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Using Blogs in Higher Education Programs in Mexico: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The use of Blogs in Mexico as a tool to enhance higher face-to-face courses in a *Blended learning* context begun in 2003, just two years after the emerging of first edublogs in the world and nine years ago from the first threaded forums in the Web. This paper presents some lessons learned derived from almost eight years of experience, categorized in three stages according with the manners of use of that Blogs in classroom. The experience with edublogs in Higher Education in Mexico, can be analyzed based on five main categories: a) learnings about the educative use of Blogs, covering repeating old fashion practices, simulation practices and lacks b) learnings about the design and its implications, c) learnings about the motivation of teachers and students, covering sources of motivation and causes for fall of it, d) learnings about the kind of interaction between the participants, e) learnings about the institutional environment that hosts the courses.

Introduction

Internet has now simpler and more accessible tools that make easier to work with it in several ways to facilitate our everyday activities, including those in the educative scenario, especially in higher education. In developing countries like Mexico, this kind of technology it's even more used in the last few years due to the recent development of faster broadband networks and the impact of the later on the impulse to the use of new technologies in universities and higher education institutes all over the country.

It is widely known that the Web 2.0 offers very useful tools to enrich the classical face-to-face higher education programs, to lend them to *Blended learning* modalities, with some advantages like (Kennedy, 2003):

- Helping to perform in an easier way the academic and administrative process associated with the learning process in formal programs
- Tracking and following all activities,
- Controlling access to all recommended learning resources, and
- Facilitating the personal communication between all participants;

In the area of personal communications between all participants in a course, the Web 2.0 tools permits to achieve some close interaction among teachers, students and both, and even more, this kind of tools facilitate the following and trace of personal improvements due the possibility of keeping track of all posts placed. Related with the later, the students develop communication skills expressing their own opinions and points of view about the learned contents (Ruiz & Exposito, 2007), skills like (redaction, own idea expression, critical thinking, response to feedback, and ethic in the communication process).

As a collateral effect of the use of Web 2.0 tools in higher education, new forms for learning and assessment are develop by teachers, where the discussion takes a privileged place, taking them out of the traditional ways used, built on experience and repetition in face-to-face modalities.

The use of Blogs in Higher Education Programs, has demonstrated several advantages versus other written expression ways especially the traditional ones, or the Internet associated but not corresponding to web 2.0 ones, as plain Web Pages (Churchill, 2007). The results in this research area are demonstrated that Blogs used in Higher Education Programs as a formal tool, serves:

- As a Practical and effective tool to assess the student's discursive skills (McRae, 2006; Chen & Bonk, 2008).
- As a tool for apply tests, even more in opinion related contents (Hao, 2006; Ray & Coulter, 2008).
- As a new version of electronic portfolio (Sherry *et al.*, 1998; Fiedler *et al.*, 2004; Gordin *et al.*, 2003), lending to the so-called new *Blogfolios* (Yuen & Yang, 2008, Chi-Yin & Yang, 2008).
- As an effective tool to manage group discussions (Woodcock, 2009).
- As an effective media to publish the group generated information (Freeman, 2006; Gagne & Fels, 2007).

- As a media to help to people with special needs and requirements that demand special efforts from teacher (Hao, 2007).
- As a real tool to reach to those ones that can't attend to face-to-face courses, turning the traditional ones in to *blended learning modalities* (Barker, 2005, Lord y Lomicka, 2008).
- As a tool to manage resources and materials for individual and group projects (Haro, 2007).

Blended Learning in Mexico: successful experiences

The use of Web 2.0 tools to support Higher Education has helped to transform the classical face-to-face instruction in a *blended learning* environments, using this kind of technology as a way to enrich the traditional classroom experience with online resources and web based knowledge construction activities (Barton, 2003; Herrington & Deden, 2002). According to Bleed (2001) this modality is based on an effective combination of bricks with clicks (Blead, 2001: 18).

The blended learning experiences in Mexico are very successful ones, implemented by Public and Private Universities all over the Country: The *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey* (ITESM), The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), The *Instituto Latinoamericano de la Comunicación Educativa* (ILCE) and The *Universidad de Guadalajara* (UDG). These higher education institutions has about 25 years of experience each, using the new technologies in formal undergraduate and graduate programs, given a leap from face-to-face programs to distance education programs and making a track back later to *Blended Learning* modalities to extend the benefits of the experiences learned in the later to enrich the former and to rise its quality level (Mortera, 2006; Cabral & Morfín 2007; Ibarra, 2002, Christensen et al., 2003).

The use of Blogs in blended learning modalities in Mexico

The study of the history of *edublogs* in Mexico has not been an easy task, principally due to:

- a) The lack of registered experiences about the use of Blogs with educative purposes in Mexico.
- b) The possibly dead of the first Blogs created and that were no continued.
- c) To identify the purposes of a Blog it's a complex task if it is not defined on the profile or expressed somewhere in the contents of the Blog.
- d) In same way, it's a complex task to identify the geographical origin of a Blog, if it's not crystal clear defined somewhere in the Blog (Ponce & Hernández, 2007). (In example, In some cases, Mexican Blogs are hosted in Australian European, or American free Blog sites)

The lack of registers implied the necessity to review the *Blogosphere* to find that Blogs on its own, with a very complex problem that could be reduced using clues and heuristics in the search process.

The use of Blogs with educative purposes in higher education started in the first semester of 2003, seven years later of the *boom* of Blogs in the United States. The use of Blogs in higher education started as a tool to support face-to-face traditional courses due to the interest of some teachers that could consider as pioneers. They first interest was derived from an incursion in the world of Internet and Technology by its own. At that moment there were some institutional address to apply the new technologies to enrich the educative process in traditional courses, but they where limited only to the use of traditional Web Pages and some platforms like *Blackboard* or *WebCt*, only to mention some of them.

Contreras registered one of the first courses in use Blogs as a tool to support the activities on classroom at the beginning of 2003 (Contreras, 2004). This course was part of a formal undergraduate program in Psychology at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM). The Blog remains online even when it's dead a few years ago (see: <http://psicoeducativa.blogspot.com/>). Another blog that it is a part of the starting group of *edublogs* in Mexico was the one developed to support an undergraduate formal course about journalism (see: <http://actualizacion.blogspot.com/>). This course still remains in use seven years ago.

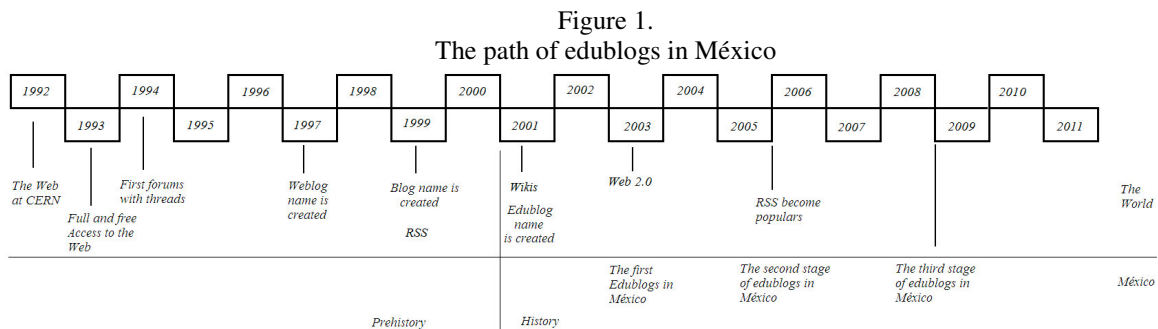
The analyses of these Blogs located at the starting group of *edublogs* in Mexico, reveals a basic use of the technology and a very simple educative use as a class newspaper or a class sticker holder to publish relevant posts for all the participants. In this age of *edublogs* in Mexico were commonplace to see posted announces as dates for examination, new tasks assigned, results from tests and homework. In this stadium the Blogs transcended the time and space, helping to students to be awarded of some events in the course. The level of discussion it's very simple and it is limited to one or two interactions by trend. Teachers posted in this Blogs links to other resources trying to encourage to students to use it, but there's no evidence of some kind of tracing of the process in the students using these resources, or at least it is not visible online.

In the second stage of use of Blogs in Mexico with educative purposes, one can easy identify a more complex use of these tools. *RSS channels* and the use of *Wikis* appear in the scene and one can see links to other resources backtracked, and it is possible to observe more complexity in the Blogs design. In this stage it is possible to observe

more interaction between the students and between students and teacher, or even more, some people outside the class could participate. This stage is characterized by a more extensible use of the technology and a concern to facilitate the interaction between all the participants.

In the third stage in is possible to observe a full use of the technologies associated with Blogs. The Blogs not only accomplishes the task of inform to all the participants about the activities implied in the course, but implies a more interaction and the activities are near of the process of group creation and processing knowledge. Some of these kinds of Blogs could be revisited in Mexican Universities' institutional pages as the *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM)*, The *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)*, and The *Universidad de Guadalajara (UDG)* which are, -all of them- some of the more prestigious universities in the Country. This stage of edublogs is very recent and could be started between the second semester of 2008 and the first one of 2009. In this third stage of edublogs in Mexico, appeared several groups of people interested in the use of Blogs with educative purposes, efforts like *Edublogs Mexicanos* (see: <http://edublogmexicano.ning.com>), *Edublog7* (see: <http://edublog7.blogspot.com>), or *Edublog* (see: <http://docencia.incan.edu.mx>).

So, if we trace the history of edublogs in Mexico, we can divide the route in the three stages presented in figure one.



As shown in Figure 1. The Blogs with educative purposes or *edublogs* were named in 2001 and two years later the first edublogs show up in Mexico. The first stage in the history of edublogs in Mexico stills to 2005-2006 at the beginning of the second stage, where more sophisticated and more educative edublogs are created. The third stage shows up about 2008-2009, dates when the *microblogging* shows-up in the scenario, maybe beginning a new stage characterized by mobile learning, following the world trends.

Some learning sketched

The analyses of cases of the three identified stages in the use of Blogs in Mexico with educative purposes, lends to a group of reflections exposed in this paper:

a) About the educative use of Blogs

Even when we try harder to reach new modalities, sometimes we're exposed to the trend to repeat old practices. This repetition occurs at two levels, the first one is related with the repetition of old face-to-face practices and principles, like the way in the examinations are implemented in the new tool: it is common that the teachers try to implement the examinations in the same way they applied in the past, trying to prevent in a very complexes ways that the students may cheat, or even suggesting a face-to-face meeting to apply the examination in the old fashion. The second one is related with the repetition of practices acquired with the work of web pages: like the poor actualization of the pages or the misusing of them. In both cases it just implies old practices implemented with new tools (Ponce & Hernandez, 2009). When teachers begin to use Blogs as a support tool for face-to-face instruction, tend to think that they are changing its own pedagogical practice; so only at a discursive level the teacher has an innovative practice and behaviors like this statement was really true. A teacher, who is considered by him self as an innovator, difficultly will change his way of thinking. This is one of the strongest inertia that is necessary to break when one speaks about a real change in the teaching practices.

Another issue to consider when we think about the manners of use *edublogs* in Mexico is the fact that this kind of tool is principally used in teaching or as an additional resource for learning, leaving apart another possible uses like coaching or mentoring (Ponce, *et al*, 2010).

b) About the design on edublogs

Teachers lose the interest in the resource if they do not see quick results. This is a very important learning to consider especially when we try to design policies and strategies at an institutional level for the use of Blogs in support to the face-to-face traditional high education courses. Perhaps this is the main cause to explain why the teachers do not prefer to work with an instructional designer and wait some days or even weeks to see the results in a institutional web based platform. The Blogs offers the advantage of a very simple and quick time design (about 15 minutes to get a very basic design by its own) (Ponce, Hernández & Badajós, 2010).

Another thing to consider is the fact that teachers prefer to make designs by themselves based on essay and error; modifying some aspect on the Blog's appearance and seeing immediately what the result is. But sometimes, this kind of design is more addressed by common sense and not by didactic principles or directives. The more visual and design effects in a Blog the more interest of the teachers, but this not necessarily implies that we will obtain the more efficient didactic results.

c) About the motivation between students and teachers

It is easy to lose the motivation even when all over the course we have been following the treads in the blog. The students look for a feedback on their posts, especially if it is sent to the teacher. When a teacher does ignore the post of some student is affecting the direct motivation achieved by him, and no matter if this occurs at the lesson number one or the number twenty, always there's decay (Ponce, 2008).

At the same time, we must to consider that teacher's motivation depends on the student's interactions in the Blog. The teachers often look for the student's comments in the edublogs but it is often too that the students enter the posts only one or two days about the deadline. This kind of behavior does not facilitate to achieve a real interaction between all the participants. That's why one of the first efforts from teachers is to achieve that students participate in Blog's discussion since the beginning of the assignation and not just at the end.

The main goal when working with Blogs is to achieve that the Blog by them self constitute a source of motivation for all the participants. In this way it will not be so significant the fall of someone in the motivation of the rest in the group.

d) About the kind of interaction between all the participants

One of the things related with the participation of teachers and students in Blogs, when used as a tool for enhance face-to-face instruction is the danger of simulation. Sometimes, the participation of students in a Blog, especially when it is a requirement to get a grade, could fall in simulation. The more people interacting in a blog, the more complex to manage its interactions, this is an opportunity for students to make posts without any sense or without any intention of really collaborate with the group, but just for acceding to pints in a grade. In the same manner, teachers could fall in simulation when the management of the participation of students become a complex task, teachers begin trying to leave the interaction to manage them self and later, leave the blog with out been revisited for several days or weeks. This lapse of time without revision lends to a fall in the level of interaction and even could kill all commitment from students to participate.

Another problem that could arise without an adequate management of the interactions in the blog is the lack of originality. One student could wait until a great number of posts from his partners are settled, and just read every post behind him to rephrase it and accomplish the task of participate, if the teacher is not managing the interactions in an adequate might not realize it.

e) About the higher education institute or university

If the university where the teachers though do not encourage the use of these kinds of technologies, the high motivation that everybody got at the start will be decay, due to a lack of institutional reinforcement. Why it is necessary to get this kind of reinforcement, because the work with Blogs as same the work with other varieties of technology web 2.0 related, implies may be the double of the time that the classical face-to-face modality requires. The most motivated are teachers, the most longer will be the first impulse, but always is needed the institutional comprehension and encouraging getting a second impulse.

Conclusions

The history of edublogs in Mexico shows that the world trends are following, but we must to consider some particularities. Are Blogs a useful tool in Mexico for use in higher education in a *Blended learning* modality? The experience shows that the answer is affirmative: The Mexican experience has demonstrated that edublogs has been exploited in Mexico to enhance the results of some face-to-face courses in undergraduate and graduate courses, but its use has been depended principally on the interest of some teachers and not necessarily on an institutional interest.

That's why the quality of results obtained in the major part of them, depends on the developed skills in teachers: technical and pedagogical ones.

To work with Blogs in a face-to-face course as a way to enrich the learning process requires more efforts for all the participants, spending more time and a high level of commitment are necessary elements from teachers and the open mind to new manners to work are required for students.

Another very important issue to consider is the fact that repetition of old practices occurs at a two levels and not always is noted by these ones. Teachers use to think that the simple use of the tool transforms its own practice, without notice that they are just getting the old paradigm on the new media.

The set of elements learned based on the analysis of the history of the use of the Blogs as educational way in Mexico, it allows to admit that even a lot of way is absent for covering, the route is not wrong. The use of this type of hardware implies not only a major effort from teachers, but it needs also a major preparation, as well as a separation from the old practices, to achieve a real innovation.

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