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**LEARNING PEDAGOGY THROUGH BLOGS: AN EXPERIENCE IN INITIAL TEACHER
TRAINING**

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyse the use of blogs as teaching-learning and assesment tool in a course in initial teacher education. Moreover we identify the limitations and pitfalls of using blogs as group activity in the field of teacher education in order to improve future practice. The data for this study was gathered using satisfaction questionnaires for students and observations made by the teachers engaged in this experience. The premise from which we started using this approach was the development of a range of ICT competencies in using weblogs, specific and professional competencies, in order to prepare student teachers for their work as teachers in the new educational context. Using blogs as an assesment tool had also the purpose to track students' learning progress by giving weekly assignments, in order to avoid leaving all the study to the time of the final examination. This way the teacher's role was to support rather than to direct. This experience took place during the first semester of the academic year 2011/2012 and engaged a number of 180 students engaged in initial teacher training that were attending the course Pedagogy II at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science from the University of Bucharest who created 46 blogs. In order to evaluate the experience we employed a satisfaction questionnaire and an observation sheet. We are currently involved in the data analysis. The first results suggest that blogs prove their utility in developing the learning process of the students engaged in initial teacher education. This enables us to agree upon the fact that it is an effective practice and that it brings a range of benefits to those who practise it. However, further research needs to be carried out in order to find ways to improve this practice by identifying the best methods to use blogs in teacher education and to keep it up to date in a field that is continuously changing.*

Keywords: *teaching, learning, assesment, e-learning, blogs, students' satisfaction*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Theoretical Background

Nowadays, blogs have become a new and innovative learning-teaching and assesment tool. In this context, blogs in general is widely debated subject (e.g. Barger 1997; Doctorow et al. 2002; Du & Wagner 2005; Brune 2008). To the date, there are a lot of refereed published material on the subject of blogs in education, in general, especially in the teacher training activities, in particular (e.g. Oravec 2003, Snyder 2009) is published in the last years.

Analysing blogs Hiler, (2003) has described it as "the latest disruptive technology" or the "killer app" capable to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate. As a knowledge management tool, blogs provide the potential for relatively undifferentiated articles of information passing through an organisation to be contextualised in a manner that adds value, thus generating 'knowledge' from mere 'information'. In the same way, Ferdig & Trammel (2004), drawing on educational theories of Vygotski (1978), assessed the educational value of blogs. The authors argue that the discursive nature of knowledge construction is best addressed by the

closeness and commentary based system of blogging. They pointed out that there is a natural tendency for reflection and analysis on the part of the student, given feedback systems are integral to the blogging interface, but also note that the contextualisation of learning through hypertext links to other materials encourages revisiting and revising of learned concepts, enriching the learning experience. In addition, Ferdig & Trammel (2004) assured that blogs are more successful in promoting interactivity between students and teachers or between students and students, offering a mode of interaction more conducive to improved student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning more generally.

Academics pay attention to the numerous advantages offered by blogs for the learning and teaching process. There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of the blogs as a tool for collaboration and self-reflection on course content (e.g. Xie & Sharma, 2005; Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Baggetun & Wasson, 2006), peer feedback (e.g. Cooper & Boddington, 2005) and as a resource space for content management (e.g. Martindale & Wiley, 2005).

In the last decade, interest was drawn to the advantages and disadvantages of tutor feedback in the higher education context. The focus of feedback is on helping students to identify the strengths and weaknesses inherent in their performance and to improve it. This interactive and collaborative aspect of feedback is emphasized by many authors. In this sense, Liu and Carless (2006: 280), for example, describe peer feedback as “a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards”. However, and although tutor feedback has been severely criticised for taking the ‘ownership’ of writing from students and making them passive, uncritical recipients of feedback (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984), the tutor feedback is still the prevalent way of providing feedback on student’s progress in higher education. Peer feedback is useful not only for those who receive it, but also for those who provide it, as it allows students to develop their collaborative competencies, or to analyse from a critical point of view, the colleagues’ work (e.g. Nicol and MacFarlane- Dick, 2006 among others). According to Cassidy (2006) this is an important factor in developing the professional competencies required by employers. Additionally, the same author suggests that students work harder in a peer learning environment or in a context where the surface learning is encouraged by peer feedback. From this idea one further advantage of electronic feedback through blogs derived. Is that it brings with it the potential to speed up the feedback process considerably in comparison to non computer-mediated environments, where more time is invested in the administration of the process with the redistribution of student work and the corresponding provision of feedback. Feedback is also a strategy of formative assessment. Numerous studies have attempted to explain that formative feedback furthers student learning as the student engages in a continuous loop of self-assessment based on particular criteria (e.g. Bollag, 2006; Leahy, et al. 2005). In the same line, Shute (2007: 1) stated: “Formative feedback represents information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner’s thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning”. This allows learners to set clear expectations of themselves and to make decisions that influence their own practices (e.g. Butler 1987; Nyquist 2003; Shute 2007; Stiggins 2008). In order to obtain maximum benefit, feedback must focus on more than one aspect of learning; thus formative feedback is given on the product (assignment or performance), on the process (how it’s done), and on the progress (improvement over time) of the learning (Guskey 1996; Shute 2007; Stiggins 2008 among others). Recent evidence suggests that effective formative feedback comes from the instructor as well as from self and/or peer assessment and is based on clear criteria (e.g. Sadler 1989; Fontana & Fernandes 1994; Vispeol & Austin 1995; Tunstall & Gipps 1996; Frederiksen & White 1997; Black & William 1998; Smith 2007).

1.2. The context of the study

In our paper we focus on the blogs as learning spaces that facilitate the feedback process especially from tutor to student in order to improve the students’ learning process. The objective is to analyse the use of blogs as teaching-learning and assessment tool in a course in initial teacher education, identifying the participants’ perceptions.

The premise from which we started using this approach was the development of a range of ICT competencies in using weblogs, specific and professional competencies, in order to prepare student teachers for their work as teachers in the new educational context.

This experience took place during the first semester of the academic year 2011-2012 and gathered a number of 180 students engaged in initial teacher education. They were attending the course Pedagogy II at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science from the University of Bucharest and they created 46 blogs. The activity was coordinated by two tutors, the academic in charge with the theoretical classes and the academic responsible for the practical activities.

Through the blogs we worked the following students' competencies:

- To make the students able to realize an instructional design of a teaching program in psychology;
- To enhance the communication between students and tutor. In this sense, an academic blogs was created. It was used as on line platform for publishing handouts, references, for sharing knowledge and providing instructions;
- To promote the peer learning between students and students. In order to achieve this objective, each group of students has created its own blog as e-portfolio tool used to submit their assignments and interact with the colleagues.

As we already mention, the students worked in small groups (4-5 members each) and thought the blogs they designed an instructional program.

- In each class session, each group has to include progressively a new instructional sequence according with the session objective. In total was a number of 28 hours of class work and 28 autonomous work outside the classroom per student. The instructional design has contained the following steps according with the teaching programme: Teaching paradigm; Lessons' content; Project' s Objectives; Teaching methods; Assessment tools

There were two types of blogs developed in this course: teachers' blog, used for publishing handouts, references, for sharing knowledge and providing instructions; student blog used to submit their assignments. The student blogs were e-portfolios of assigned tasks, which were focused on developing the students' competencies in planning a lesson.

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the students satisfaction with the experience, at the final of the programme a qualitative approach was used. The semi-structured approach was chosen because we were interested to know the student's opinion about the experience. For this reason, it was decided that the best method to adopt for this investigation was to we developed a survey in which we asked to the students to identify the advantages and disadvantages of this experience. In order to complement the information semi-structured discussions with the tutors involved was conducted during the process and at the end of the innovation activity.

The participants were a number of 180 students involved in the teaching experience. The survey was administrated to a sample of 49 students

The data was analysed using a categorisation technique based on the following categories: level of knowledge in using blogs; feedback; utility and applicability of the information used in creating the blogs; blogs as an assessment tool and teamwork. Following this, we have assigned to each category, its significance units.

III. RESULTS

The first category analysed was the students' level of knowledge in using blogs. In this sense, we found a variety of responses, as a few students were able to get started very easily, while most of them found it very hard to adapt to the online environment of 'blogosphere'. Many students felt that the creation of the blogs itself was a major challenge that some of them didn't thought that they could meet. In the participants words: *"I was challenged to create a blog!"* or *"Is the first time I take part in creating a blog, thing I had not thought possible."*

Some of the students considered this as an opportunity to learn how to create and manage a blog and learn in a new environment: *“Personally, first of all, it helped me to see how a blog looks like, how to create a blog and how to use one”*, stated one of the students.

In addition, for some students creating a blog represented an impediment in carrying out their assignments due to the *“lack of knowledge in using blogs”* and the difficulties encountered in the process.

Focusing on active learning, feedback was given permanently by the tutor, enabling students to improve the quality of their assignments. In order to speed up the feedback process we used a blended learning approach as feedback was given both online and face to face during the weekly meetings. Taking this in consideration, students appreciated *“the possibility of receiving feedback from the teacher through the blog”* and that *“it facilitates the communication between team members and between teacher and students”*.

Some students also stressed the effectiveness of this kind of feedback: *“It streamlined the seminar activities because feedback was received sooner, unlike if we would have handed the projects at the end of the semester”* pointed one of the students involved in the experience. Nevertheless, some students felt that *“the feedback was sometimes late”* and that *“the information posted on the blog wasn’t commented”*.

Another focus point of student reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of using blogs in education was the utility and accessibility of the information through time and also by other students. In the opinion of the students, this experience made them able to *“had access from home to all the course materials”*, *“use the result of this project over time”*, *“make the course materials available to other colleagues, everybody who is online can see our work.”*

Both teachers and students observed that the public character of the blogs determined students to make sophisticated use of language and design elements. *“...Being posted online, the information becomes more valuable for the author, it makes him more aware of his writing’* pointed one of the students”

Students stressed that they developed greater flexibility in learning as they could transfer the theoretical information acquired, in a practical manner and even felt that they were actually ‘teaching’: *“The blog experience was useful because we could transpose in a practical and subjective manner the lesson plans, the objectives and the instruction strategies’ and ‘I had the impression that what I write on the blog, I actually ‘speak’ to pupils.”*

Other interested topic of our research is related with the use of blogs as formative assessment tool. The on-going use of blogs promotes continuous learning instead of exam focus. The permanent monitoring of the blog posts determined students to work constantly and efficiently in order to improve both their tasks and the design of the blog. They considered this method as being *“a very useful idea because our activity was permanently monitored”* and *“relatively efficient, being easy to access and assess”*.

One of the things that students appreciated the most was the novelty of the method: *“...the method is a new and modern one that pulled us out of the conservator context the teachers used us with over the time”*. Being pulled out of the usual context they were used with they felt free to carry out their tasks in a personal manner: *“we were free to choose the information we wanted to post”*; *“we were free to personalize the way we designed the posts”*.

Due to that students had to complete certain tasks on the blog, the results show that the number of descriptive tasks exceeded the number of critical reflections. Nevertheless, some of the tasks permitted students to have a critical approach which they used to reflect on education and on what it means to be a teacher in a new educational context. As one student said: *“I believe that many problems encountered by teachers in the classroom derive from the fact that the teenagers nowadays don’t accept that easily the teacher-pupil roles. That is why we choose the socio-critic paradigm that promotes anti-hierarchical principles which permit that teachers and pupils to see each other first of all as humans”* (<http://viitoriprofesorifascinanti.blogspot.com>). In addition, another participant stated: *“The idea is not to “bomb” the pupils with tones of information, but to develop their capacity to learn in a logical manner, to be creative, sociable and to have the courage to stand up for themselves. Not the final result is important, but the whole learning process.”* (<http://psyche-personna.blogspot.com>).

From the tutors' point of view using blogs as assessment tools was challenging because there were many aspects to focus in assessing the quality of the blogs: on the task, on the process and on the group learning progress. Taking in consideration that there was permanent feedback between students and teachers and that students were able to review their tasks and make improvements the marks for this assessment task were very good.

By working in teams we wanted to develop the communicational and collaborative skills of the students. Even if some of the students considered that "*working in teams was beneficial (...)we could put together five different views and managed to create a complete product*", others found it difficult to adapt to colleagues" different approaches in solving the tasks and mentioned that "*the different styles of the team members was reflected in the quality of the blog*".

Several students made comments about the use of blogs within the course and views varied, but generally positive: "*I liked the idea with the blog right from the start and it was useful because it helped us to structure the information after every seminar*" points one of the participants, adding: "*The idea of creating a blog extraordinary because it was a whole lot easier both for the teacher and for us*" and "*the whole coherence of the project was hard to track because of time and approach differences.*"

Some students also expressed the view that they would like to use blogs for other subjects too and that teachers should be encouraged to use this method. "*I would recommend this method to be used for as many subjects as possible*" and "*It should be applied in the future by other teachers too*" are the voices of the students involved.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

As analyzed in the case presented here, the implementation of blogs as ICT tool to support the face to face learning-teaching and assessment process, in a teacher training programme, brings us some of the constraints and strengths of the innovative experience. In the first place, the blogs promotes more student-centred learning supported by materials and activities, where both teachers and students play different roles from traditional to more modern ones. The second important aspect is the improvement of the students' autonomy in learning and the team work. At the same time, thorough the uses of virtual space, the students become more responsible in relation with their work and with the colleagues. We could also identify some limits of this approach such as limited access of some students to the online environment or time consuming activity for the tutors engaged in this experience.

Finally, therefore, it seems that both tutors and students declared their satisfaction with the experience. However, further research needs to be carried out in order to find ways to improve this practice by identifying the best methods to use blogs in teacher education and to keep it up to date in a field that is continuously changing.

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