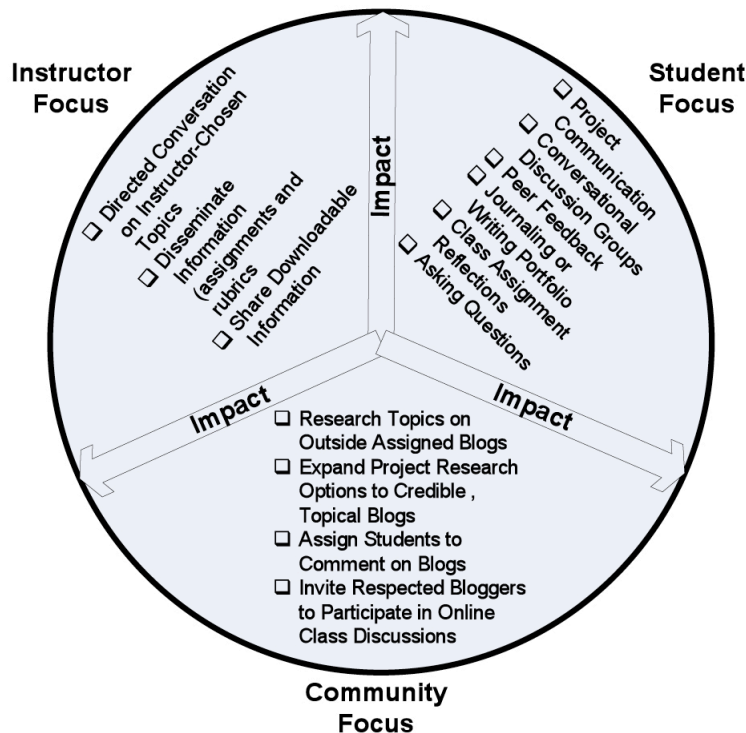
have become easier to create than a webpage. As noted by John Raleigh, a website designer, “adding a new post [on a weblog] is as easy as sending an e-mail” (Demopoulos, 2007, p. 4).

THE IF (IMPACT-FOCUS) CIRCLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL BLOGGING

Before introducing a class blog to our students, we had to determine the focus it should take to help in achieving our learning objectives. We determined that this depended upon the course being taught, our teaching philosophies, and the comfort level we each had with giving up some control in our classrooms.

Edbauer writes that the typical response she gets from colleagues when she shows them some of the blogs on the Internet is, “Cool! But, how in the world would I actually use this” in my class? (Edbauer, 2004, p. 1). How blogs are used depends on the professor’s teaching style and course subject matter. We determined three possible approaches that varied from instructor-focused, featuring one-way communication from faculty to students; learner-focused, using two-way communication between faculty and students, or an interactive community-focused teaching tool between and among the students and the professor, as well as others identified as experts to create a virtual learning environment. In other words, blogs can be used as a more efficient method to communicate information, as a way to get increased participation from students, and/or as a method of creating a virtual learning community. Figure 1 lists various ways of using these three approaches to blogs in the classroom.

FIGURE 1
The IF (Impact-Focus)
Circle of Instructional
Blogging



Instructor-focused blogs

The simplest way to use a blog is as a one-stop source where the professor posts syllabi, announcements, assignments, and links to articles and websites for the students to read. Faculty retain ownership of the site and students are expected to access the blog on a regular basis to obtain class information. The blogs allows the professor to be more efficient as he or she doesn't have to make copies of course materials and can point students to the blog for answers to questions on assignments. Sample papers or grading rubrics can be posted to guide students in understanding expectations. The blog is also a good way to hyperlink to visual aids used in class so that the students can access these. An instructor-focused blog may be the best approach for classes that don't involve a lot of discussion. As noted by a colleague who teaches finance, "I deal with questions such as, 'what's the present value of \$500 received five years from now if the interest rate is 8%?' The one and only right answer: \$340. Not much discussion needed here."

However, we found that it is easy to move beyond 'the student as passive recipients of content' stage by posting weekly questions or links to relevant articles and requiring the students to comment on these. Delaney Kirk has used a class blog in teaching management courses for several years because she gets 100 percent participation to questions she posts on their blog (Demopoulos, 2007). Zane Quibble used a blog to post scenarios of a poorly written business letter in his Business Communication courses. The students then respond as to what should be done to correct the letter using techniques they were learning in class (Quibble, 2005). Even our finance colleague mentioned earlier would be able to link to current articles and have the students read and comment, thus allowing the professor to see if the students understood the concepts being taught.

Learner-focused blogs

In this approach, the professor would expect the students to be more active participants in the blog. Learning can occur peer-to-peer in addition to teacher-to-student. Students could write their own posts or comment on what they had been learning in class, relating the course topics to work and personal experiences. Students could create their own portfolios of their writing and get feedback from their fellow classmates. They could also create learning journals, a technique strongly advocated by Ramsey (2002) except in this case these would be online and easy to access offsite. Faculty can have students create their own individual blogs on topics either chosen by the instructor or by the students themselves. In this instance, the student creates and owns the blog, and the professor (and potentially classmates) is the commenter, thus giving the student more control over his or her own learning experience.

Sparacio and Witonsky (2006) advocate using learner-focused blogs as they believe that "teaching can be significantly enhanced by the integration of blogging" (p. 2). They have their students in a course in Logic & Reasoning develop their own blogs on a specific topic of their choice that they then write about during the course of the semester. According to them, the students tend to put more effort and care in their work as they got to choose their subject matter and they know that their peers in the class are reading their work.

Liz Kleinfeld (2008) at Metropolitan State University at Denver also has students develop their own blogs in her English composition classes. She gives them ten minutes in class to blog on a topic developed from activities or discussions that day or from the previous class. She sometimes does this at the beginning of class and other days at the end and doesn't allow the students to make up the assignment, thus also modeling her value of on-time attendance.

Tom Nelson uses group blogs in teaching rhetoric classes at the University of Texas. Each "blogger group" writes on subjects such as politics, music, or technology. Nelson allows his student groups to decide on their own goals and guidelines for posting and commenting on the blogs and finds this helps in building a collaborative learning environment (Edbauer, 2004).

Community-focused blogs

A third approach to using blogs is to involve participants from outside the class itself. Students could be required to find, read, and evaluate blogs from "experts" outside class on assigned topics and then to share this information with their classmates. Tryon (2006) incorporated the requirement that his students read blogs in his first-year English composition classes in order to encourage students to be active participants rather than passive consumers and thus make a connection between the classroom and the 'real world.'

Students can also develop questions related to course topics and contact others outside of class who participate as "guest teachers." One of the authors of this paper was asked questions in class on how to manage people with disabilities. She went on the Internet and found a man who was blind and another whose legs were paralyzed who both agreed to help. She then had the students post their own questions on the blog. The students had questions such as:

I'd like to know what the best technique is to offer help to a disabled person without making him/her uncomfortable or even getting on his/her nerves. This is especially tricky when the disabled person is an introvert and is uncomfortable with asking for help. Is there some middle ground where both parties can meet and be comfortable?

It would be helpful and interesting for me to know about past experiences (very good or bad) you have had in the workplace that you would not mind sharing. This would help me understand how I can make the work environment more comfortable.

Do people who are blind get scared when they hear noises from people or objects near them if they didn't know they were there? How do they not get hurt on a daily basis?

Obviously, having someone who has a disability to answer the students' questions contributed greatly to the learning process and will enable the students to become better managers after graduation. The students took ownership of the process by posting their own questions on the blog and then reading and commenting on the answers shared by the outside participants. In addition, they were able to share their own personal and work stories with their classmates. As noted by Gould (2002), "research evidence and common sense tell us that students learn more about a subject when they are emotionally involved with the intellectual context being taught"

(p. 23). Thus, designing the course to provoke curiosity and emotional reactions can bring about insights and learning.

In some of our other classes, we contacted authors of books that the students were reading and asked them to contribute comments and feedback on the class blog. As you can imagine, the students were very excited to have meaningful interaction with the person whose book they were discussing. Opening up the learning process to include personal connections with book and journal authors, subject matter experts with their own blogs, and others including potential employers created a virtual learning community unlike anything we had ever done or even envisioned in the physical classroom. One student summed up the experience as follows:

I thought it was so great to have the author of one of the books in our class write comments on our class blog. I never realized that published authors would be interested in participating. It gave a whole new meaning to my reading of his book.

OTHER DECISIONS WE MADE IN SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR THE BLOGS

In addition to deciding the focus of the blog used in each class, we had to choose how we would communicate our expectations to our students. This involved how we would grade participation, deadlines we would enforce, whether we would password protect the site, the quality and quantity of writing we would expect, and how we would enforce these guidelines. In addition, we decided it was important to discuss “Netiquette” with our students as to issues of appropriateness and respect.

Grading policy

Just as with any other assignment, we had to communicate our expectations on blog participation to our students. Below is a sample policy we used:

Every few days, I will create a new blog post, and you will be expected to comment within 72 hours of the post going up. I will grade your comments based on content rather than length (actually, shorter comments on blogs are more generally welcome than longer ones). It will be up to you to balance relevance with brevity.

In addition, since students tend to do what they are rewarded for, we decided it was necessary to allocate points toward blog participation. Table 1 contains a sample rubric used to grade blog comments. We basically agreed with the approach to grading blogs espoused by Liz Kleinfeld (2008):

As far as grading goes, I made the blogs worth 15% of the course grade. To earn a B, blogs have to be complete and, for an A, blogs must be complete and, as I explain on the syllabus, “I should be able to tell that you have used your blog entries to challenge and stretch yourself as a researcher and writer (for example, your blog entries may be exceptionally detailed, specific, thoughtful, and probing).” The grading criteria are pretty soft, but still, there’s a wide range of grades students earn on the blogs.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE RUBRIC FOR GRADING CLASS BLOGS

	To earn an “A”	To earn a “B”	To pass	To choose to fail
Frequency	At least two posts added consistently to the blog each week, spread out throughout the week	1-2 posts added each week, not as consistent with timing	At least one post a week	Inconsistent and/or sporadic posting
Readings	Student clearly demonstrates that s/he is reading the text and is incorporating context and application into posts	Student references the readings in a factual sense, more of a book report approach; little or no application	Inconsistent or minimal references to the reading, little or no application when referenced	No references to the reading
Class content	Student references classroom discussion and exercises, attempts some of them on his or her blog	Student will reference classroom activity but with inconsistent depth (e.g., I liked the guest speaker’s presentation – but little detail provided)	Passing references to classroom exercises but little application or depth	No reference to class activity
Personal application	Student demonstrates an ability to integrate life with creativity concepts discussed in class and in readings. Shares stories from job and life to show application.	Some personal application but connections between personal or business stories and creative concepts lacking or incomplete	Few personal stories or business applications. Information presented strictly from readings or class activities.	No personal application provided; relevance to personal application lacking
Other elements	Links to other blogs, includes pictures, shows “creative side” in blog presentation.		Information is strictly text; no links to other blogs or pictures included in posts.	

Set deadlines

In the classes where we required the students to comment on assignments or to respond to our discussion questions, we find it useful to set deadlines to encourage the students not to put off accessing the blog until the last minute. For example, we might set a deadline of midnight on Monday for a Wednesday morning class that met once a week. This gave us time to read over the comments on Tuesday and prepare responses to cover in Wednesday's class lecture.

Decide whether to password protect the blog

Setting a password is easy and means that only those who know the password can access the information in the blog. For most, but not all of our classes, we decided it best to have a closed blog so that the students will feel more comfortable making comments. One of our reasons for using a password was disclosed in a syllabus as follows:

This blog has been set up in an "unpublished" format meaning that your comments will only be read by me and the other class participants; nothing written on this blog will show up in search engine results.

Communicate expectations as to quality and quantity of writing

We had very different views on this. One of us believes it's all about the content and wanted his students to focus on just getting their ideas and thoughts written down; the other author, however, believes content is important but that presentation is equally important (spelling, grammar, etc). This difference in teaching philosophies affects course design and obviously was an expectation that needed to be shared with the students.

Also, because of the novelty of social media, we found it important to set appropriate expectations of student behavior and activity for blogging. We found some students would comment to an extreme, while others did not take the assignment to blog (or to comment on a class blog) seriously enough. Obviously, we had to be the ones to set and enforce performance expectations. In some classes where this was a problem, we gave the students samples of blogposts and quality comments to let them know what we expected.

Another issue that we had to address was plagiarism and citation. Just as faculty have to address this with hard copy research papers, we spent time explaining why and how to cite sources when posting content on the class blog.

Enforcement of guidelines

Enforcing the policies on blogging in a class setting is no different than enforcement of any other classroom policy. Most of our credibility as classroom managers hinges on consistency and reasonability of the policy and its follow-through. On occasion we were asked to grant exceptions and decided to look at these on a case-by-case basis. For example, one student did

not complete the blogging component of a class which was 30 percent of the final grade. However, in this case there were extenuating circumstances: the student lived in an area that was hit heavily during the 2008 flooding in Iowa during the time frame of the summer class and both her home and workplace were impacted. Typically the ability to make comments on the class blog can be closed, effectively blocking students from entering comments after the assigned date.

Teach “Netiquette” to students

Occasionally, a student would write an inappropriate or unreasonable comment or blog post, either stemming from personal beliefs and values or possibly as a test to see how others would react. One of the authors used a blog in a class for management majors titled *Managing Diversity*. She posted an assignment requiring the students to read a current newspaper article on the firing of a city manager after he revealed he was planning to have a sex change operation. Most of the students were indignant and wrote that this shouldn't have anything to do with how the man performed his job. However, one student wrote:

After reading the article on the Largo city manager, I feel like the right thing to do is be politically correct and say that I feel an injustice has been committed. My true feelings get in the way because I think this guy is disgusting. I don't understand what kind of mental state a man has to be in to decide that he wants to become a woman...It may not affect the managerial skills that this thing has used for the past 14 years, but anyone that would have this procedure has serious psychological issues and shouldn't be in a position of leadership.

Obviously the professor felt the need to make this a 'teaching moment' as she was trying to promote the inclusion of people perceived as 'different' from ourselves. This took both classroom management skills as well as an ongoing rapport with the students to achieve but ended up being a worthwhile exercise that probably would not have occurred in the physical classroom (Kirk & Durant, 2009).

Another consideration is respect and privacy for others. In one of our classes, students were assigned a consulting project with local small businesses and not-for-profits. If a student writes disparaging comments on his or her blog, it can have an adverse impact on that organization. In addition, it makes it difficult for the professor to convince other businesses to be involved with projects for future classes. This instructor now advises students to speak of these companies (and their management) in general terms which would not specifically identify them.

Two of the overriding themes that students need to understand when expressing themselves on blogs (or other social media) are common sense and common courtesy. One of our students wrote about a variety of psychological disorders and personal problems which she was experiencing. While this information put into context some of her other classroom performance issues, it was not relevant to the assignment and was certainly more information than she needed to provide.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM OUR USE OF BLOGS IN OUR CLASSES?

In the three years we have experimented with using blogs as a pedagogical tool, we have incorporated these into undergraduate courses in Principles of Management, Organizational Behavior, Managing Diversity, and Human Resource Management as well as in graduate courses in Leadership, Creativity, Project Management, and Corporate Politics.

For the most part, the students were familiar and comfortable with using the Internet so the format was easy for them to use. The most recent information posted is listed at the top of the blogpage and the students can even have updates forwarded to their email accounts. As faculty, we retained control over the class blogs and could decide whether to password protect these so only class members could access or to make the information open to others outside the class. Course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT have blog capabilities and there are also other free or inexpensive sites such as *Typepad*, *Blogger*, or *Edublogs*. We found that we only needed to be tech comfy, not tech savvy, as all blog writing is done in a Word document and does not require any programming skills.

We found blogs to be much more useful than just discussion boards in terms of ownership and ability to hyperlink to journal or newspaper articles and other blogs. A blog is controlled by the person who created it; others can comment but cannot create blogpost content unless given administrative access. As noted by Trammell and Ferdig, "On a discussion board anyone can start a thread of conversation and all contributors have the same editorial authority" (2004, p. 61). We agree with Asllani, Etkin, and Somasundar (2008) that blogs appear more successful than discussion boards in communicating tacit knowledge.

We asked our students for feedback about their experience of the class blogs at the end of each semester. The students' responses were overwhelmingly positive to both the specific use of blogs in the classroom and to the use of online learning in general. The major themes reflected emerging trends from both academic and social influences.

Blogging invites more students into the conversation

Students who were unwilling to speak up in class indicated they felt more comfortable writing their thoughts and responding to the thoughts of others in a blog/comment format. In addition, using a blog allowed students with different learning styles (for example, visual learners rather than auditory or those students who would rather reflect before answering) to interact with the class.

The blog structure...allows us to express our opinions and experiences when we may not otherwise be able to [and] we got to hear a lot of different perspectives on a lot of different subjects.

I thought that the use of a blog as a teaching tool was a very creative way to get everyone involved. I have found that one of the greatest resources in this program is my classmates. Learning from their different experiences and listening to their different points of view helps to bring my learning experience full circle.

Blogging extends the conversation

Allowing students to participate in mini-conversations via blogs keeps the classroom conversation alive even when the students are not physically present. As universities create flexible class times and schedules such as night and weekend courses to meet the needs of the students, using blogs may be even more useful in preventing the fade-out effect.

Often after class ended, I would think of good points that I could have added to the discussion. However, after the week's gap, those ideas are long forgotten. Also, some students are not as outspoken as others and often their opinions do not get heard. Having the ability to share these unspoken thoughts would benefit the class as a whole.

I found the blog to be very effective as a learning tool, mainly because I am one of those more quiet people in class. Things don't always come to my mind right away, but once I give them time to sink in and realize how I really feel, this is when I find the blog to be quite useful. It also allows me to express myself more clearly and to allow others to become familiar with my point of view.

Classroom blogging provides a “safe” mechanism for introducing students to social media

Even with the proliferation of blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, there are some students who were only vaguely aware of social media and its possibilities. Once students see how blogs can be used, they begin to realize the business benefits of extending “conversations” to the online world. As the following comments show, while the students may resist a classroom blog at first, they quickly embrace the medium and start seeing ways to use these in both their professional and social lives.

Occasionally we would have a student ask why we were using a blog in their class rather than one of the standard university course management programs. Our response was that while these educational software packages can be useful (and we do use their gradebook function), these programs are not available outside the academic setting. Learning to use blogs is a skill that translates to the business world. Many organizations are either developing their own in-house blogs and/or keeping track of what is being said about their products and services in the blog community.

This blogging experience has been informative for me as well. The longer that I am in this MBA program, the more I realize that I am one of the few people that do not read blogs on a regular basis and after this class, I may have to rethink that. It has been fun.

The blog is great! I know I'm still being dragged in but rest assured that I'm coming around. ... The “peer pressure” actually did wonders for me. I will be entering the blog world soon. I definitely have seen the social aspect work and it does make me very curious about the professional benefits.

As this is my first experience blogging it took a few weeks to become used to this media, as I am far more familiar with classic paper and e-mail based communications. This type

of collaborative technology was a unique approach to class assignments, but a necessary experience as blogs are becoming more and more popular in the workplace. After submitting a few assignments, I became very comfortable using this technology.

Blogging makes the students into subject matter experts

This process of creating a blogpost or answering a well-crafted question requires students to search for, filter, and then share information found on the Internet. The process exposes students to vast amounts of information and in the process makes them become more knowledgeable on a topic. Doing this on a regular basis “creates a repetitive process where the blogger student can build on what he learned last week and find more advanced information for the current week,” thus increasing both explicit and tacit knowledge (Trammell & Ferdig, 2004, p. 62). In one of our classes on leadership, one student started thinking about applying his personal brand to his class blog and was able to transition into a new career for himself in a field he was passionate about.

Blogging helps students take ownership of their own learning

We have been pleasantly surprised by the depth and breadth of our students’ blog comments and posts. They tended to spend more time and effort than required by the assignments. When given a choice of using a blog or a more traditional paper method of journaling, those with blogs appeared to be more creative as they were leveraging online resources, linking to other blogs, and finding meaningful graphics. The students who wrote in more traditional ways (even using a word processor) tended to stay strictly within the stated expectations of the assignment.

THE DOWNSIDE TO USING BLOGS

Although we found many advantages to using blogs, there are disadvantages as well. Finding the time to post on the blog and read comments made by students can feel overwhelming. It’s important to treat blogs like any other assignment, and budget time to provide adequate feedback. We found that spending more time reading and responding earlier in the semester helped prevent problems later, and allowed us to see the students’ thought process mature and expand. Setting a deadline by which students must comment was very important to allow time to read and respond. We have considered setting a word limit to make reading the students’ comments more manageable and to aid the students in learning to be more succinct in their writing.

Another issue can be the comfort level of the professor with technology and new teaching methodologies. While writing a blogpost is essentially as easy as sending an email, the prospect of using it as a classroom tool can be daunting. We found that using an instructor-focused approach the first time helped with the learning curve of having a class blog.

Some students and faculty may perceive communicating online as a loss of a personal connection. It does negate the ability to observe body language and vocal tone, both of which contribute heavily to the communication process. However, we found the 100 percent participation rate far offset this perception that effective communication needs to be in person. In

addition, we find that students today are quite comfortable with communicating online, either by cell phone, text messaging, or through social networking sites.

Allowing students to comment on each others' blogs may have some potential draw-backs. Students may not be as open to sharing their thoughts and opinions if they know someone other than the professor is reading it. Hurlburt (2008) notes that these feelings of insecurity are usually temporary and vanish as the students get more comfortable with the class and their peers. Table 2 summarizes some of the advantages and disadvantages to having a class blog.

TABLE 2: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES TO USING CLASS BLOGS

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Independent of institution-run software issues and maintenance schedules <input type="checkbox"/> Provides communication medium between in-classroom experiences <input type="checkbox"/> Allows “quiet” students a forum for expressing themselves <input type="checkbox"/> Format allows instructors to disseminate information quickly and accurately outside of the classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Information is available electronically for students to access from home <input type="checkbox"/> Lower cost than making hard copies <input type="checkbox"/> High comfort level with blogs among Generation Y students <input type="checkbox"/> Promotes learning community between and among students and gives them a feeling of ownership <input type="checkbox"/> Students may put more effort toward their writing knowing it will be read by their peers as well as the professor <input type="checkbox"/> Gives students skills in obtaining and evaluating knowledge found on the Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Allows for teachable moments that might not take place in physical classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Students perceive a “cutting edge” factor in their classes from using blogs as a powerful communication tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Many instructors lack a comfort level with blog technology <input type="checkbox"/> Can create more work for the instructor (developing content, reading student blogs and comments) <input type="checkbox"/> Students may be uncomfortable sharing information through this medium <input type="checkbox"/> Instructors may not understand how to use the blog effectively <input type="checkbox"/> Student writing might be more casual and sloppy compared to turning in hard copies <input type="checkbox"/> May be seen as not as useful in classes that do not require discussion <input type="checkbox"/> Students may resist commenting if it is not made part of their grade <input type="checkbox"/> Students must have access to computer and Internet to participate <input type="checkbox"/> May be difficult to keep students focused on topics they are to discuss <input type="checkbox"/> Students may write what they think professor wants to see rather than their own thoughts and feelings

One last issue: as students link out to other sites, their posts and comments may become visible to the public on social search engines such as Technorati. Thus, it might make sense to password protect the class blog. However, on the other hand, if you think of blog readers as “participants

in conversation,” this can be beneficial. It has provided our students a way to begin conversations with book authors who blog, with subject matter experts in their fields of study, and with other interested students.

CONCLUSION

While weblogs can be useful, it is important to note that they are just tools and not the objective itself. They are not for everyone or for all classes and need to be made an integral part of the course design. However, as noted by Trammell and Ferdig (2004), theoretically the use of blogs as a learning tool seems to be low-cost with high-returns. Technology will continue to influence learning. According to Diana Oblinger, “Already, our focus has shifted from teaching to learning...Much of what we have done in the past has been constrained by the prevailing conception of the classroom, but the lecture and the lab are only two ways to learn...The next step may be the integration of knowledge management and e-learning systems to augment current practices” (Morrison & Oblinger, 2002, p. 3).

Student acceptance of technology in the classroom requires its perceived usefulness and ease of use (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004). We tend to learn best when we need information that we can put to use immediately. Blogs allow faculty and students to access information as it is needed and to make connections between explicit knowledge from our textbooks and tacit knowledge that shows us how to use the information gathered. Blogs also introduce students to online learning communities so they can share information, evaluate knowledge, and construct new learning paradigms for themselves. Effectively modeling ways to use blogs as a teaching and learning tool is a useful skill for our students to have.

As noted by Arbaugh (2008), more research needs to be done on “what constitutes effective blends of classroom and on-line education or what contextual factors most influence such blends” (p. 130). However, the technology is here to stay and our tech-savvy students are, for the most part, comfortable with the incorporating of Internet tools into their learning. As one student noted:

I really enjoyed the use of blogs as a teaching tool. Reading what our peers have experienced and hearing their stories allows us to gain a better understanding of not only the subject matter, but also how to handle ourselves in a situation that we could face in the future.

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