



ISSN: 1545-679X

Information Systems Education Journal

Volume 4, Number 15

<http://isedj.org/4/15/>

March 28, 2006

In this issue:

Weblogs and Student-Centered Learning: Personal Experiences in MBA Teaching

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Recommended Citation: Forster and Tam (2006). Weblogs and Student-Centered Learning: Personal Experiences in MBA Teaching. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 4 (15). <http://isedj.org/4/15/>. ISSN: 1545-679X. (Also appears in *The Proceedings of ISECON 2004*: §3242. ISSN: 1542-7382.)

This issue is on the Internet at <http://isedj.org/4/15/>

The **Information Systems Education Journal** (ISEDJ) is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by the Education Special Interest Group (EDSIG) of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP, Chicago, Illinois). • ISSN: 1545-679X. • First issue: 8 Sep 2003. • Title: Information Systems Education Journal. Variants: IS Education Journal; ISEDJ. • Physical format: online. • Publishing frequency: irregular; as each article is approved, it is published immediately and constitutes a complete separate issue of the current volume. • Single issue price: free. • Subscription address: subscribe@isedj.org. • Subscription price: free. • Electronic access: <http://isedj.org/> • Contact person: Don Colton (editor@isedj.org)

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Weblogs and Student-Centered Learning: Personal Experiences in MBA Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the lens of Gibson's concept of affordances to explore how weblogs might encourage student-centered learning. It discusses the authors' personal experiences using weblogs in the context of an MBA-level course as course weblogs and as a case discussion weblog. Practical matters in improving the use of weblogs in the classroom, and how the affordances of weblogs are constrained by the institutions of teacher-centered learning are discussed.

Keywords: weblogs, blogging, online case discussions, affordances

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional teacher-centered education is often criticized for treating students as passive recipients of knowledge and diminishing their role as active learners rather than empowering students to become active participants in their own education. To the extent that models of teaching reflect the capabilities of underlying technologies (consider the impact of the printing press on the communication of knowledge), new technologies such as weblogs may enable new types of teaching and learning. How can these technologies be used to support student-centered learning? How will students raised in the traditions of teacher-centered learning react to such efforts?

This paper describes the authors' initiation with weblogs in teaching a semester-long MBA electronic commerce course during the Hong Kong SARS crisis (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in the second quarter of 2003. This crisis created the unexpected opportunity to engage the issue of sustaining interaction with students through online case discussion weblogs and course weblogs. During the several months that this exercise was continued weblogs provided both teacher and students a promising tool for interaction and self-expression. However, there are several issues that influenced the effective tool of weblogs: institutional context, student experience, design of online exercises, and incentives. Reflecting on these personal experiments

the authors share some insights into the affordances of weblogs and the process of using weblogs to supplement the MBA learning experience.

The paper is structured as followed. Weblogs are described in the following section and the concept of affordances is introduced. Experiences with weblogs in an MBA electronic commerce course are described. The paper closes with some thoughts on lessons learned and further research directions.

2. WHAT ARE WEBLOGS?

Weblogs are extremely diverse but as a genre share some common elements. They have short textual (e.g. Lawrence Lessig's much-cited weblog example at www.lessig.org/blog) or visual entries (www.rion.nu), dated entries, reverse chronological ordering, and frequent updates. Metaphors of diaries and journals are often used to describe weblogs although some distinctions are discussed below.

There are an increasing number of weblog providers (Table 1). Given that there is competition amongst software firms for the blog market there is some differentiation between blog development products. Weblog tools differ in look, templates, platforms, target audience, hosting and search tools.

Table 1 Weblog providers

Company	Website
Lycos	blog.tripod.lycos.com
Microsoft	asp.net
Tucows	resellers.blogware.com
Broadcast	freedownloadswindows.com
Blogbuilder	blogbuilder.org
SixApart	movabletype.org
ConstructionClub	designblogs.com
FoxFire	foxfirereporting.com
Java Sun	java.sun.com

3. AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS OF WEBLOGS

Gibson's seminal work on affordances originated from his desire to understand the problem of how perceptions of physical objects in an environment inform the behavior of animals. Here we use this concept as a lens to examine how perceptions of software and hardware objects inform the behavior of human learners experiencing these objects in the context of formal education.

There are two general types of explanation used to explain how objects and events inform action (Jones, 2003). The first is that the meanings of objects are somehow "processed" within the observer. This is referred to as indirect perception. The second is that the objects themselves have inherent meaning and are acted upon by the observer without further processing, or direct perception. Gibson's theory of affordances falls into this latter view. Simply put, "meaning is in the environment" (Chemero, 2003).

Gibson defined an affordance of an object as "a specific combination of the properties in its substance and its surfaces taken with reference to an animal" (Gibson, 1977; Jones, 2003). Stoffregen (2003) argues that in general, a multiplicity of affordances of an object exist concurrently from which the perceiver can choose which affordances are relevant.

Clearly there are some significant differences between Gibson's original objectives and our own. Gibson was interested in physical objects, while here we are interested in objects that are not only physical but contain an element of electronic design. The object itself is not static thus changing the nature of the interaction between observer and object. In this discussion the animal is the human animal, and the context is not "natural" but the context of formal education. Norman (X) popularized the notion of affordances in the field of human-computer interaction in his popular work *The Design of Everyday Things*, although later he laments the misrepresentation the concept received as it became commonly used.

First, weblogs are not independent objects but are built on Internet and Web protocols and thus inherit affordances of the Internet. This is consistent with Stoffregen's (2003) concept of nested affordances. Drawing upon Ryder and Wilson's discussion of Internet affordances, weblogs afford immediate-ness, global-ness, and connected-ness for bloggers.

Immediate-ness means that blog postings are available to readers on the weblog as soon as they are posted. This immediate-ness has implications for the consciousness of both the writer and for the reader. The writer has the opportunity to express instantaneous reactions to events, to publish thoughts while they are fresh, spontaneous and uncrafted. The reader also has the opportunity to react to these posts in a similar manner.

Weblogs also inherit from the Internet an affordance for *global-ness* for both writers and readers. Bloggers are cognizant that their postings will be accessible to a worldwide readership of familiar and unfamiliar readers changing their consciousness from a diary's personal expression in a private space to personal expression in a public space. This global-ness also enables worldwide readership and participation from across cultures.

Weblogs also inherit from the Internet their *connected-ness*. Weblogs, as with all websites, can link to, or be linked to from any other weblog or website on the Internet.

Weblogs have been compared to paper and online diaries and journals. They are similar in some respects in that they share a textual nature, chronological ordering and personal nature of content. In other respects weblogs are unique and we propose engaged-ness and authoritativeness as unique affordances of weblogs.

Engaged-ness is the affordance of weblogs that invites interaction between the writer and the reader. Readers are invited through the design of weblogs to comment on each entry, recent and past. Most weblog tools provide calendars to mark entries, search tools, lists of latest activities. These encourage interaction with postings across the entire weblog.

Weblogs also have an affordance of *authoritativeness* to the blogger over the tone, continuity, and discussion. Each blogger is also, in a sense, writer, webmaster, and editor. This reassures the blogger that they retain some control over the interaction lowering the barrier to self-expression on the part of the author. This affordance also counters somewhat a characteristic of the Internet that promotes anonymity and reduces the power of users to control behavior. Consider how early discussions on bulletin boards were often railroaded by flammers or current problems with spam. Credibility is more difficult to establish online as many cues of experience and authority are removed. Retaining control over the weblog enables the author to shape their online persona and establish and protect their credibility.

4. WEBLOGS IN EDUCATION

Traditional education has been criticized for inhibiting active student learning. The role of the teacher in traditional education has been as the keeper of knowledge. In this model the student is a passive recipient of knowledge, exploring in an environment created by the teacher.

We argue that the affordances of immediate-ness, global-ness, connected-ness, engaged-ness and authoritativeness are consistent with the aims of student-centered learning.

Ryder and Wilson (1996) see a trend in education towards distributed and collaborative models of learning where the design of the Internet affords public expression and frustrates the modern educator to place artificial constraints on the student in order to control and manage the educational environment.

Carraher (2003) proposes that weblogs can address two shortcomings in the education process: constraints on students as active producers of knowledge, and the “firewall” around the classroom inhibiting interaction with the environment.

The Internet affordances of global-ness, connected-ness and immediate-ness enable changes in student behavior to access knowledge outside the bounds of the classroom. And they afford the teacher (meaning educational institutions) the opportunity to provide students with contemporary global content.

Weblog tools with their affordances of engaged-ness and authoritativeness create the possibility of increased student interaction increasing their participation in their education and learning from other students. Stiler and Phillko (2003) discuss how blogging increases student enthusiasm in journaling, increases quality and quantity of student output, increases teacher-mediated input, and provides a platform for web-based learning.

Clearly lacking in the Internet is control and authority over content and behavior of which spamming, hacking and flaming are cases in point. Weblogs provide the teacher greater control over the content of their blog and the structure of the interaction with students in the blog both of which increases teacher confidence in their control.

The potential of these affordances has been recognized in the educational community. Weblogs have been used as student diaries, teacher journals, learning logs (Wagner, 2003), travelogue (Oravec, 2002), portfolios (Halavais, 2004), and research blogs. Some universities are actively promoting the use of weblogs. For instance, the University of Minnesota libraries have started a project based on Moveable Type that offers a weblog service to faculty and students to “support teaching and learning, scholarly communication, and individual expression” (UThink, 2004). Such activities legitimize the use of this new technology in the context of education.

5. PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH WEBLOGS

In 2003 the health concerns of SARS affected normal teaching during the spring semester at all universities in Hong Kong. Universities responded to the health concerns of students and faculty by creating some new rules and by temporarily removing others. Instructors were required to use face masks in classrooms, student attendance became optional, faculty were given flexibility in regard to when and how courses would be conducted, incentive systems were changed (teaching evaluations were only included at the discretion of the instructor), and increased resources for online education were made available. It was no longer business as usual, and the SARS crisis freed faculty and students from the normal mode of teaching.

It was during this period the first author began to experiment with the use of weblogs in MBA teaching, first as a replacement, and then a supplement to in-class teaching. These experiments were aimed at maintaining or enhancing teacher-student and student-student interaction using weblogs as a replacement for classroom case teaching and subsequently as a supplement to classroom teaching.

MBA courses, in general, emphasize high levels of interaction in the classroom. There are several reasons for this. First, MBA students are expected to learn skills that make them effective managers, such as leadership and decision-making. Interaction helps develop their communication skills required to communicate effectively and effect change (April, 1999). Second, many students use the MBA as a vehicle to change careers. Interaction helps these students learn the “language” of business and a place to experiment safely with new behaviors. There is an expectation amongst

MBA students that there will be a strong incentive for participation in their courses.

The authors used weblogs to support interaction in two different applications during SARS. First, course blogs were used to support regular interaction in the absence of a regular class schedule. Second, a weblog was used to support an online case discussion.

Movable Type was used for the creation of the weblogs. Movable Type offered a relatively easy installation, good documentation, a low learning curve and customizable templates.

5.1. Course Blogs

Course blogs are relatively common so we will not dwell on these much. The first author has now used weblogs to support four MBA courses. After some experimentation there is on a standard layout for the content of the course weblogs (Figure 1). Each weblog covers course information, slides, videos, links to online magazines and journals, and the course blog as centerpiece.

A key function of the course blog is to encourage students to engage in discussions and explorations that are outside the direct grading incentives of the course. Course blogs can do this through discussions of current topics, providing interesting links, extending classroom discussions online, and creating low-threshold opportunities for students to interact.

There are several challenges that have arisen in the use of course blogs.

- Keeping the blog updated, dynamic and fresh is always an issue when the instructors' schedules get busy. If the dynamism is lost, the students frequency of visiting the blog will rapidly drop, as will the benefits of interaction. Regaining the students' attention becomes more difficult after that.
- Similarly, in order to interact on the course blog students must first come to the site. Motivating busy students to visit the course blog frequently is a matter of creating necessity and making the visit to the site a positive experience.
- On public blogs there is the positive side that outsiders might add constructively to a discussion or that overseas colleagues or experts can be invited to participate. However, there is the negative side that outsiders might make unwelcome comments on course blogs. Careful administration can reduce the risk of unwanted blog spam. The affordance of global-ness and immediate-ness applies not only to the community of students but to all users of the Internet.

Next we discuss an experiment with weblog case discussion.

5.2. Case Discussion Blog

The case method is a teaching method commonly used in MBA courses. In case discussions, teacher-student and student-student interaction is seen as a critical to the learning experience. Several online tools have been developed that attempt to support online case discussions. This is an illustration of the use of a case discussion weblog for the case of Siebel Systems (Marti et al., 1999).

The affordances of weblogs suggest that the use of a case weblog might increase student interest, invite greater self-expression, enable student access to Internet resources, provide a platform for shared-knowledge, and decrease reliance on the instructor as the gate-keeper to knowledge.

The first screen of the case discussion blog is shown in Figure 2. The complete case discussion blog is available online at <http://ihome.ust.hk/~pwfblog/general>.

The printed case was provided to students prior to the online discussion. Instructions for the case discussion process were provided on the course blog. The case discussion was divided into nine questions that developed the main themes in the case. Each case question was presented as an individual entry in the weblog to which students could post their comments. About five students were assigned to each of the nine questions. Students were encouraged to build upon each other's postings in the instructions. Students were asked to respond to their questions in a window of three days from the start of the online discussion. The students assigned the last question reviewing the entire case discussion were given two additional days. In addition to the specific case questions, a general discussion area was provided to which all students could post. The class participation grade was used as the incentive to participate. There was no grading of individual posts or their quality, credit was given for making a sincere attempt at posting. All students participated and all received credit.

Immediately after the case discussion closed there was a meta-discussion on the course blog about the experience of the online case discussion motivated by a student's e-mail about the process. Here are a few key points from the discussion. (NB: These quotes have not been edited for spelling or grammar. Please note that English is the 2nd or 3rd language for most students.)

First, some students found the online case discussion beneficial. It increased their participation, gave them an archive of the discussion, and they could read comments selectively. Students could access the weblog when and where they chose.

One student hinted that the weblog discussion was better at drawing out participation than in class.

"Speaking for myself (and perhaps other less active speakers in class), I think I'm actually more motivated to participate in the discussion as we all get a fair chance and time."—Alex

The weblog discussion was highly successful in terms of volume of material. Students posted long postings (there were no guidelines given for length) many with links to other web materials. However, navigating the volume of material created in the discussion (over 30 printed pages) became a problem for several students. This appeared to be particularly onerous for part-time students. The problem did not appear navigation per se, but staying current with the discussion.

"It is also frustrating for the reader who have read a couple postings and found that the scrollbar haven't moved a bit after pressing the pageDown key several times. It's like SARS, you don't know how long it will take before you will reach the end."

Moreover, if you visit the page two times: once at the middle of the week and once at the end, you may lost track of which comment you have read." -- Albert

It was not possible to ascertain whether after posting their own discussion responses whether students tried to keep track of the remaining discussion. Some students did participate further in the general discussion area but few voluntarily followed on previous posts.

In addition to there being a lot of materials, it was noted that much of the discussion was repetitive or redundant, or - as some students put it - there was no "rubbish" filter.

"There is no differentiation on quality of input. Participation point should be awarded to those with quality input. What is the differentiation between excellent comment and rubbish. I am not saying there is rubbish here, but there is no mechanism to prevent such and reward those excellent comments." -- Tony

Several students objected to the rubbish remark, saying that there was just as much rubbish in the classroom and it was easier to filter out the rubbish online.

"I don't think reading 30 pages of comments is a tough assignment. I was assigned to comment on Q9 but I think it would be beneficial for me to read all the comments and understand all the different issues surrounding CRM, just like all keen learners would do, and I believe most of us would read all those comments as well."

From my point of view, I think the discussion was better online (although I do miss all the interactions and discussions in class) because as Alex pointed out, I can skim through the rubbish instead of listening to them and fall asleep during class time." -- Kelvin

Student also noted that the role of the teacher as discussion facilitator changed in the weblog discussion.

"One major issue I have about the online discussion board is the lack of immediate feedback from the Professor. Whenever we make a comment in class, the Prof could immediately add his comment so that we know whether it make good sense or not. The comment made may sometimes lead to further relevant discussion which otherwise cannot be done without the prof being a facilitator and providing immediate feedback." -- Arthur

This reflects concern about the role of the teacher as discussion leader and discriminator. The aim was for students to learn from each other's postings. These comments seem to be calling for the teacher to identify the "good" postings for them to read. Together with the previous comment on participation grades also suggests concern for the role of the teacher as the key authority figure. i.e. Who's in charge?

6. LESSONS LEARNED

The objective in exploring weblogs in our classrooms was to use them to increase student-centered learning by playing on the affordances of weblogs to increase student participation, student-to-student interaction, and increased self-expression.

There is some evidence from this experience that weblogs may be useful in increasing interaction in MBA courses, as complements to classroom discussions, or in online case discussions. However, the experience suggests that while weblogs may afford a more student-centered learning experience, there are many further considerations in using them effectively.

While MBAs might demand more interaction in their education, and weblogs may afford interaction, the preference of MBAs for in-class interaction may inhibit opportunities to initiate weblog case discussions in the regular MBA curriculum. The unusual circumstances of SARS freed the authors from the usual institutional constraints that might have inhibited this exploration during a normal curriculum. In the subsequent semesters the strong preference of students for in-class discussion prevented continuing the use of case discussion weblogs.

The design of the online case discussion is extremely important. In reflecting upon this example there are several things that would have improved the experience. First, the case questions themselves were derived from the provided case questions. While the questions are good, better questions could have been designed that encouraged discussion between the students and explicitly encouraged interaction between group members online. Second, the workload should have been distributed more evenly so that students did not perceive

themselves as unfairly burdened. Third, the instructor should have stayed actively engaged as a moderator in the general discussion instead of staying hands off. Finally, the instructor should have “wrapped up” the case and pulled together the strands of the case discussion. These activities are very time-consuming and represent the need for a different mind-set when going online.

The tone of the instructor’s postings is important for encouraging interaction. The early course blog postings were more teacher-centered, top-down and not inviting engagement. Later postings were more informal, spontaneous, shorter and more effective. That is, while an affordance of weblogs is engaged-ness, the content of the weblog also contributes to the engaged-ness.

That some students felt that the authority figure was absent in the weblog case discussion may reflect several things. The first is that the way the case discussion was managed did not include an active instructor commenting and filtering posts as they came through. This was delegated to the students themselves. A second thought is that it is difficult to establish “authority” on the Internet as it is a very egalitarian medium. The egalitarian-ness of the Internet erodes the authority of the instructor and increases the authority of the student. Third, the concerns of the students for the active hand of the instructor may reflect in part their long experience with teacher-centered learning.

This last point raises an interesting insight into affordances. Affordances fall into the branch of phenomenology where objects themselves have inherent meanings, and that action takes place as part of the affordance without “processing” within the observer.

However, that some students objected to the absence of the teacher suggests that while an affordance of weblogs might be self expression, how this affordance plays out in action also depends on the institutional context of the weblog. That is, affordances of weblogs meet the social institutions of teacher-centered learning. Students may manifest different reactions to the affordances depending on their particular experiences with teacher-centered teaching. Thus, eliciting the desired outcome of increased student-centered learning requires not only the careful design of weblogs, but addressing the institutional context of teaching.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Because this paper discusses personal experiences using weblogs, the conclusions are limited. This paper contributes towards further understanding of weblogs and student-centered learning in two ways. First it uses the lens of affordances to identify unique characteristics of weblogs that afford student-centered learning behavior. Second, the paper describes a novel

application of weblogs as online case discussions blogs. These have the potential to be effective in MBA teaching where interaction is particularly important. The experiences in using weblogs in the MBA classroom have been encouraging, indicating that weblogs may indeed support interaction as course blogs and case discussion blogs. However there are clearly many more steps in learning to use weblogs effectively as teaching tools. Finally, from a theory perspective, the use of affordances may help identify the space of possible behaviors by students. However, the space of actual behaviors is limited by the institutions which operate in the learning environment of the students. Further understanding of the complex interaction between the design affordances and institutional constraints may cast light on how to most effectively manage these new technologies in the classroom.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all the students of ISMT532 in the spring semester of 2003 for their enthusiasm and contributions online and offline that inspired this paper.

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Figure 1 Electronic commerce course blog

e-blog

Here are some thoughts about things that have happened this semester - and what a semester it has been - war, SARS, university closures, the HK economy. It's a collection of random ideas and it would be very nice if you'd leave a comment on any of the postings! Thanks for visiting.

[« About that online case discussion](#) | [Main](#)

April 28, 2003

ARTHUR IN THE NEWS

Our very own Arthur Chow has some comments in [an article in the SCMP](#) about the increase in online shopping as a consequence of SARS.

I wonder how much of the increase will stick after SARS dies down?

Posted by pforster at April 28, 2003 06:59 PM

Comments

At the beginning of the SARS, every news sounded negative: dropping consumer markets, decreasing business in restaurants, cancellation of tours, etc. Certainly the biggest is not the SARS, but the loss of confidence of the Hong Kong. However, with the number of newly infections stably dropped every day (of course it is still too early to conclude anything as of now), people started to think more positively. This is e-commerce course, and I just want to mention about the related observations.

One of the benefits brought by SARS was of course e-commerce transaction, more particularly B2C. The figures told it already. Personally thinking, B2C will become more popular and SARS serves as a good chance for HK people to attempt it. Therefore it may drop later, but still will stabilize at the level higher than pre-SARS time.

Another benefit is for those IT consultancy companies who assist SME in "Work@Home" solution. The sense of crisis has been increased significantly. And SARS perhaps helps expedite Hong kong to transit to really the IT port, hence more competitive among the world market.

Figure 2 Case discussion blog

ISMT532 Case Discussion

April 22, 2003

INTRODUCTION TO THE SIEBEL SYSTEMS CASE

This business case study describes Siebel Systems, Inc. situation in mid-1999, as CEO Tom Siebel guides his company along a path of furious expansion. We will use this case to discuss the convergence of CRM and the Internet.

In order to get the most out of this case please read [this article by Russell Winer in the California Management Review, 2001](#) (required reading). Further background on CRM metrics, software, costs, etc. can be found at [CIO magazine](#).

Please comment on the discussion point with your name. Try to build on previous comments rather than just repeating so the discussion is more engaging. Then follow the developing discussion over the next few days and feel free to contribute beyond your specific comments.

(Post general case comments here)

Posted by pforster at 12:34 PM | [Comments \(14\)](#)

DISCUSSION POINT 1

What is the "value proposition" (the target market, the benefits to the target market, and the price to the target market) of CRM? Are these expensive systems really worth the price to the target market? Is the target market benefiting from these systems?

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April 2003

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