

Examining the Use and Awareness of Educational Blogs among University Students

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Abstract

Blogs are widely used in education since their emergence particularly in higher education. This research study investigated the use of educational blogs by students at university level. 100 male and female university students were the sample of this study. Data was collected through a questionnaire and focused group discussions. Descriptive statistics i.e., frequency and percentages, were calculated for the analysis of quantitative data and the qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The results of the study indicated that students used blogs to get educational ideas and communicate with other people. They used educational blogs and commented on relevant course related posts. In this way, students get knowledge of different subjects through blogs. Students and teachers also used educational blogs to get to know each other better by visiting and reading blogs. Educational blogs help teachers to teach and students to learn. It is suggested that at university and college level there should be workshops and awareness programs for the use of modern technology into education. Teachers should offer blogs related courses at university and college levels. This study also creates awareness among university students about the use of blogs for educational purposes.

Keywords: Educational Blogs, University Teaching and Learning, Higher Education, Modern Technology, Workshops, Quantitative, Qualitative.

Introduction

A blog is defined as a “personal weblog, which is kept by the author or writer in a reverse chronological diary form” (Du & Wagner, 2005, p.3), or “a personal diary, which is kept on the webpage” (Fun & Wagner, 2005, p.19). Blogs are web sites that are uploaded on a routine basis from their authors. To some extent, blogs can be used as regular log about user’s particular personal lives, local perspective, or even as general commentaries. The fact is that blogs can be created and developed into whatever the author desires them to be.

Blogs are educational software which gives social company to the student (Anderson, 2005). It provides a social support. Blogs are used to “get to know each other by visiting and reading blogs created by other students” (Downs, 2004, p.18).

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Blogs are common social software and could be utilised by university students for their collaborative work. Educators' blogs motivate students to complete their work and help them out at any difficulty. They make their own blog related to any specific subject area, which keep them socially connected not only with their own students but with other students as well. They also get help from different blogs regarding their subject. Most of the teachers post lesson material on their blog, and students take help from them. Downes, (2004) found "the Weblog is now a famous piece of the educational landscape, and for those websites, where personal publishing, material or chronologically ordered content would be helpful; blogs have stepped to the fore" (p. 20). Educational blogs have been used as a special tool that provides teachers endless chance to promote teaching exercise (Downes, 2004).

Number of blogs on web are increasing day by day and so is the importance of educational blogs. Students use educational blogs to get some help for their studies and share their ideas with other people belonging to the same area of study. Keeping in view the importance and use of blogs for educational purposes, this research is conducted to explore the use and awareness of educational blogs by the university and college students.

Literature Review

Blogs

Blogging is a new way of social networking. The word "weblog" originally manipulated by Barger in 1997 (Blood, 2000). A blog as an "easy to update website characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order" (Stefanac, 2006) p. 230). In 1999, two commercial services, Livejournal and bloggers.com, made it easy and facilitated the creation and maintenance of blogs (Scheidt, 2009). This was the beginning from where blogging became popular among the internet users.

Educational Blogging

In higher education institutions, some of the benefits of blogs as described by Embrey (2002), Wagner (2003), Huffaker (2005), Lee and Allen (2006), and, Lujan-Mora (2006), are; blogs can be used as e-learning tools to facilitate teaching-learning process outside the classroom. Educational journals can be used to connect students and teachers, with sharing tools for student's assignments (Ray, 2016). Educational Blogs provide effective means of communication. Educational blogs can be used as instructional resources. Instructors can give the websites that provide assignment-related homework that help the students doing their work easier, and it can also be used as group activity for student tasks. Blog increases social awareness among university students. Educational blogging is an opportunity for students to develop a personal voice and interest in learning. It is the most famous online movements among social-media (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011). Through social media student and teacher also interact with other web sites, which help them out in their studies. Blogging engage bloggers (students) in the activities of writing,

and help them in getting ongoing feedback on their learning activities. Blogs provide the forums for online discussion that promote critical and higher level of thinking among students. Just like a personal diary, blogs support self-expression, communication and creativity.

Blogs are the networking sites where students can create connections, and share knowledge and information with other students. As writing in blogs is easy, therefore, college and university students can share their experiences and feelings in an interactive way. Through blogs, students and teachers around the globe, can teach and learn together.

Use of Educational Blogs at Higher Education

With the increased use of blogs in higher education, researchers started investigating the effects of blogging on students' performance, and conducted many research studies (Chen & Bonk, 2008; Li, 2010; Shim & Guo, 2009). These and other research studies found that use of blogs in education can enhance students' performance into their studies (Churchill, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Goldman, Cohen, & Sheahan; Shim & Guo 2009).

Downs, (2004) argue five basic uses for blogs in education. First, teachers use blogs to exchange the well-ordered class website on daily basis. Educators display new stuff, like, class times and order, assignment notice, homework, advice readings materials, and work. Secondly, teachers link their course content with Internet e.g. people can preserve a net web to find way to associate and right words about different topics. Third, blogs can act as forum to generate and facilitate in-class- discussion. Fourth, some of the tutors further apply online blogs to arrange class workshops, conferences and to present abstracts of readings. The fifth is, novice interrogates to write their individual online journals related to their progress (Downs, 2004). Use of educational blogs can upgrade students' judgmental and logical reasoning expertise, knowledge that is crucial for both teacher and students (Duffy, 2008). Blog site can attract learner additionally in the course material (Davi et al., 2007), and also supply them with extra functional tasks in the teaching and learning process (Du & Wagner, 2007).

Any person with basic computer skills and an internet connection can maintain a blog. Furthermore, blogs allow users to publish archive and interact (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Participants interact in their roles as blog writers, readers and reviewers; they write entries and respond to criticism from peers (Pinkman, 2005).

To explore the potential of blogs as learning spaces for students in the higher education sector, William and Jacobs conducted a research in 2004. In this research a blog was created and university students were encouraged to utilize it for their study purposes. A total of 51 MBA students participated. It was found that blogs provided students an opportunity to interact with peers, and high level of autonomy. Moreover, it was found that blogs have the potential to be a truly transformational technology for teaching and learning.

In 2008, Ellison and Wu conducted a research to investigate students' attitudes towards the use of blogs for their studies and its effect on comprehension. The results indicated that the majority of the students showed positive attitudes toward the educational use of blogs, moreover, reading others' blogs helped them in better understanding of the course content. Ali and Byard conducted a research in 2013, to explore students' perception about the use of blogs as an assessment tool and its impact on learning and skill development. An online survey was conducted on three hundred and fifty (350) students. Results indicated that students perceive blogs as helpful in submitting the work and taking ownership of their learning. Through blogs they can check and improve their work regularly. Blogs facilitated them in getting feedback from their teachers, which helped them in improving the quality of their work.

It is evident from the previous research that blogs could be effectively utilized in education to facilitate teaching learning process. Students have positive attitude towards the educational uses of blogs. Therefore, it was imperative to find out the uses and awareness of educational blogs among university students in Pakistan. For this, the main focus of this research was to explore how much students are aware of educational blogs, and how much they use them for educational purpose, and how they get benefit from educational blogs.

Research Questions

- How much students are aware of the use of educational blogs?
- What is the usage of educational blogs among the university students?
- What are the views of students about educational uses of blogs?

Methodology

The study utilized mixed method i.e. both quantitative and qualitative research approach.

Sample

For the purpose of the survey (quantitative part of research) 100 students were conveniently selected from the two universities located in the Rawalpindi city. They were the Master's and Undergraduate students. Among these 100 students, those who had consented, were invited to take part in the focus group discussion (qualitative part of research). There were 25 students and three focus group discussions were conducted.

Questionnaire

For this format, quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire. This questionnaire was adapted from Halic, et al (2010). The questionnaire consisted of 25 items which were scored on 5 point Likert scale as 1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral,

4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree. Keeping in view that this questionnaire was being used for the first time in Pakistan, it was important to find out the ‘internal consistency reliability’ of the instrument in this context. That is, it was necessary to evaluate how reliable this questionnaire was for exploring the awareness and use of educational blogs by students in the Pakistani context. The reliability in terms of internal consistency was calculated through Cronbach’s alpha, which is generally referred as the alpha coefficient of reliability (Cohen et al., 2007). For the purpose, this questionnaire was administered to 30 students in the pilot testing stage. The values of Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was 0.83, which showed that it was satisfactorily reliable for use in this research in the Pakistani context.

Focused Group Discussion

For the qualitative part of research, focused group discussions were designed to collect data from the participants. Focused group guide was developed to get views and opinion of students about the use of educational blogs, and how they get benefit for their studies. Three focused group discussions were conducted having approximately 8 students in each group. These focus group discussions were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. All the audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. The accuracy of the transcripts was ensured by consulting two academics, a professor and a research officer. This was to ensure that the transcribed versions were accurate accounts of the conversations and any mistakes they pointed were corrected accordingly. Secondly, in order to assure inter-coder agreement regarding the qualitative data, another researcher was asked for comments on the ways in which the qualitative data was coded, and categorized in themes. The researcher, independently coded 10-20% of all the qualitative data. Her coding matched well with mine, except for a few differences, and yielded an inter-rater agreement of approximately 95%. The inconsistencies were resolved through discussion.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data was collected through questionnaire mentioned earlier. The participants’ responses for the use of educational blogs were obtained on the questionnaire. The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics i.e. frequency and percentages were calculated.

Tables 1-4, presents the results of students’ responses on the questionnaire. Questionnaire was distributed to all hundred students included in the sample, however, sixty one (61) students responded. Therefore, response rate was 61%.

Table 1, presents the results regarding provision of blog as a social support, majority i.e. approximately 70% of the participants either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ to the option that blog provided them social support and networking site for their studies. For blog as a medium for sharing of knowledge, 38 out of 61, i.e. 62% of the participants ‘agreed’ and ‘strongly agreed’, and only 5 students (8%), disagreed to it. Because they did not think blogs could be utilised for knowledge sharing among them.

Table 1 *Sense of social support and knowledge sharing through blogs*

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Blogging is a new way of social networking?	3 4.9%	2 3.3%	14 23%	32 52.5%	10 16.4%
Blog provides a sense of social support?	2 3.3%	2 3.3%	12 19.7%	27 44.3%	18 29.5%
• I like making comments on my class mate’s posts?	1 1.6%	4 6.6%	18 29.5%	23 37.35	15 24.6%
• Blog discussion helped me to share my knowledge and experience in general.	1 1.6%	1 1.6%	21 34.4%	25 41%	13 21.3%
• Other student’s comments on my blog posts were important.	1 1.6%	7 11.5%	28 45.9%	17 27.9%	8 13.1%

Results presented in Table 2, below, show that blogging helped students in their studies, they felt connected with other students and got motivation for the completion of their assignments on time. Among the 61 participants, 67% agree and strongly agree, that uploading their study related work, directly on blog was easier than submitting a hard copy, while 57% agree and strongly agree, that they like posting assignments on blogs. More importantly, 81.10%, of the participants agree and strongly agree that blogs provide help in their studies, however, only 3 participants 4.9% disagreed to this.

Table 2 *Blogging provide students educational help and connectivity*

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
• Blogging motivates me to complete my assignment on time?	1 1.6%	5 8.2%	11 18%	31 50.8%	13 21.3%
• Uploading work directly to the blog was easier then submitting hard copy?	2 3.3%	4 6.6%	14 23%	28 45.9%	13 21.3%
• Blogs provide help to the students in their studies?	3 4.9%	0 0%	8 13.1%	38 62.3%	12 19.7%
• The blog has helped me feel connected to other students in this class?	2 3.3%	5 8.2%	14 23%	31 50.8%	9 14.8%
• Students like posting writing assignment on blog.	1 1.6%	7 6.6%	18 29.5%	29 47.5%	6 9.8%
• Blog based assessment gave me more flexibility in completing my weekly task.	2 3.3%	6 9.8%	18 29.5%	25 41%	10 16.4%

Results presented in Table 3, show the responses of students on the use of blogs for improving reading and writing skills. For this, 70.8 % of the participants agreed and strongly agreed to that blogging activities helped them improve their reading and writing skills while only 4 participants, 6.6% disagreed to it. Students found blogs useful for increasing their interest in learning, and helped them in enhancing and improving their vocabulary. For this almost 63% participants agreed and strongly agreed, and 10% disagreed i.e. they did not find blogs helpful in increasing their interest into learning and studies. For students' responses regarding, the blogs are good tool for assessment, 70.5% were agreed and strongly agreed to that the blog was good assessment tool, and only 7

respondents disagreed to this. It is concluded that the blogging activities helped students in improving vocabulary, reading & writing through assessment, it also increased their interest in learning. Moreover, blogs based assessment provide flexibility to students for the completion of their work.

Table 3 *Blogging activities improve reading and writing, vocabulary, and interest in learning and good tool for assessment.*

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
• Blogging activities improve my reading and writing activities?	2 3.3%	2 3.3%	12 19.7%	31 50.8%	14 23%
• My vocabulary has increased due to blogging activities?	1 1.6%	4 6.6%	17 27.9%	26 42.6%	13 21.3%
• Using blogs increased my interest in learning?	3 4.9%	5 8.2%	15 24.6%	27 44.3%	11 18%
• Blogs are good tool for writing assessment?	3 4.9%	4 6.6%	11 18%	30 49.2%	13 21.3%

In this section of results in Table 4, the students responses regarding the blogs provide sufficient information, wherein, 34 participants 55.8% were agreed the provision of blogs sufficient information while 5 participants 7.44% were disagreed on it. This Table presents the data of different responses on blog as a fast and convenient to update information on weblog. Wherein, 44 out of 63 participants, 72.2% were agreed that it is fast and convenient, and only 4 respondents 5.15% were disagreed on it.

In this table we can see that among the 63 participants 45 i.e. 73.8%, were stick to the agreed option for blog as user friendly, and there were only 7 participants, 10.14%, disagreed on this statement. Thus, participants agreed that blog was user friendly, and 38 respondents, 61.13%, agreed that working on blogs is easy for them and they liked to create and keep blogs.

Table 4 *Students' awareness about educational uses of Blogs*

Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
• Sufficient information was provided for using blogs.	2 3.35	3 4.9%	22 36.1%	22 36.1%	12 19.7%
• It is fast and convenient to update information on the blogs.	3 4.9%	1 1.6%	13 21.3%	30 49.2%	14 23%
• It is important for blog to be user friendly.	1 1.6%	6 9.8%	9 14.8%	25 41%	20 32.8%
• Students would feel at ease in a blog class.	2 3.3%	3 4.9%	26 42.6%	23 37.7%	7 11.5%
• Have a lot of self-confidence when it comes to working with blogs.	3 4.9%	2 3.3%	10 16.4%	24 39.3%	22 36.1%
• I would like working and keeping blogs?	2 3.3%	2 3.3%	19 31.1%	28 45.9%	10 16.4%

Qualitative Data Analysis

In focused group discussions, participants of the study expressed their views and opinions about the use of blogs for the educational purposes. Focused group discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. Major themes which emerged from the data were; blog as personal diary, educational help, sharing experiences, enhance general knowledge, awareness about blogs, and communication with others. These themes are discussed in the following text.

Personal Diary and Educational Help

During the focus group discussion students were asked about the use of blogs. Students said that blog is a site on net which gave them a social presence. They found blogs as personal website where they can share their posts and gather relevant information.

Moreover, students use blogs to find solution of any problem relevant to their subjects of study.

All participants showed positive response about the educational blogging. They said that they write on blogs and also get help from other class fellows. Some of the students said that blog is a source of knowledge and information for them. They said,

“When we want to get any information, we recommend blogs because we can get lots of information from there. Whenever we need, we can use it easily.”

Through blogs they can interact with other students, which resulted in increased social awareness and opportunity to learn. Some students shared that blogs were really helpful in their course work, because lots of up to date information available there, which helped students in making their studies easier.

“The course related blogs are more beneficial, if we don’t have knowledge about any topic, we simply post the topic on blog, different comments and views of other people helped us in getting clarity of the concepts.”

One student said during the focus group discussion:

“I personally created a blog on web so that I can easily share my knowledge and information with others.”

Sharing of Experience

Focus group participants also described that students can share their experiences through blogs. Blog is such a web log where everyone can participate and they also share their experiences related to lesson material. On blogs, users can easily access relevant study material. They said about the easiness on blogs:

“There are different blogs available on web related to different subjects. Thus, whenever we need information related to thesis or assignments, we can easily access information from blog.”

Some participants argued that blog is such a site where they can search and get relevant material related to the topic. There were different perspectives and views of many people on blogs. They said:

“Whenever we had to get opinion of other people, we just post our topic on blog and get lots of information.”

Some respondents also discussed, blog as an authentic way to search and get relevant material on different topics. Different subject related blogs really helped them to search different research articles and to identify which one is authentic. One student said,

“I have difficulty in the blogging; I can’t understand which article is authentic. But when I started working to create blogs, then I understand how to search different articles.”

Enhance General Knowledge and Promote Critical Thinking

Participants showed a great interest about educational blogs and its usage for educational purposes. Students said that blogs enhance general knowledge not only for the students but also for other people. They got different knowledge from blogs web sites, which promote and enhance their critical thinking skills. During discussion one student said:

“I learn how to use blogs for educational purposes. We communicate with different students and also get diverse views about any phenomenon. Through blog’s commentaries my communication skills have improved and also enhanced critical thinking.”

Blogs helped in increasing knowledge and critical thinking of the student. Through this, users can also improve their writing skills. Students got lots of information when interact with other students on blog.

Awareness about Blogs

During the focus group discussion, majority of the students showed their awareness about the use of blogs for educational purpose. Students said, they post different topics and got relevant information. This also helped them in sharing their opinions about any topic. Students have created their own blogs to get help in research. Moreover students found it easy to get articles of different authors on blogs. Some students discussed,

“Teachers and professors are much aware about educational blog because they are writing different articles on them. Teachers had already taught us about blogs, therefore, we are aware about the purpose and uses of them.”

One respondent said,

“In my opinion, students don’t know much about blogs when they were in college. But when they came to university, they easily understand what blog is? and how to use it for the educational purposes.”

Most of the students emphasised on creating a blog, because it’s a source of information for students to work on it. They said:

“Before going to university, they have no idea about how to create blog and work on it, but in the university they got information regarding blog’s creation.”

Communication with Others

Blogs facilitate communication where every user can participate and share their ideas on different topics. Students interact and work collaboratively in blogs and get solution of study related problems. One of the participants said about interaction and communication,

“We get different opinions and interact with different people through blog. We increase our knowledge by communicating with different students and also get to know views of different teachers.”

Majority of the respondent said:

“When we started using blogs, our writing and communication skills improved, and through this our critical thinking skill enhanced.”

One participant said:

“It is pride for me to make my own blog and share my personal feelings and comments with others.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the use of educational blogs at university level and also know the students awareness about educational blogging.

Mostly, students use blogs to communicate and to discuss their views about different topics related to their studies. Duffy (2008) argued that use of educational blogs can enhance students' critical and analytical reasoning skills, learning that is crucial for both teacher and students. Blogging can attract students more in the learning (Davi et al., 2007).

Results of the current study revealed that most of the students have no awareness about blogs. They have no opportunity to build a blog on web. Therefore teachers recommended making a blog when they came to university level. After the experience, they spend more time on blogs to write different posts, see other comments and got benefits from it. Participants interact in their roles as blog writers, readers and reviewers; they write their entries and respond to criticism from peers (Pinkman, 2005).

The students thought that when they use blogs, they get more information about any subject matter. Through blogs student's critical thinking was enhanced and they could write a blog at their own. They argued that use of educational blog become more popular at university level. But most of the students were not aware of its use. However, when they reached university for their studies, they gradually become familiar with its benefits and usage.

Majority of the students had their own blogs and they frequently used it. It is because of the reason that they have awareness about blogs and they know how to use it for their educational purposes.

Research also demonstrates that blog is such a website, where a person can see other comments and share their experiences related to any topic. Students use blogs to “get to know each other by visiting and reading blogs from other students” (Downs, 2004, P.18).

Sim and Hew (2010) proposed that online web are often used to gather relevant information related to a specific and certain topic; as personal journal to record information on special life events; as course administration instrument; as assessment tools and as communication tools.

Conclusion

This is 21st century; it is important and need of time to create awareness how we can utilise and incorporate the web tools for teaching and learning in our academic culture.

Educational blogs plays an important role in student's education. The study concluded that students use educational blogs and they have good experience while studying in university. Students are much aware of the use of blogs and see different views or comments of other students. Study also found that blogging enhance critical thinking and engage students in learning. Through blogs, students become socially aware at higher education. It supports the research finding of Kang, Bonk & Kim (2011), educational blogosphere is the opportunity for students to develop a personal voice and interest in learning. It is the famous online activity among different social-media.

The study also revealed that there were some students who were not much aware of the educational blogs, and when they made blogs and have experienced it, they got lots of information on blog.

To conclude, that there should be workshops and awareness program about the use of modern technological tools, not only for the students at university level, hence, for the college level as well. University should also introduce blogs related subjects, that enhance student's capability and they can also share their ideas and knowledge with other students.

The future research could be conducted on the impact of educational blogs on student's performance and academic achievement.

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