

# Bloggging in an MBA Classroom: Personal Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

*Weblogs are tools that have the potential to increase student-centered learning. We examine the affordances of weblogs that are inherited from the Internet and that are unique to weblog design. We relate our personal experiences using weblogs in our MBA teaching as course blogs and case-discussion blogs. We discuss lessons learned and future directions.*

## Keywords

Weblogs, blogging, online case discussions, affordances

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional teacher-centered versus student-centered education is often criticized for depriving the student of opportunities for self-reflection, diminished engagement, stifling interest, growth and encouraging dysfunctional practices such as plagiarism. If we consider that our models of teaching reflect in great part the technologies that have enabled contemporary education – consider the impact of printing and literacy – might not new information technologies such as weblogs enable new forms of teaching and learning? How might we use such technologies to support student-centered learning? How will students, raised on the teacher-centered model, react to such efforts?

This paper describes our initiation with weblogs in MBA teaching during the Hong Kong Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis from March to late May 2003. This event created the unexpected opportunity to engage the issue of sustaining interaction with MBA students through online case discussion weblogs and course weblogs. During the several months that we continued this exercise, we found that weblogs afforded both teacher and student a promising tool for interaction and self-expression. However, there are several issues that can influence the effective tool of weblogs: institutional context, student experience, design of online exercises, and incentives. As a result of these personal experiments the authors have 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 we use the concept of affordances to discuss the uniqueness of weblogs and their potential contribution to MBA teaching. We then describe our experiences with weblogs in an MBA electronic commerce course. We end with some thoughts on lessons learned and further directions.

## WHAT ARE WEBLOGS?

Weblogs are extremely diverse, but as a genre are characterized by their form rather than their content. They have short textual (e.g., Lawrence Lessig’s much-cited weblog) or visual entries, dated entries, reverse chronological ordering, and frequent updates. Metaphors of diaries and journals are often used to describe weblogs, although we will discuss some distinctions below.

There is an increasing variety of tools for the creation of weblogs. Table 1 shows the most popular providers. 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.

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

Table 1. Weblog providers

## AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS OF WEBLOGS

In order to assess the utility of weblogs as a teaching tool, we need to determine the unique contribution of weblogs. We use the concept of *affordances* provided by Gibson (1977). He uses the term to describe how the design of objects enables the action of actors. Objects such as weblogs afford actions on the part of the actor, and through the actor’s actions transform design affordances into effectivities which enable the actor’s capabilities.

First we note that weblogs are built on Internet and Web protocols and inherit affordances from those of the Internet. Drawing upon Ryder and Wilson's discussion of Internet affordances, weblogs afford immediacy and world-wide expression for bloggers. By immediacy we mean that blog postings are available to readers on the weblog as soon as they are posted. This immediacy has implications for the consciousness of both the writer and for the reader. The writer has the opportunity to express immediate reactions to events, to publish thoughts while they are fresh, and possibly spontaneous and uncrafted. The reader has the opportunity to react immediately to these posts in a similar manner.

Weblogs also inherited from the Internet an affordance for worldwide public expression for both writers and readers. Bloggers are aware 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 worldwide expression also enables worldwide readership and participation from across cultures.

Weblogs also inherit from the Internet their connectivity. Weblogs, as with websites, can link to, or be linked to from any other weblog or website on the Internet.

Blogs have been compared to paper and online diaries and journals. Blogs are similar in some respects sharing their textual nature, chronological ordering and personal nature of content. In other respects weblogs are unique. We identify affordances of interaction and control as unique to weblogs. The design of weblogs invites interaction between the writer and the reader. Readers are invited to comment on each entry, recent and past. Most weblog tools provide calendars to mark entries, search tools, lists of latest activities. These increase the activity across the entire weblog.

Weblogs also offer greater control to the blogger over the tone, continuity, and discussion. Each blogger is also, in a sense, writer, webmaster, and editor. This control reassures the blogger that they retain control over the interaction, lowering the barrier to self-expression. The enthusiasm with which weblogs have been embraced and the degree of self-reflection displayed in many weblogs – daily narratives, strong themes, topical narratives are supported by the design of weblogs – would suggest that this control is effective.

While the design of weblogs affords certain actions, their design also constrains actions. For instance, weblogs, as all Internet applications, cannot assure privacy, security, quality of information or reliability any more than any other web application.

## **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.

The affordances of immediacy, world-wide expression, interaction and control would seem to support the idea that weblogs can effectively support student-centered learning. Ryder and Wilson (1996) see a trend in education toward distributed and collaborative models of learning where the design of the Internet affords public expression and prevents the modern educator from placing artificial constraints on the student in order to control and manage the educational environment. 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. 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.

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).

## **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 in several ways, creating some new rules and removing others. Instructors were required to use masks in classrooms, student attendance was made optional, faculty were given flexibility in regard to whether and how courses would be conducted, incentive systems were changed, and increased resources for online education were made available. It was no longer business as usual, and the crisis freed both faculty and students from the normal institutions of teaching.

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

MBA courses, in general, emphasize interaction. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, MBA students are expected to learn skills, such as leadership and decision-making, that make them effective managers. Interaction helps to develop the communication skills required to effect change (April, 1999). Secondly, many students use the MBA to change careers. Interaction helps these students to learn the 'language' of business. There is an expectation among MBA students that there will be a strong incentive toward participation in their courses.

We used weblogs to support interaction in two ways. Firstly, as we shifted from classroom to online teaching we used course blogs to support regular interaction in the

absence of a regular class schedule. Secondly, we used a weblog to support an online case discussion.

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

## Course Blogs

Course blogs are relatively common so we will not dwell on these much. We have now used weblogs to support four MBA courses. After some experimentation we have settled on a standard structure for the content of our weblogs (Figure 1). Each weblog covers course information, slides, videos, links to magazines and journals, and the course blog.

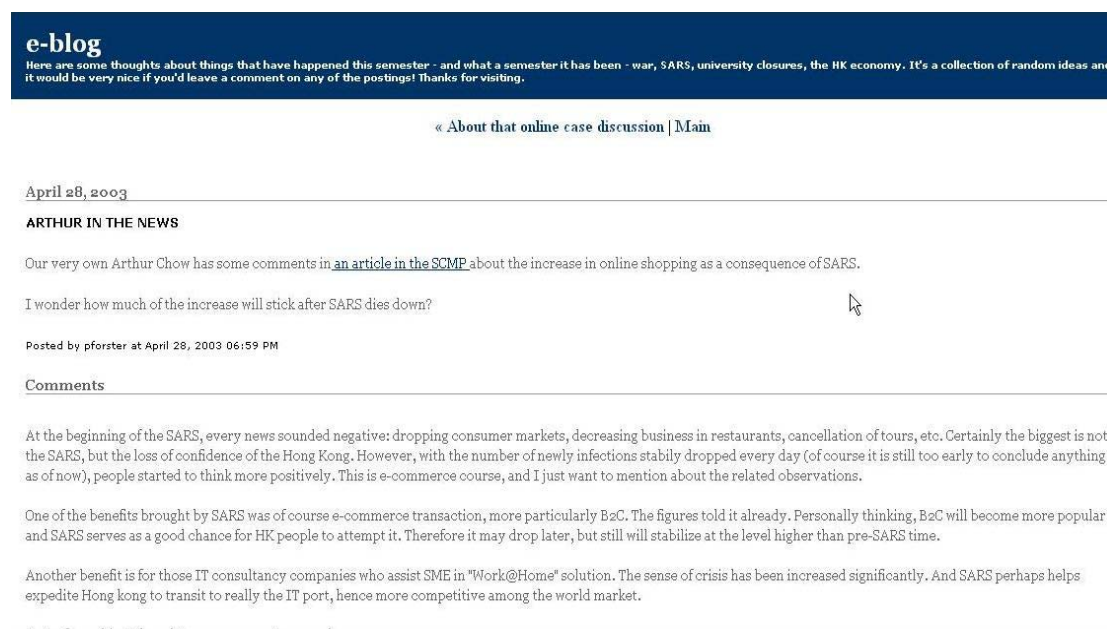


Figure 1. Electronic commerce course blog

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 during our 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 drop, as will any interaction.
- Similarly, in order to interact with the course blog students must come to the site. Motivating busy students to visit the course blog frequently is always an issue.
- 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 blogs. The frequency of blog spam is increasing.

- There is the possibility that while blogs may increase student interaction the nature of the interaction may be unwanted.

## Case Discussion Blog Example

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. Here we would like to illustrate our use of case discussion weblogs with an example of Siebel Systems (Marti et al., 1999).

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>.

Figure 2. Case discussion blog

The case was provided to students prior to the online discussion. We provided case instructions on the course blog. The case discussion was structured as follows. The case 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 question. Students were encouraged to build upon each other's postings in the instructions. We felt ordering of the questions was important, so students were asked to respond to their questions in a window of several days. The entire case was covered in a week. In addition to the specific case questions, a general discussion area was provided at the front of the case. The class participation grade was used as the incentive to participate. There was no grading of individual posts.

The entire case discussion was conducted over a period of a week. After the week we conducted a meta-discussion about the experience on the course blog. Owing to space limitations we can only summarize a few key points from the discussion.

Several students found the online case discussion beneficial. It increased their participation, gave them an archive of the discussion, and they could read selectively. It would be fair to say that most students favored in-class interaction over online case interaction given the choice.

The volume of material created in the discussion (over 30 printed pages) became too much for some students to keep track of. This appeared to be particularly onerous for part-time students. In addition to there being a lot of material, it was noted that much of the discussion was repetitive or, as some students felt, there was no 'rubbish' filter. 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.

Some students felt the way in which the questions were structured placed a burden of more reading and digesting of previous posts on those who had the later questions. There was some discussion of how incentives ought to be structured in order to improve the discussion. One student suggested rewarding those who post earlier, noting that most posts seemed to cluster at the end of their time window. Another suggested grading each post in order to increase the quality of the postings.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

We have found that our initial uses of weblogs suggest that they may be useful in increasing interaction in MBA courses, as complements to classroom discussions, or in online case discussions. However, our experiences suggest that while weblogs may afford a more student-centered learning experience, there are many factors that will determine their effectiveness.

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

The design of the online case discussion is extremely important. In reflecting upon our example we feel that there are several things that would greatly improve the experience. Firstly, we should design questions that encourage discussion between the students and explicitly encourage interaction between group members online. Secondly, we should ensure an even distribution of the workload so that students do not perceive themselves as unfairly burdened. Thirdly, the instructor should be actively engaged as a moderator

in the general discussion. And finally, the instructor should ‘wrap up’ the case and pull together the strands of the case discussion.

The tone of the instructors’ postings is important for encouraging interaction. Our early postings were more teacher-centered, top-down and not inviting engagement or comment. Later postings were more informal, spontaneous and more effective. Both teacher and student need to learn to use the weblogs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Because this paper discusses our personal experiences using weblogs our conclusions are limited. This paper contributes towards our further understanding of weblogs and student-centered learning in two ways. Firstly, it uses the lens of affordances to identify unique characteristics of weblogs that afford student-centered learning behavior. Secondly, we describe our personal experiences with 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. Our 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. Our future research will be directed towards a more structured examination of using weblogs to increase student-centered learning in MBA education.

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