Assessing Peer Support and Usability of Blogging Technology

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ABSTRACT
Blogs provide the contextualization of the information which is vital to the process of peer support. Through dialogues initiated by blog authors and followed by readers, blog platforms build a viable base of shared experiences and mutual relationships. We employ blogs as interactive learning tools for communities of practice in higher education. Content analysis based on empirical data is used to gauge the blog technology’s potential for encouraging interactions between students and the degree of peer support exhibited through educational blogs in hybrid learning environments. Investigation on the implications of students’ academic achievements on learning preferences is conducted to further assess the usability of blogs with particular reference to educational settings. Findings also include observations and user survey that are also used in a triangulation strategy for the use of multiple methods and data sources to produce a reliable evidence base for this study. Results reveal that students demonstrate reflective interactions and offer peer support in the online discussions between class members. However, the usability study shows a statistically significant difference in learning preferences among students of varying academic performance.

Keywords
Blogs, e-Learning, Social Learning, Peer Support, Usability, Evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION
Blogs create a context for dialogues between bloggers and readers. Through conversations initiated by bloggers and engaged by readers, blog platforms build a solid base of shared experiences and mutual relationships. The increasing growth in the popularity of blogs as educational tools witnesses students experience improvements in a range of skills, such as writing and debating (e.g. [5]) which educators regard as positive learning outcomes. Blogs often serve as a digital portfolio of students’ assignments and achievements. Most blog platforms provide a personal writing space that is easy to publish, sharable, and automatically archived and empower users to form learning communities by way of inter-linkages. Therefore, blogs can combine solitary and social interaction in the learning processes [19]. Williams and Jacobs [24] contend that students have long learned as much from each other as they have from an instructor or a textbook - it’s just a question of finding an appropriate vehicle for facilitating this learning. It further concludes that blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning. Employing social network theory in their study, Chang and Chang [1] reported an emergent, self-supporting online community based on a blog environment that facilitates common access to shared class members’ work on the blogs. The self-organizing community serves a platform for peer learning and stimulating reflections among participating students.

In the context of higher education, there is general awareness of blogs and some students as well as faculty may even have maintained personal blogs for years in non-educational settings. However, blogs in educational environments have not generated a comparable level of momentum as those in non-educational use. In essence, enthusiastic claims for blogging in educational settings need to be focused on a comprehensive research base that is broadly supported by vigorous empirical studies conducted in the framework of educational theory. It is our hope that this study provides substantial insights beyond enthusiasm for educators who consider the use of blogs to improve the quality of students’ learning experiences.

The main focus of this paper is the investigation of blog technology for encouraging interactions between students, as well as its consequences in terms of peer support and usability. Thus, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent can blogs serve as a tool to encourage participation and support peer learning?
2. Are blogs suited for all students in educational settings, considering their perceivable differences in levels of academic performance and learning preferences?

It was anticipated that the findings would help make more sense of blog use in higher education considering the existing small base of knowledge on educational blogging. Benefits and pitfalls were examined through a comprehensive set of research methods, such as survey, dataset analysis, ethnographical observations, and evidence investigation. Triangulation of methods (e.g. [6]) was