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**Student perceptions on using blogs for reflective learning in
higher educational contexts**

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Student perceptions on using blogs for reflective learning in higher educational contexts

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Increasingly, blogs are being used by educators in higher education for teaching and learning as they have numerous pedagogical benefits. This study describes and analyses the use of blogs as a private journal or e-portfolio for an assessment in a first year bachelor of business programme. Three hundred and fifty students answered an online questionnaire exploring their perceptions of blogs as an assessment tool, in particular ease of use and impact on learning and skills development. Students found numerous benefits of using blogs such as ease of submitting work, increased ownership of learning, and being able to check and improve their work on a regular basis. They also reported that the use of blogs provided flexibility in completing tasks, helped get feedback from lecturers, and increased the quality and quantity of their work. However, there was a lack of consensus on whether blog use improved writing ability of students, increased dialogue between students and lecturers or increased student interest in learning. The challenge for those contemplating using blogs for similar purposes is to ensure that students are provided with sufficient instructions, and constructive, timely feedback.

Keywords: blogs, private journal, higher education

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Introduction

Innovative Internet technologies for teaching and learning such as Web 2.0 not only have the potential to foster competence development of students (Schneckenberg, 2011), but also provide exciting opportunities for engaging and assessing students. Of the new Web 2.0 technologies, weblogs or blogs have become a familiar tool in recent years for many educators. There is emerging literature highlighting the benefits of using blogs for teaching and learning in higher education (Blau, Nili, & Neuthab, 2009; Deed & Edwards, 2011; Duffy, 2008; Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008; Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010; Kumar, 2009; Sim & Hew, 2010; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Instructors seeking to integrate computer mediated communication (CMC) tools at higher education levels find blogs appealing because technology literate students readily adopt such tools (Halic et al., 2010).

The most common reported use of blogs at university level seems to be for collaborative learning. Farmer et al. (2008) suggested that the most valuable aspect of blogging was to enable students to interact with peers. Williams and Jacobs (2004) concluded that blogging helped to facilitate intellectual exchange among students. Coutinho (2007) and Kumar (2009) found that students considered blogs to be a powerful communication tool that promoted class interactions. However, given the reflective nature of blogs they can be successfully used as personal journals or portfolios. Weller, Pegler, and Mason (2005) suggested that there are a number of ways in which blogs can be used for pedagogical benefit, but probably the most interesting and significant use could be as a journal or portfolio where students demonstrate their thoughts and reflections. This use has the potential to provide a confidential learning space in which students can express their feelings, emotions, and evolving perspectives.

There is limited research on the use of blogs for teaching and learning in business programmes at higher education level. Sim and Hew (2010) found that previous research studies on the use of blogs were limited to writing-intensive disciplines such as education or technology related disciplines such as information technology. There is also limited research on the use of blogs as private journals for assessment purposes. This paper aims to fill that void and describes a research study in which students answered an online questionnaire canvassing how they felt about the use of blogs as an assessment tool in a first year business programme. The paper begins with a literature review on the growing use of blogs in higher education. It then describes the use of blogs as a personal journal for an e-portfolio assignment and analyses the students' responses regarding the ease of using blogs in such a way and how this supported their learning. The paper concludes with some suggestions for future research in this area.

Background

The term blog is a contraction of 'web based log' or 'weblog' (Farmer et al., 2008; Liu, Kalk, Kinney, & Orr, 2012; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Therefore, essentially a blog is an online journal with dated entries, presented in reverse chronological order providing an archive of posting with the newest post at the top of the page. It may be viewed as a personalised page with individual ownership where an author publishes commentary in the format of a personal website (Liu et al., 2012). This technology allows an author to create hypertext links to other web content or other blogs (Sim & Hew, 2010). Du and Wagner (2007) suggested that individuals could use blogs to communicate in a way that is easier than discussion forums or e-mails but at the same time retain ownership of their contributions. This is supported by Kim (2008) who explored the attributes of a blog and concluded that its features helped overcome

the limitations of current CMC technology such as Blackboard discussion forums and e-mails.

There appears to be growing use of blogs for higher order learning (Weller et al., 2005). Numerous studies have reported on the benefits of using blogs in higher education (Coutinho, 2007; Davi, Frydenberg, & Gulati, 2007; Du & Wagner, 2007; Duffy, 2008; Hain & Back, 2008; Halic et al., 2010). Duffy (2008) argued that blog use could enhance students' critical and analytical thinking skills, learning that is essential for both scholarly and professional development. Blogging has been shown to engage students more in the course material (Davi et al., 2007), as well as provide them with a more active role in the learning process (Du & Wagner, 2007). Coutinho (2007) and Hain and Back (2008) found that the use of blogs increased students' learning and suggested that lecturers can successfully integrate them into academic courses. Halic et al. (2010) reported that the majority of students found that blogging enhanced their learning and led them to think of course concepts outside the classroom. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) suggested that students can use blogs for personal information management such as for goal setting and planning for tasks and assessments.

Using blogs as a collaborative learning tool has received significant research attention recently (Davi et al., 2007; Farmer et al., 2008; Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2009; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Davi et al. (2007) reported that students considered blogs to be a powerful communication tool with the ability to promote class interaction. Most of the students in a study by Farmer et al. (2008) said that one of the most valuable aspects of blogging was that it enabled them to interact with their peers. Likewise, Williams and Jacobs (2004) reported that most students in their survey said that blogging helped facilitate intellectual exchanges with student peers. This finding was further validated by Kerawalla et al. (2009) who identified interaction with others as one of a variety of uses for blogs.

Although blogs can be successfully used for collaborative and cooperative learning, privacy concerns may prevent less confident students from participating in class interaction. Halic et al. (2010) found that if blogs are used for collaborative learning, students preferred reading peers' blogs over writing their own entries. They also found that the majority of students did not value comments made by peers. Kerawalla et al. (2009) reported that some students chose not to engage with the course community through blogging and blogged mainly for themselves. They argued that these blogging behaviours challenged popular assumptions that blogs are primarily a communication tool for collaborative learning. Kim (2008) found that students with personal blogs were more interested in blogging than those students with shared blogs. He suggested that personalised blogging might enhance online communication activities and cautioned against using a shared blog environment.

Educational applications of blogs include reflecting and expressing individual thought (Top, 2012). Given the reflective nature of blogs, the greatest instructional potential for students may therefore be its use as a knowledge log and reflective tool. Reflection requires students to express their opinions and feelings which they may be reluctant to do if they know that others can read and comment on their entries. Hemmi et al. (2009) found that the choice of a private blogging environment had significant pedagogical benefits. In their study, one of the aims of using blogs was to give students a place where their tutor could give them reassuring and personal feedback. They argued that private blogs supported students to develop ideas in a relatively secure and safe environment. The tutors in their study also thought that the pedagogical benefits of this approach were quite significant.

One of the learning goals for many university programmes is for students to be self-directed, reflective learners. Xie, Ke, and Sharma (2008) suggested that to advance from surface to deep learning students need to make meaning of new information. They argued that reflection is an important prerequisite for deep and meaningful learning and recommended using strategies such as journal writing that would not only promote reflection but also deep thinking and learning. Therefore, the most interesting and significant use of blogs in education may be to use it to promote reflective learning. This is supported by Deng and Yuen (2009) who concluded that students are likely to shoulder more responsibility if self-reflection is stressed. Students can use blogs as a journal or portfolio, recording their own thoughts, reflections, and discussions on a subject area.

Joshi and Chugh (2009) argued that business professionals need a range of generic skills such as critical thinking and reflective skills. They suggested that educational blogs can be successfully used as reflective tools to improve educational outcomes for students. Yang (2009) found positive implications for the use of blogs as a medium to provide and promote critical reflection. Reflective thinking requires students to express emotions and feelings which they are more likely to do if a blog is used as a personal journal that allows for discourse between the instructor and the learner without peer feedback. Xie et al. (2008) found that the use of blogs increased students' reflective thinking but peer feedback was found to affect students' reflective thinking skills negatively.

In addition to being a reflective tool, blogs can also be used as an assessment tool. A limited number of studies have investigated the potential of using blogs for assessment purposes (Chen & Bonk, 2008; Smith, Mills, & Myers, 2009). Chen and Bonk (2008) concluded that blogs bring new possibilities for educational assessment. They argued that compared with other technology blogs provide a clearer track of the authentic progress learners have made. However, they found that if blogs were used as a group assessment tool then one of the problems instructors had was to locate and give feedback on posts relating to a similar topic by different students as all the posts were intertwined. They recommended that further changes were required and suggested that future studies might address personalisation of blogs for assessment purposes.

Smith et al. (2009) examined the strengths and weaknesses of using online tools such as blogs for assessment purposes in first year engineering. In their study, blogs were used by the students for regular bi-weekly journal entries which were assessed. Students were asked to comment on what they had gained from the course and told that they would not be losing marks for strong criticisms against the course. The final blog post was used for course evaluation so staff could see what activities motivated students and what didn't. Their study found logistical challenges as well as negative experiences and recommended changes to how blogs were used for assessment purposes. To make it easier to mark and administrate, they recommended that students' blog entries only receive feedback from instructors as opposed to other students.

Purpose of the study

This study analyses students' perceptions on using blogs for an e-portfolio assessment in a first year Bachelor of Business programme. In this assessment students are provided with weekly e-portfolio frameworks which require them to complete and upload tasks to their

personal blog space created on Blackboard. The tasks are completed using specified software such as Microsoft Excel. After they have completed and uploaded the required tasks, students are then required to reflect on their learning using the provided triggers for reflection. The tasks have deadlines and students are given regular formative feedback by lecturers, with summative feedback provided at the end of the semester.

The study aims to answer two main questions:

1. What were the students' perceptions on the ease of using blogs as an assessment tool?
2. How does the use of blogs support students' learning and achievement?

Research method

Data for the research was collected using an online questionnaire (a copy of the questionnaire is available from the authors on request) which received ethics approval from AUT Ethics Committee on 17 May 2011, ref.11/42. An independent third party posted an announcement on Blackboard, e-mailed all the students, and visited each class informing students of the research. The notifications outlined the research and directed students to online information detailing the rationale for the research and the link to the questionnaire. Students were invited to participate in the survey in their own time.

The two page questionnaire, designed to be easily answered, comprised of questions in three main sections. The first set of questions collected demographics and enrolment details. For example, whether the student: was male or female; was enrolled through the faculty of Business and Law or another faculty; was studying full time or part time; was domestic or international; was enrolled in another business programme. This section also investigated students' computer use - for example, whether they had access to a computer at home, access to internet at home, and whether they used computers mostly at home or on campus. All eight questions in this section required tick box responses only. The second set of questions collected information on how easy or difficult it was for students to use blog functions. The third set of questions collected information on the impact of using blogs on their learning and achievement. The responses for sections two and three were elicited by using Likert scales of responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The target audience for the survey were all students enrolled in Business Information Management, a compulsory first year Bachelor of Business paper. The survey was carried out in the second semester of 2011 and for this particular semester 793 students were enrolled in this paper. A total of 350 students participated in the survey. This represents a response rate of 44% of the students enrolled in the paper for this semester. However, two of the students did not continue with the survey so the responses of 348 students were analysed.

Discussion of results

Results 1: General information

There was an even distribution of male and female respondents. Of all the students who participated in the survey, 51% were males and 49% were females. A significant majority of these students were enrolled through the faculty of Business and Law with only 4% from another faculty. A small percentage of students identified themselves as part-timers with 95%

of the participants saying they were studying fulltime. The majority of the respondents were domestic students with only 18% being internationals.

An issue that is often raised when computer based technologies are used for teaching and learning is the accessibility of computers and internet by students from the lower socio-economic groups. Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, and Gray (2008) found that although many first year students are 'tech-savvy', not all may have access to computers and internet at home. In this study 98% of the respondents indicated that they had access to computers at home and 95% had access to the Internet at home. These figures are comparatively higher than those in the study by Kennedy et al. (2008) and demonstrate the growing use of computers and the Internet in households. Computers are available on campus for students to use, but interestingly more than 82% of the participants reported that they used computers mostly at home.

Results 2: Ease of using blogs

In the second set of questions, 75% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy for them to use their blog with a similar number saying that the blog was easy to navigate. Only 8% of the students either disagreed or strongly disagreed in regards to their blog being easy to use. However, 62% of the students indicated that they were familiar with some of the blog tools and functions. Similarly, when asked whether sufficient information about how to use the blogs was provided, 66% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had been given sufficient information on how to use blogs. This may suggest that for a significant number of students the instructions may not have been sufficient. One possible reason for this could be lack of familiarity of staff with some of the blog functions.

In relation to the blog functions, 70% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that it was easier for them to create hyperlinks to information they had found from their research instead of uploading information found to their blog as a file. The one blog function that students were most positive about was the ease of uploading work to their blog. A significant majority of students (83%) either agreed or strongly agreed that uploading work directly to the blog was easier than submitting hard copies of tasks completed. One reason for this may be that students could complete tasks at home and upload them to the blog without having to come to campus to submit a hard copy. However, anecdotal feedback from lecturers indicates that their preference is to mark hard copies of assessments so a challenge is to motivate lecturers to provide feedback for soft copies of work submitted.

The summarised results from the survey relating to ease of using blogs is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Ease of using blogs

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The blog was easy to use				
24%	51%	17%	6%	2%
Sufficient information was provided for using blogs				
16%	50%	24%	9%	1%
Uploading work directly to the blog was easier than submitting hard copy				
42%	42%	12%	4%	1%
The blog was easy to navigate				
24%	53%	18%	4%	1%
I was familiar with some of the blog tools				
18%	44%	26%	10%	2%
It was easier to create links to the articles instead of uploading them straight into the blog				
24%	46%	23%	5%	1%

Results 3: The impact of blogs

A key learning goal for most university programmes is for students to become effective communicators. This includes written as well as oral communication. Wells, Gerbic, Kranenburg, and Bygrave (2009) found that graduates lack the professional skills and capabilities that are important for success in their careers. They suggested that written communication is one of the professional skills in which graduates are inadequately prepared. Writing blog entries could help improve students' writing ability. However, only 44% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the use of blogs had improved their writing ability. One reason for this could be that blogs lack the technological facility for students to do grammar and spelling checks. Students were observed to use Microsoft Word for writing their reflective paragraphs before copying and pasting them to their blog.

Most students indicated that the use of blogs had increased ownership of their work and when commenting on the flexibility of completing their work, 66% either agreed or strongly agreed that blog based assessments gave them more flexibility. One important feature of blogs is that it allows students to check their work regularly and make improvements when they felt necessary, especially to their weekly reflections, based on formative feedback from lecturers. Most students said that the use of blogs helped them check and revise their work on a regular basis which increased the quality and quantity of their work.

An important feature of this blog based assessment is that it allows students to receive formative feedback from their lecturers throughout the semester. A significant majority (71%) of students felt that the use of blogs helped them get feedback from lecturers, but only 50% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback was timely and constructive. This could be due to inconsistencies between lecturers in providing feedback to their classes. Furthermore, only 46% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that using blogs increased dialogue between them and their lecturers. This may suggest that some lecturers could have given comprehensive feedback whereas the comments provided by others could have been brief. This could be due to workload issues for staff as the use of such technologies could have the potential to increase instructor workloads. The viewer comments section of blogs is meant to increase dialogue between the students and staff but given time constraints

it was observed that staff gave feedback once but did not go back to read or respond to comments provided by students.

Innovative use of emerging technologies such as blogs could increase students' interest and motivation in learning. One reason for using blogs as an assessment tool in the Business Information Management paper is to increase students' interest in their learning and use technologies they are familiar with or can adapt to quickly. Surprisingly, the average rating for the question 'using blogs increased my interest in learning' was the lowest of all the questions asked in section 3 of the survey (see Figure 1). Fewer students were negative about blogs being a good tool for writing assessments with only 11% of the students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. However, although the majority of students either strongly agreed or agreed that blogs were good tools for writing assignments, the challenge would be getting the less 'computers savvy' students and staff to understand the potential benefits of using blogs as an assessment tool.

The summarised results of the survey on how the use of blogs impacted on students' learning and achievement are shown in the following graph in Figure 1.

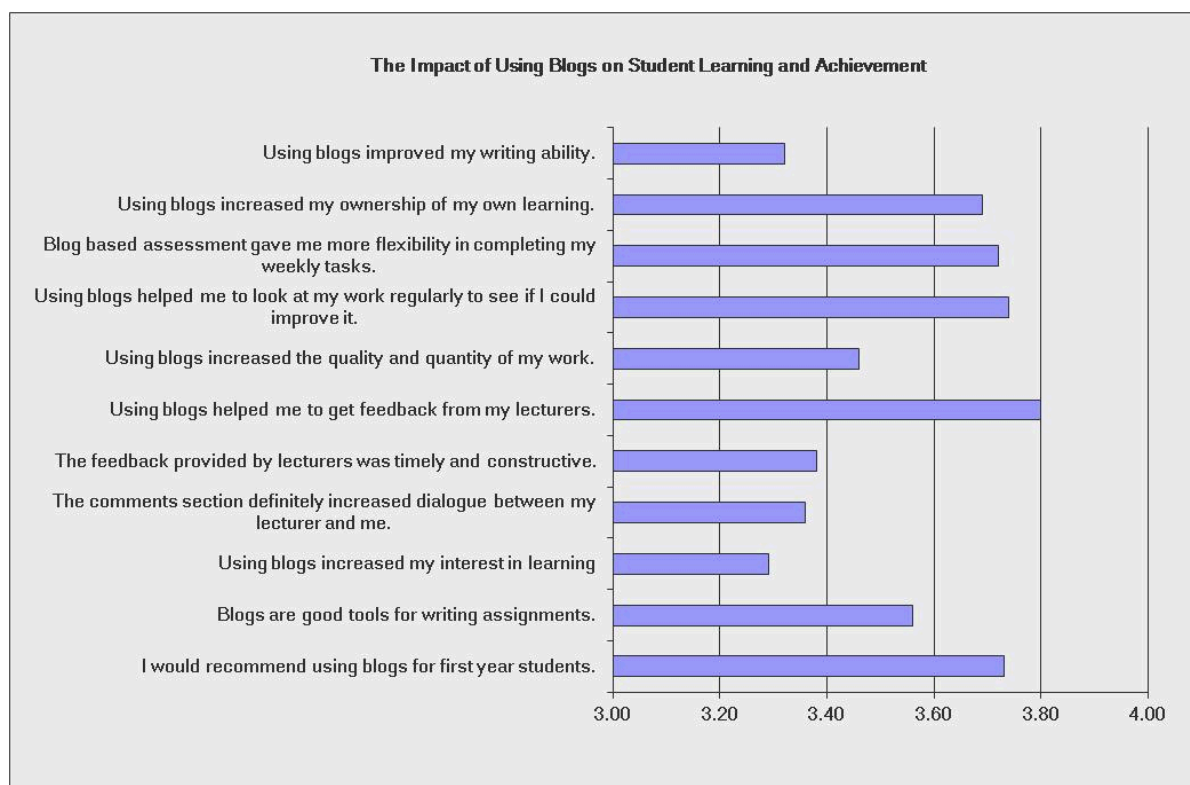


Figure 1: Graph of the impact of using blogs on student learning and achievement.

Conclusions

This paper describes and analyses the findings of a research project in which students answered an online questionnaire that aimed to explore the potential benefits of using blogs as a private journal or e-portfolio for an assessment in a compulsory first year Bachelor of Business paper. It evaluated the students' responses to the ease of using blogs for such purposes and how the use of blogs impacted on their learning. The findings show that

although students acknowledged that blogs were relatively easy to use and navigate, more could be done to provide them with sufficient information on how to use the blogs. The function of blogs that students felt most positive about was the ease with which they could upload files for tasks they had completed instead of having to submit hard copies. A challenge however would be motivating staff to provide online feedback as there has been some reluctance from staff to do this.

The analysis indicated that students found working on personal blogs increased ownership of their work, and provided them with some flexibility in completing tasks. Students reported that they were able to check their work regularly and make improvements based on formative feedback received from their lecturers that increased the quality and quantity of their work. Although students were generally positive about the feedback they received, only half of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback was timely and constructive. There was a lack of consensus on whether blog use increased dialogue between the students and their lecturers. These issues provide challenges that need to be addressed given staff workload and pressure to produce research outputs possibly resulting in reluctance of staff to provide time consuming constructive formative online feedback. There was also a lack of consensus on whether blog use improved students writing abilities or increased their interest in learning.

One limitation of this research was that only closed questions were used in the questionnaire. The absence of open ended questions has meant that the authors have not explored students' reasons for their responses. It is also likely that the phrasing of some of the questions such as "using blogs improved my writing ability" might have confused some students resulting in those who have little confidence in their own performance answering it slightly more negatively than may be the case. Future research could explore the rationale behind the answers provided by the students through the use of open ended questions. In addition, further research could be conducted on how doing the blog entries supported students' learning of discipline content and how it enhanced or otherwise their performance in other assessments. Future research could also be conducted on the use of blogs from the perspectives of lecturers as there are numerous implications for them in terms of workload issues.

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