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Weblogs: Technology for Instruction and Learning

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ABSTRACT

As weblogs, in its nascent state, are becoming one of the most participated online activities after web surfing, email, and instant messaging, it has been considered more of a trend in net broadcasting than just a fad. The emergence of bloggers and their behavioral models has opened up new research opportunities in many perspectives. This article attempts are twofold; 1) demonstrate how weblogs can be beneficial to educational instruction and learning and 2) support such argument by analyzing the students' perceptions of using weblog as a knowledge distribution method in class. These perceptions are divided into three different segments of usability, collaboration, and performance evaluation. The findings of the survey indicate that weblogs have the potential to enhance the students' learning experience.

Keywords weblogs, blogs, blogging, IT education, team collaboration, online teaching

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, blogs have become a prominent communication tool for the online community. It was estimated that there would be 10.3 million weblogs created by the end of 2004 (Perseus, 2004). Today, there are 80,000 Weblogs created every day (Morrissey, 2005). As more and more people realize the convenience of sharing their views and experiences using weblogs, it is suggested that weblogs can contribute much more than just a forum where political gurus express their opinions of the government. The term "weblog" is the combination of 'we' and 'blog'. As the name itself indicates, it is a journalism approach that is available through public network and can be accessed by, technically, the entire Internet community.

There are various uses of weblogs. One of the most promising ways is the delivery of educational content via a web browser over the Internet or Intranet anytime and anywhere. A number of higher education institutions, such as University of Michigan, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Purdue University, have increased their usage of weblogs in classrooms. The purpose of this article is to direct focus of the IS community to: describe the technologies; show how these technologies improve learning and instruction; present and interpret the findings obtained through a survey of students from various educational backgrounds. More specifically, this research will investigate the perceived value of weblogs among MIS students in order to support the assumption that blogging contributes towards knowledge sharing activity in education.

WEBLOG: OVERVIEW & CURRENT STATUS

There are numerous definitions and descriptions of a weblog. In this context of discussion, the authors adopted the usages of the following definitions: An amateur website that provides news, information and opinions to audiences drawn by shared interests. It offers valuable knowledge management and communication tools in organizations, physical or virtual (Grossman, 2004) (Rosencrance, 2004). The bulletin board system (BBS) is a close relative to weblog and has long existed in the cyber network community. Although they have much in common, a weblog has distinctive qualities that allow it to surpass BBS as the more favorable online discussion media. Compared to BBS, weblog is more dynamic, responsive, and topic-oriented. All of these features can be principally contributed to RSS, the Really Simple Syndication protocol. A brief historical illustration of weblogs' evolution is provided in Figure 1.

Really Simple Syndication (RSS)

The debate over the original developer of RSS remains along with the evolvement of weblogs. The conceptual origin of RSS can be traced back to 1997, when Ramanathan V. Guha invented Resource Description Framework (RDF) to store meta-data information. Later in 1999, Netscape created an XML based technology, Rich Site Summary (RSS 0.91), which is the RSS we know today. The brief evolvement of RSS is described as:

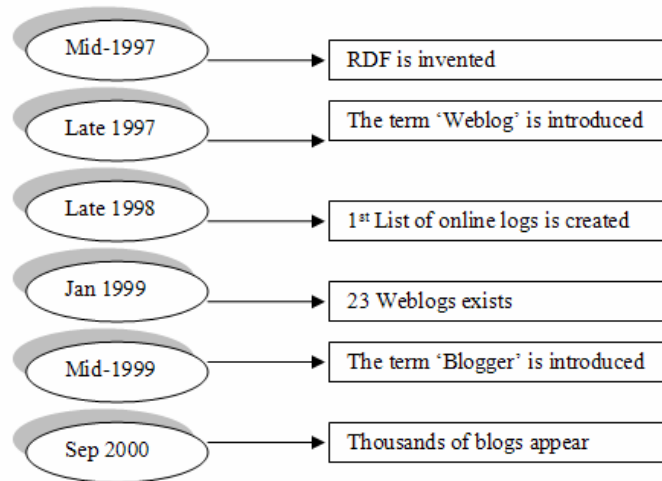


Figure 1. A Chronicle View of Weblog

- Rich Site Summary (RSS 0.91), by Netscape company;
- RDF Site Summary (RSS 0.9 and 1.0), by a group led by Rael Dornfest at O'Reilly;
- Really Simple Syndication (RSS 2.0), released by Harvard Law School under a Creative Commons license.

By utilizing 'Push' like technology, RSS updates blog users of the latest posted content. According to Blood (2002), there is a 3-step process involved in weblogging: scouring, filtering, and posting. The RSS technology plays a critical role in the first two processes by automating any updated news and customizing requested information feeding, hence affecting the third process, posting. There are two types of RSS service enabler: web-based service and program-based software. The former is a service located in a remote web server and the latter is an application installed in the client's PC. Today, both weblogs and online discussion forums adopt RSS technology, either web-based or software applications, to increase the number of their respective audiences. For example, the University of Michigan requires students in its Business Information Technology (BIT 320) course not only to participate in blogging but also to install Really Simple Syndication (RSS) software to dynamically connect with the entire class. Relevant course updates, such as new assignments, are published through RSS. By enforcing students to subscribe to the RSS service, a course instructor motivates his/her students to fully take advantage of weblog activities.

Comparison of current weblog services

As shown in Table 1, there is a summarization comparing weblog site providers in terms of services. The information, obtained from each provider's website, is valid as of January 30th, 2006.

	Cost	Numbers of Blog Limited	Numbers of Pictures Upload	Extent of Customization
Blogger.com	Free except for premium service	No Limit	300 MB	High
Tribe.net	Free	No Limit	80 MB	Moderate
Crimson Blog	Free/Pop-Ups	No Limit	100 MB	Moderate
Weblogger.com	Not Free	No Limit	No Limit	High
EasyJournal.com	Free	No Limit	No Limit	Moderate
Blogsource.com	Free	No Limit	No Limit	Moderate

Table 1. Comparison of Services among Different Weblog Providers

The major income sources of these weblog service providers consist of advertisements and commercials; therefore, bloggers are enticed with a relatively low, or even zero, cost. Registration of a weblog service is simple and fast, which is a major plus for college instructors, since they can spend more energy and time on designing the site content. The process is illustrated in the Figure 2 diagram.

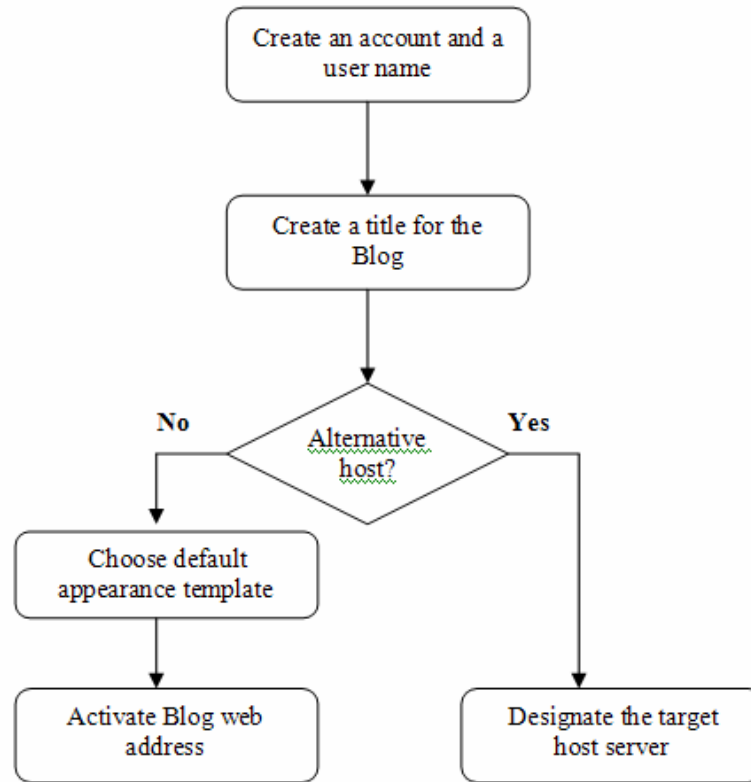


Figure 2. Flow Chart of Creating a Weblog Account Using Blogger.com as an example

WEBLOG IN MIS COURSE

The primary purpose of this article is to investigate the role played by weblogs in Management Information Systems (MIS) courses. The authors want to prove that the delivery of information can be enhanced through adoption of emerging new technologies. According to Callahan et al (2000), it has been discovered that the traditional lecturing is one of the least efficient methods of educating. There are many drawbacks of lecturing in-class, such as non-anonymous critiques and taking turns to contribute comments (Aiken et al, 1996). Our study indicates that the integration between weblog collaboration and traditional lectures can address the mentioned shortcomings of in-class lectures and improve the learning/instruction experiences in MIS courses. In order to illustrate this idea, the authors have designed Table 2 comparing weblog versus other major knowledge management technologies in the discussion context of knowledge distribution.

	Flexibility	Distribution Speed	Information Richness	Availability	Topic Orientation	Degree of Interaction
Weblog	High	Moderate	High	High	Strong	High
Email	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Weak	Moderate
BBS	Low	Moderate	High	High	Weak	High
Instant Message	Moderate	Real Time Fast	Low	Moderate	Weak	High
Homepage	Very Low	Slow	High	High	Strong	Low

Table 2. Comparison of Different Information/Knowledge Distribution Technologies

As shown in Table 2, the ratings of evaluation attributes between a weblog and BBS are close due to the fact that they are characteristically similar. However, BBS, compared to weblog, lacks strong topic orientation. In order to attract more visitors, BBS usually contains numerous discussion subjects or topics. For instance, a BBS that is featured with discussions of cellular technology might include topics such as cell phones brands comparison, service providers discussion, and debate of CDMA/GSM superiority. Anyone who is interested in one or more topics can contribute his/her opinion whenever possible. Although the diversified content of discussion is a driving force for the growth of BBS, it is not appropriate in class collaboration, which requires a medium that is concentrated on a certain topic and under control of the course instructor. A weblog created by teacher can be focused on the topic(s) covered by that specific class, in which the teaching staff has more control. Therefore, weblog has a stronger topic orientation over BBS. Moreover, RSS achieves a more dynamic aspect of weblogs with added value regarding close communications in classes. The authors rated BBS as 'low' flexibility because it takes more time and experience in setting up services in BBS than weblogs. Instructors cannot afford to deal with time-consuming techniques needed to create, maintain, and supervise an online forum. On the other hand, setting up a course-related weblog takes no more than a few minutes, and it is fairly easy to manage online activities. Although a homepage can also provide a focus of topic, it has been rated negatively in other critical attributes, such as Flexibility, Distribution speed (refreshing the web page is slower than weblog), and Degree of Interaction (unless utilizing the BBS function). Instant Messaging (IM) is the fastest way to communicate because it is a real-time application, provided that the user has signed in. Nevertheless, not only does IM lack the richness of information, but also is less flexible and available than weblog. For instance, in a networked computer lab environment, the administrator might block the port of IM due to systems' security consideration. However, it is very unlikely that a port for web browsing will be blocked. In addition, unlike IM, a weblog does not require proprietary software to communicate but can operate on any industrial standard web browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Netscape).

Therefore, the authors' conclusion is that weblogs are the most appropriate method to be used in combination with in-class lectures to enhance the education performance in MIS courses. Many educational institutions have already brought weblogs into college classrooms. Some of these institutions are shown in Table 3.

Universities	Course Weblog Site
University of Southern California	http://www.usca.edu/english/fornes/101f03/
University of Michigan	http://bit320.bus.umich.edu/F04/default.do?target=schedule
Harvard University	http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/monkeybrain/2003/09/24
Purdue University	http://joe.english.purdue.edu/fa05/damore2/
Ashland University	http://personal.ashland.edu/~dschreck/educ232/assign.html

Table 3. A Sample List of Institutions Adopting Weblog in Class

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK & HYPOTHESES

In this section, we have constructed a theoretical framework proposing that the values offered by weblogs can be integrated into in-class education for a better student learning experience. The framework is described in Figure 3.

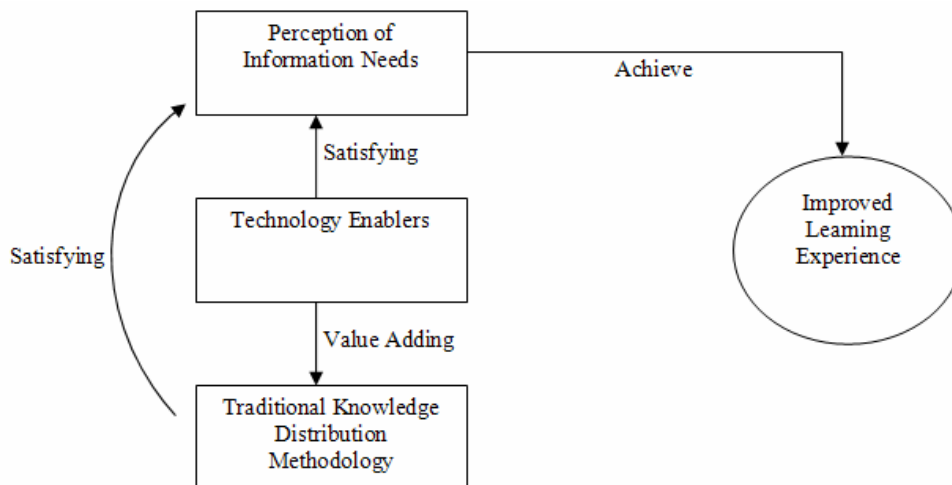


Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Weblog's Contribution to Education

In the above model, there are three driving forces that affect better learning experience in MIS courses: Perception of Information Needs, Technology Enablers, and Traditional Knowledge Distribution Methodology. The perception of information needs is derived from the student’s motivation of learning. The methodology of traditional knowledge distribution consists of in-class lectures, remote collaborations via communication tools such as phone and Internet, and student interaction activities. But the limitations of traditional methodology hinder the student’s knowledge gaining process. There is a time limit for the lecture, which results in another limited scope of knowledge delivery. This is where weblogs can fill the gap by providing various technological advantages to complement the old method. The three interacting components on the left of the conceptual model eventually provides for a better learning experience.

Based on the previous model, the authors have raised the hypothesis that will be tested using the data collected later in this research. By incorporating weblogs into the traditional knowledge sharing process, students would have a higher degree of satisfaction with the educational experience. The hypothesis will be examined through the empirical study in Data Analysis section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

To test the research questions, a research instrument was given to approximately 150 students at a major academic institution (usable responses of 143 (see Table 4)). No monetary incentives or bonus points was offered for participation. It is the authors’ intention to increase the diversity of subjects’ background by including both graduate and undergraduate level students as well as those who major MIS and who do not. All of them, however, are enrolled in MIS courses. The nature of MIS course content and the characteristics of weblog technology would establish an ideal foundation for observing participants’ perceptions of utilizing weblogs in an educational environment.

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	84	58.7%
Female	59	41.2%
Total	143	100.0%
Level of Study	Number	Percentage
Graduate	22	15.4%
Undergraduate	121	84.6%
Total	143	100.0%

Table 4. Characteristics of Observing Subjects

Research Instrument

During the 2006 spring semester, we conducted surveys in undergraduate and graduate level classes to capture the students’ perceptions of using weblog as an enhancement to their learning experiences. The instrument has been designed to be highly related with the authors’ research topic and pretests have been done for the purpose of content validity.

Each participant received a one-page questionnaire on the perceived value of weblogs. The questionnaire of the general format is Likert-type items with 5-point response scales. Participants were asked to complete this anonymous survey. The collected data was entered into a computer-aided statistical program to address issues such as the correlation among measuring attributes and their power explaining the dependent variable – the overall perception of whether weblogs can enhance their learning experience in class. The survey is attached as an appendix to this paper.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of the data analysis is to empirically test the conceptual model, which is presented in Figure 3, as well as the hypothesis raised in our research design. We have utilized the Regression Analysis technique provided in SPSS software and obtained adequate evidence to support our hypothesis. In addition, we attempted to discover the differences of the user perception based on categorical variables of gender, years of experience using weblog, and study level. The interpretations of findings will be organized as the following: the satisfaction of statistical assumption is discussed first, followed by the findings obtained from regression analysis; finally we present the results from conducting multivariate analysis of variances.

Before the collected data were analyzed, we must examine the statistical assumption of normal distribution in order to validate the analysis technique adopted. For both regression and multivariate analysis, the criterion of normal distribution must be somehow satisfied to generate dependable results. In our situation, we have obtained normally distributed sample data that can be seen in Figure 4. Moreover, we have also generated the normal probability plot that examines whether the residuals from the regression are normally distributed. As our diagram in Figure 5 shows that the points in the plot approximately formulate a straight line hence the Normal P-P Plot provides another evidence of normal distribution.

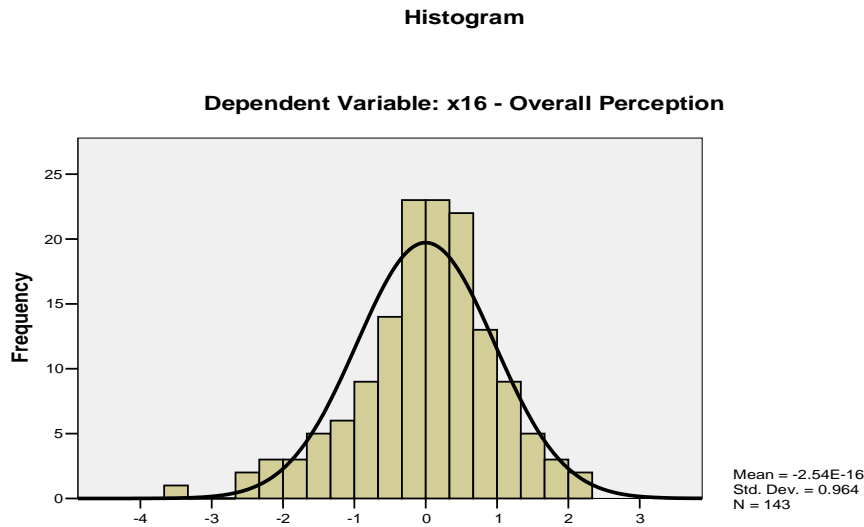


Figure 5. The Normal Distribution of Data

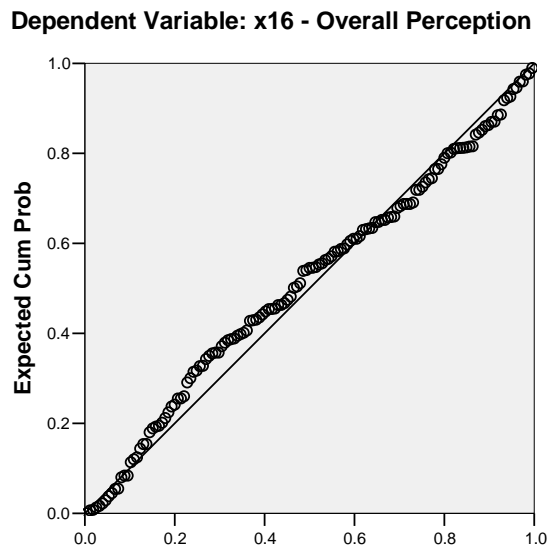


Figure 6. The Normal P-P Plot of Dependent Variable

Since it is our argument that weblog, as a complementary method, would improve students learning experience in class. Therefore, the dependent variable is assigned as ‘Overall Perception of Weblog’s Efficacy in Class’. According to our findings generated from regression analysis (Table 5), we have obtained a F-value of 10.685 indicating that the explained variance is greater than unexplained variance at a significant level of .001. In the table of coefficient, we have found that the following variables significant in terms of explaining the variances of X16 – Overall Perception of Using Weblog, the

dependent variable: X3 is a variable of the study level that contains undergraduate and graduate. From the findings we can argue that the level of study has significant impact against how the observing subject perceives usage of weblog. This point is also supported by the findings in MANOVA study. The other significant independent variables are X5, X11, and X14 with significance level of .021, .002, and .029 respectively. It can be inferred that the helpful information provided by weblog (X5), up-to-date information available in weblog (X11), and performance judgment based on blogging participation(X14) are highly correlated with how students consider weblog in terms of enhancing their learning experience. A more comprehensive description of regression coefficients is provided in Table 6.

ANOVA^b

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	71.096	13	5.469	10.685	.000 ^a
	Residual	66.023	129	.512		
	Total	137.119	142			

a. Predictors: (Constant), x14 - Fair to Judge Performance, x2 - Gender, x10 - User Friendly, x6 - Share with Others, x1 - Years Using Blog, x11 - Up to Date Info, x8 - More Efficient, x3 - Study Level, x4 - Adequate Info, x13 - Noticable Contribution, x12 - Convenient, x9 - Easy Navigate, x5 - Helpful Info

b. Dependent Variable: x16 - Overall Perception

Table 5. Analysis of Variances

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.535	.536		-.998	.320
	x1 - Years Using Blog	-.091	.076	-.083	-1.195	.234
	x2 - Gender	-.107	.130	-.054	-.821	.413
	x3 - Study Level	.550	.213	.203	2.582	.011
	x4 - Adequate Info	.091	.108	.084	.841	.402
	x5 - Helpful Info	.257	.110	.234	2.343	.021
	x6 - Share with Others	.014	.082	.013	.172	.864
	x8 - More Efficient	.043	.076	.043	.567	.572
	x9 - Easy Navigate	.087	.110	.072	.787	.433
	x10 - User Friendly	.008	.122	.006	.062	.950
	x11 - Up to Date Info	.281	.089	.249	3.162	.002
	x12 - Convenient	.141	.088	.145	1.611	.110
	x13 - Noticable Contribution	.103	.093	.093	1.112	.268
	x14 - Fair to Judge Performance	.148	.067	.152	2.202	.029

a. Dependent Variable: x16 - Overall Perception

Table 6. Individual Explanatory Power of Measurements

Several patterns have been discovered in the process of multivariate analysis of the variances (MANOVA). Firstable, there is a significant correlation between subjects' experience level of using weblog and how they perceive the benefits of weblog. In Table 7, the significant level for X1 alone achieves .05 across different measurements. Such finding is consistent with the test between subjects effect. It can be inferred that as the student's experience of using weblog increases, s/he has a more positive

perception of using weblog to improve in-class learning. Secondly, X3, the level of study, indicates that graduate students, comparing to undergraduates, generally intends to recognize the benefits brought by weblog in terms of learning experience enhancement. The significance levels of X3 estimated by different techniques are also consistent in Table 7.

There are also several limitations in this empirical study: The ratio of graduate level students and undergraduate student is disproportional. There are 121 undergraduate students vs. 22 graduate students (Table 7). Such unbalanced sample data might generate undesired outcomes in explaining the relationship between variable X3 and other variables. Another limitation lies in the multicollinearity among the variables. In regression analysis, the occurrence of any multicollinearity is more than likely a non-preferred phenomenon from a statistical standpoint because it hinders researchers from understanding and predicting model construction. Nevertheless, interesting patterns might be discovered through multicollinearity from a behavioral perspective, which is another potential research issue. An example in this situation would be the correlation between X4, adequate information, and X5, helpful information.

Multivariate Tests ^c

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.955	257.096 ^a	10.000	120.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.045	257.096 ^a	10.000	120.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	21.425	257.096 ^a	10.000	120.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	21.425	257.096 ^a	10.000	120.000	.000
x1	Pillai's Trace	.334	1.528	30.000	366.000	.040
	Wilks' Lambda	.693	1.562	30.000	352.900	.033
	Hotelling's Trace	.403	1.595	30.000	356.000	.027
	Roy's Largest Root	.275	3.361 ^b	10.000	122.000	.001
x2	Pillai's Trace	.075	.969 ^a	10.000	120.000	.474
	Wilks' Lambda	.925	.969 ^a	10.000	120.000	.474
	Hotelling's Trace	.081	.969 ^a	10.000	120.000	.474
	Roy's Largest Root	.081	.969 ^a	10.000	120.000	.474
x3	Pillai's Trace	.143	1.995 ^a	10.000	120.000	.040
	Wilks' Lambda	.857	1.995 ^a	10.000	120.000	.040
	Hotelling's Trace	.166	1.995 ^a	10.000	120.000	.040
	Roy's Largest Root	.166	1.995 ^a	10.000	120.000	.040
x1 * x2	Pillai's Trace	.204	.888	30.000	366.000	.640
	Wilks' Lambda	.808	.884	30.000	352.900	.646
	Hotelling's Trace	.222	.879	30.000	356.000	.653
	Roy's Largest Root	.118	1.435 ^b	10.000	122.000	.173
x1 * x3	Pillai's Trace	.239	1.057	30.000	366.000	.389
	Wilks' Lambda	.777	1.057	30.000	352.900	.389
	Hotelling's Trace	.267	1.057	30.000	356.000	.389
	Roy's Largest Root	.163	1.987 ^b	10.000	122.000	.040
x2 * x3	Pillai's Trace	.092	1.213 ^a	10.000	120.000	.290
	Wilks' Lambda	.908	1.213 ^a	10.000	120.000	.290
	Hotelling's Trace	.101	1.213 ^a	10.000	120.000	.290
	Roy's Largest Root	.101	1.213 ^a	10.000	120.000	.290
x1 * x2 * x3	Pillai's Trace	.038	.468 ^a	10.000	120.000	.908
	Wilks' Lambda	.962	.468 ^a	10.000	120.000	.908
	Hotelling's Trace	.039	.468 ^a	10.000	120.000	.908
	Roy's Largest Root	.039	.468 ^a	10.000	120.000	.908

a. Exact statistic

b. The statistic is an upper bound on F that yields a lower bound on the significance level.

c. Design: Intercept+x1+x2+x3+x1 * x2+x1 * x3+x2 * x3+x1 * x2 * x3

Table 7. Multivariate Analysis Based on Categorical Variables

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
x1 - Years Using Blog	0	None	88
	1	Less than 1 year	31
	2	1-2 Years	16
	3	More than 2 years	8
x2 - Gender	0	Male	84
	1	Female	59
x3 - Study Level	0	Undergraduate	121
	1	Graduate	22

Table 7. Characteristics of Observing Subjects

CONCLUSION

A recent study (Ferdig, 2004) pointed out four major benefits of student blogging:

- The use of weblogs helps students become subject-matter experts who are highly skilled in filtering information needed, which is a critically preferred technique in the information overwhelming era;
- The use of weblogs increases student interest and ownership in learning;
- The use of weblogs gives students legitimate chances to participate;
- The use of weblogs provides opportunities for diverse perspectives both within and outside of the classroom.

Weblogs have unique features that explain its prevalence: compared to webpages, weblogs are more dynamic; when compared to online discussion forums, blogs are more permanent and customized; when compared to journalism, blogs are more interrelated among certain groups that share common interests (Jenkins et al, 2002).

However, it must be clarified that it is not a goal of this research to prove that weblogs, or any similar knowledge contribution technology so far, will replace physical interactions between the teaching staff and students. The technology has its own limitations. It is a goal of this research, though, to establish a view that as a complementary method, weblogs can contribute more power in the enhancement of student learning experience and enable them to possess necessary skills demanded by today's information age.

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This survey is for research purposes only. Your responses are on a voluntary basis and will be kept anonymous. The researchers appreciate your voluntary participation. Thank you.

[Definition of Weblog: A “web log” or online journal. Unlike traditional websites, they provide instant, typen-click publishing that can be done anywhere, anytime and from any browser. These on-line journals can incorporate multimedia such as: digital pictures, digital video, sound clips, electronic documents, weblog polls, and much more.]

First, we would like you to answer a few background questions:

1. Please indicate the number of years you have used Weblog.
 .. None .. Less than 1 year .. 1-2 years .. More than 2 years
2. Gender
 .. Male .. Female
3. Please indicate your current level of study.
 .. Undergraduate .. Graduate

Please evaluate your experience of using weblogs in this class (circle your answer).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I believe that the weblog would be an effective way to provide me with adequate information in this class.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Information provided by the weblog is helpful to improve my learning.	1	2	3	4	5
3. The weblog allows me to share my knowledge and experience with my peers and instructor.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I have frequently visited the course’s weblog.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Weblog is more efficient than email in terms of distributing knowledge in class.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I have found the course’s weblog self-explanatory and easy to navigate.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The course’s weblog is user-friendly.	1	2	3	4	5
8. The weblog contains up to date industrial information that I believe is beneficial to my knowledge acquisition.	1	2	3	4	5
9. It is convenient that the weblog has relevant information such as class announcement.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Using the weblog, I feel that my contribution to the class is well noticed by my teacher and peers.	1	2	3	4	5
11. It is fair to judge one’s in-class performance based on whether s/he actively participates blogging.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I believe that Weblogs will eventually replace class lectures in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Overall, I believe that incorporating weblog to teaching can enhance my learning experience in this class.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Your Comments:					