



PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ACADEMIC BLOGGING

DR. SAFAA MOHMMED AL-HEBAISHI

Asstt Prof., Department of Curricula and Teaching Methods
Faculty of Education, Taibah university

Email: dr.safaa93@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The current paper aims at identifying pre-service teachers' perceptions towards academic blogging in higher education institutions. Using the quantitative and qualitative approaches, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were administered to a sample of ELT pre-service teachers (n = 38) enrolled in a course blog created mainly to discuss some of the issues related to the "Principles of Curriculum Construction" course. The results showed that the pre-service teachers held positive attitudes towards blogs in various terms and perceived it as an effective tool in higher education. Relevant recommendations included careful planning to incorporate this tool for better future careers.

KeyWords: *Educational Blogging, Academic Blogging, Pre-Service Teachers, Perception Towards Blogging*

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past few years, the web has developed into a tool for connecting people all over the world. In addition, with the advancement of Web 2.0 technology such as blogs, wikis, podcasts...etc, web users have become contributors of information, not just consumers. The new tools enable them to share not only information but also personal experiences and views. With the ability to read, write, and publish, radical changes have occurred and users have become part of the global community [29]. [22] stated that a "Blog, also known as a weblog, is an online live journal which allows individuals to express and share thoughts with the public" (cited in [1] p.549. It reflects one's thoughts, feelings, else has chosen, (3) click continue, start posting, then click publish now. Each blog includes some features like banner, blog title, subtitles, links, calendar, archives, pictures and copyright statement [27]. Blog users can customize their blogs, design, post photos & video segments and conduct surveys. A blog can be an "updated resource that grows over time with the accumulation of writing and other content. This archived information is accessed using a simple calendar that highlights dates on which entries were made" [30] p.9.

reactions, ideas or progress towards goals, usually written with little attention to structure, form, or corrections [5]. It offers a free, easy-to-use environment that allows users with elementary or no technical background to create and design interactive web pages [16].

Creating a blog is easy and devoid of technical complexity. One of the most recommended blogger host sites is (www.blogger.com) which is owned by Google. It hosts blogs for free and has some level of privacy. To start, one should follow the advertised steps at blogger.com: (1) Sign up using your Google account, (2) give your blog a title that no one

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although weblogs are considered to be one of the best ways of combining Information Communication Technology (ICT) with teaching and learning methodologies in a classroom, The application of academic blogging in higher education, particularly in Saudi teachers' preparation programs, has been documented very recently. The majority of Saudi pre-service teachers are neither familiar, nor skillful in employing this tool in the process of



learning. Exposure to this tool during pre-service preparation program is thought to be helpful in promoting willingness to use it in teaching career. Therefore, the current study is a trial to integrate academic blogging in teacher preparation programs so as to familiarize future teachers with this tool and prepare them to use it in their daily practices. In particular, the study reports on their perceptions towards the learning experiences they had during academic blogging and the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating this web technology into the curriculum.

3. RATIONAL FOR THE STUDY

The findings of the current study are hoped to be of interest to educational policy makers in order to fulfill the following objectives:

- a- To determine the usefulness of academic blogging for enhancing learning in higher education institutions.
- b- To provide pre-service teachers with a forum for reflection on what has been covered, as well as an avenue to express their opinions and views.
- c- To help pre-service teachers apply new pedagogical practices for the world beyond the classroom.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Blogs as a web learning tool

The use of ICT in teacher education programs has been gaining interest throughout the world. This interest places pressure on faculties of education to prepare a new generation of graduates capable of integrating a variety of technological tools into their personal and professional lives. [15] argued that enabling teachers to make effective use of ICT as a tool for deep learning should be top priorities for both, pre-service and in-service programs (p.125), so as to overcome the most important challenge of the teaching profession, which is the preparation of students equipped with the skills needed for 21st century careers. The explosion of technological growth with Web 2.0 applications has opened up new learning possibilities for educational programs and blogs are a promising example of these new applications.

A blog, short for “weblog”, is a web site in which items are posted on a regular basis and usually displayed in reverse chronological order. Like other media, blogs often focus on a particular

subject, such as education, technology, or politics [20], p.53. A blog is “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries called posts...arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent entry appears first” [6], p.18).

Blogs offer several potential benefits to the process of teaching and learning. They have a main role in higher education as they motivate learners to explore academic topics more fully. There are many assignments that teachers can use to create meaningful blog activities. These activities are built around skills such as analyzing, brainstorming, chronicling, collaborating, communicating and comparing [17]. In fact, the applications of weblogs in education are almost endless. They are recommended by professors and educators for a number of reasons. [11]p.120 stated that using blogs for instruction (1) makes learning independent of time and space; (2) encourages learners to be active throughout the course period; (3) helps learners improve their writing; (4) captures changes in thinking; (5) invites people to collaborate; (6) makes education more informal; (7) also involves external people; (8) facilitates the use of images; (9) reduces costs; (10) and encourages people to try out things; (11) self publishing encourages learners to be more responsible and thoughtful. [32] indicated the following benefits: (12) Blogs can contain links, images, sound tracks and the like, making them much more interesting than traditional textbook; (13) they spread ideas rapidly, making them an efficient tool for information transmission in the current rapidly changing world; (14) they provide room for the right of freedom of expression, which is a crucial element for any democratic educational system.

The use of blogs has opened a new way to apply online constructivists’ theory to the learning environment. Murphy (1997) introduced the most important characteristics of constructivism: (1) Knowledge is constructed from and shaped by experience; (2) students take an active role and assume responsibility for their learning; (3) learning should occur in a realistic setting; (4) collaborative and cooperative learning are favored in order to expose the learner to alternative viewpoints; (5) problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills and deep understanding are emphasized, and (6) teachers serve as guides, monitors, coaches and facilitators. According to constructivism theory, learning is gained through construction of new knowledge based on a learner’s prior experience, active learning and



social interaction. Besides, it considers learners as unique with unique needs. Learners should be active constructors of meaning rather than passive receivers of knowledge. So far, blogs lend themselves to provide learners with meaningful experiences which are formed by the individual and influenced by social interaction. Individuals can publish personal journals, share their reflections, thoughts and emotions, and receive comments. Blogs are also effective tools in developing communication skills as they connect bloggers and bring them closer together [25]. They truly expand the walls of the classroom and provide learners with audiences outside the classroom. The nature of the learning environment, different styles, opportunities and activities provided by blogs encourage self confidence, cooperation and collaboration, which may motivate learners to progress towards achieving goals and enjoying their learning experiences.

Despite the many advantages, blogs also have some disadvantages: (1) limited opportunity to access the Internet outside the campus, some learners may go to an Internet café to work on their assignments; (2) the frequent need to develop more advanced computer programs in order to make full use of the content published in a certain blog; (3) technical problems due to Internet downtime service such as poor connection speed and difficulties to log onto the blog or post other types of files like pictures, videos...etc ; (4) lack of feedback and correction as they increase instructors' workload when making corrections and comments, especially in the case of large classes; (5) the poor language used by some learners who are unable to write down their ideas in a compelling, correct and clear manner; (6) lack of privacy, learners should be instructed neither to post personal photos or information, nor to leak private matters to the public; (7) the issue of accuracy, blogs are created and produced by individuals, so they may include biased or inaccurate information; (8) the issue of accessibility, blogs are publicly accessible. Strangers are able to read messages or leave inappropriate comments [14]; [7]; [12]; [23]; [24].

Experiences of integrating educational blogs in pre-service education programs to enhance the process of learning confirmed that pre-service teachers enjoyed the experience and responded positively to blogging activities [8]; [3]; [22]; [2]. It increased their confidence in learning and helped to develop their social skills [26].

Despite the popularity of educational blogging, empirical studies on its effectiveness in learning are limited [4]; [13]. Other studies reported that pre-service teachers preferred synchronous tools such as instant messaging and tele-conferencing in comparison to blogs [28]. Moreover, learners who had never used blogs demonstrated hesitation in using blogs, since they were not sufficiently skilled in using them. Besides, some participants were uncomfortable with the fact that their views and comments would be available to everyone in the classroom, which gave them a feeling of insecurity [31].

5. METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 38 female pre-service teachers of the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Taibah University. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 years old. All participants were Saudi and their native language was Arabic. They were selected from a pool of pre-service teachers enrolling in the different sections of "Principles of Curriculum Construction" course according to certain conditions: possession of a personal computer and Internet access at home, computer literacy and family agreement to access the Internet. The justifications for the existence of these conditions were the following: (1) the Internet was inaccessible inside the campus. (2) Some conservative Saudi families refused the participation of their daughters in online activities so as to protect them from the immoral content available on the web. The participants' previous academic experience with ICT was limited to an "Introduction to computer" course, which was the only course in computer science taught as a compulsory subject in the teacher preparation program. The goal of the "Introduction to computer" course was to help pre-service teachers become knowledgeable and skilful in the basic computer applications. The participants had no previous exposure to other ICTs, such as web 2.0 tools. This was the first course that integrated a social media tool into instruction. Although all participants said that they had heard about blogging, they had never had the opportunity to use such a tool in their courses.

Course blog

The course blog for "Principles of Curriculum Construction", compulsory course in the teacher preparation program, was created on the first term of the academic year 2010. The course was a 13



week syllabus, and it was fully conducted in Arabic. The participants attended face-to-face lectures and they were engaged in blogging which was used as an alternative for classroom discussion. The primary purpose of this blog was to examine how academic blogging can enhance learning and increase social interaction between learners studying the course through, the discussions of some of the issues related to the course, such as traditional curriculum, innovative curriculum, developing curriculum, barriers facing developing curriculum...etc. The blog used in this course was named 'curriculum construction issues'. The course blog was developed by the instructor who provided participants with up-to-date issues which were integrated into the course content in a comprehensive way. All blogging activities were assigned. Participants were encouraged to comment on the posts and vote on the polls on various topics and issues. Before posting their comments, participants were required to read related material of a similar thematic focus. They were also instructed to read and comment on coursemates' posts. They were expected to post an entry every week and to comment on at least three of their colleagues' entries as long as at the end of the course. Introduction of the course blog to participants took place in the second week of the course schedule. Since it was the participants' first experience in academic blogging, the instructor used a three hour laboratory session to train them on how to create and use blogs on blogger.com. The instructor also discussed with them the general manners in writing comments on the course blog. For instance, it was agreed that they had complete freedom to express their ideas and thoughts. It was also accepted to disagree with other participants' opinions but, care should be taken to respect others' views and avoid hurting them.

Data Collection

Two instruments were developed by the researcher in order to obtain pre-service teachers' perceptions about academic blogging; a questionnaire and Semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part collected demographic data on participants' computer expertise, their computer courses and sessions, their use of the web and their experiences with academic and non academic blogging. The second part included twenty items that focused on the participants' learning experience. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 25 pre-service teachers. Based on the

feedback received from the respondents, ambiguous items were deleted. The remaining items were revised to prepare the final version which consisted of 20 items. The questionnaire was distributed to participants at the end of the course blog. The items were formatted with a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree = 5; agree = 4; neutral = 3; disagree = 2; strongly disagree = 1). Participants were given a minimum of one point and maximum of five points for each item, resulting in a total possible score range between 20 and 100.

Semi-structured interviews containing five questions were also conducted with each participant to ascertain views and thoughts about the academic blogging experience. The researcher explained to participants the purpose of the interview and encouraged them to express opinions freely. Participants' approval to use their comments for scientific inquiry was taken. The interview questions were:

1. What are the advantages of discussing course issues in the course blog?
2. What are the disadvantages of discussing course issues in the course blog?
3. What can you say about the influence of the course blog on the interaction with the course instructor and colleagues?
4. Did the course blog encourage you to try non-academic blogging?
5. After studying the course blog, did you try to design a personal blog?

Data Analysis

After scoring participants' responses to the questionnaire, the quantitative method was applied, using SPSS software. For the purpose of the current study, descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages were mainly used. The qualitative method was used for semi-structured interviews. Responses obtained from the interview were subject to thematic analysis.

6. RESULTS

Questionnaire

The first part: demographic data

The results of the first part of the questionnaire revealed that the participants' previous academic experience with computers and web activities was limited to passing the 'Introduction to Computer' course. The main aim of this course was to prepare pre-service teachers to become knowledgeable and skilful in using



basic computer applications. The participants also stated that they accessed the web at home for different purposes such as sending emails, searching for information, downloading materials, playing games and chatting.

Academic blogging was a new experience for all participants. They had no experience with academic blogging prior to the current course. Seven (18%) of the respondents stated that they practiced non academic blogging.

The second part: learning experience

The results of thesecond part of the questionnaire given to the participants were important for a number of reasons: First, the responses indicated that pre-service teachers enjoyed publishing their views (100%), and commenting on their peers'posts (100%).This emphasized that blogging, unlike the traditional classroom, created a learner-centeredflexible environment, where learners were actively engaged and learned at their own pace. There were no limitations of time, place and situation.They could access information from home at their own leisure time and they could also discuss topics withtheir classmates without the need to meet them up physically. Second, pre-service teachers (97.13%) considered that blogging was a useful learning experience. It helped them improve their absorption of the course material (82.84%). This finding pointed out the fact that learners learn more when they enjoy the process of learning and are actively involved (Fard,Tasir& Abu Ziden

2010). Academic blogging provided participants with opportunities to discuss what they covered, analyze what they learned, criticize ideas and thoughts, express many concerns, brainstorm a lot of solutions for the issues, and think about what to write. Through the process of regular posting and commenting, they became subject matter experts and were provided with opportunities for diverse perspectives. Thirdly, the participants reported that the course blog increased their interaction with the instructor and peers (94.8%). They knew more about their peers' characters (88.29%). The course blog created a social setting where pre-service teachers communicate to share information, interact to exchange ideas, and collaborate to solve problems. Despite the fact that discussionswere carried out in traditional lectures, however, what distinguished online discussions was the fact thatthey were recorded and made available for all members. Moreover, the participants could lead discussions the way they like andthey could also evaluate others' posts. Finally, pre-service teachers indicated that they wish to apply blogging when learning most courses (85.56%) and they expressed readiness to use it in their future teaching career (91.43%). Achieving this result was a main goal for conducting the study; training pre-service teachers to apply innovative teaching practices in ways that reflect the changing world in which 21st students learn.



Table (1) Descriptive statistics of pre-service teachers' perceptions towards academic blogging

o	Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Using blogs encourages learners to publish their views	88.57	11.42	-	-	-
2	Using blogs enables learners to read their peers opinions	54.28	45.71	-	-	-
3	Using blogs increases interaction with the instructor and peers.	80	14.28	5.71	-	-
4	I dislike exchanging opinions with others.	-	-	5.71	28.75	37.14
5	I think that the course blogs a medium for discussing topics related to curriculum.	40	45.28	5.71	-	-
6	I feel happy when reading my peers' opinions in the course blog.	54.28	37.14	8.57	-	-
7	I am keen on discussing my view points on all blog topics.	57.14	42.85	-	-	-
8	Using blogs in learning is just a waste of time.	-	2.85	5.71	31.42	43.28
9	I think that using blogs is an effective strategy of cooperative learning.	48.57	42.85	5.71	2.85	-
10	According to me, using blogs to enhance learning is a useful experience.	82.85	14.28	-	-	2.85
11	The effect of blogs on discussing course topics is weak	-	2.85	5.71	54.28	37.14
12	I will use blogs when teaching.	51.43	40	8.57	-	-
13	Using blogs improves learners' absorption of the course.	31.42	51.42	11.42	5.71	-
14	I prefer discussing ideas in regular lectures than blogging.	2.85	20	43.28	28.57	14.28
15	I wish to use blogs in learning most courses.	43.28	42.58	14.44	-	-
16	I come to recognize my colleagues' characters through blogs.	42.58	45.71	8.57	-	-
17	I hope that people all over the world would read my views.	54.28	37.14	8.57	-	-
18	Using blogs limits discussing opinions freely	8.57	11.42	17.14	31.42	31.42
19	I feel excited when watching video segments related to issues published in the course blog.	37.14	60	2.58	-	-
20	I get bored when using blogs to discuss issues related to the course	2.58	-	5.71	14.28	48.57

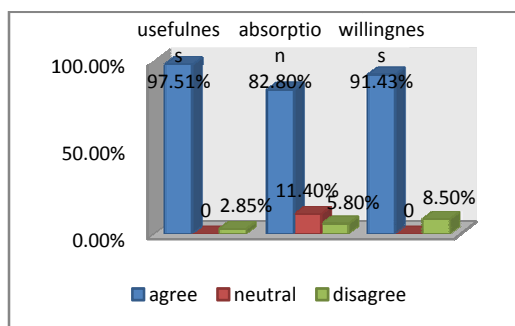


Figure (1): Pre-service teachers perceptions of the usefulness, course absorption, and willingness to use blogging

7. INTERVIEWS

Views of pre-services teachers regarding the advantage of discussing course issues in the course blog:

The results of the semi-structured interview indicated many advantages of academic blogging. The advantages for participants were the easy use of features, convenience of submitting assignments electronically, contribution to learners research of information and review of the relevant literature, enhancement of thinking skills and social interaction. The evidence for this is clearly demonstrated in the comments below:

- Easy to use and attractive new experience.
- Reading comments at any time.
- Learning became more interesting.
- A chance to practice things outside the classroom.
- I could go online at anytime.
- Freedom to express opinions and thoughts.
- I had more time to think over the discussion topics.
- Searching information and reviewing literature before posting comments because they would be viewed by others on the web.
- I could easily edit my comments.
- Reading comments supported further thinking about the course issues.
- Learning from peers by viewing their work.
- The course blog documented our assignments and comments.

Views of pre-services teachers regarding the disadvantages of discussing course issues in the course blog:

Participant's feedback (91%) revealed that the most challenging limitation in using the course

blog was technical problems. Others cited the lack of feedback from colleagues on every post. Reading comments was a frustrating and time consuming task to some participants. Three participants raised the issues of publishing rights, posting under other people's name, and lack of privacy.

- Sometimes, it was difficult to browse the net or access information.
- One day I had a problem to access the net, so I decided to ask a colleague to post my assignment.
- I did not receive feedback from colleagues on some posts.
- A colleague copied and pasted my assignment.
- A colleague posted a comment under my name.
- It took long time to read colleagues's comments.
- My comments were public information to Internet users.

Views of pre-services teachers about the influence of the course blog on the interaction with the course instructor and colleagues:

All participants agreed that the course blog was a powerful communication channel with people inside and outside the classroom. They were motivated to share information and receive feedback. The course blog helped them to develop good relationship with classmates as they knew something about their thoughts, ideas and cultural backgrounds. The majority of the participants (94%) felt more comfortable to interact with the course instructor via the blog, while only (6%) gave neutral responses towards connecting with the instructor through the course blog.

- I knew something about my colleagues' personalities and interests.
- Sharing ideas and receiving feedback.
- I could ask the instructor questions I could not ask in class.
- I felt comfortable to contact with the instructor outside the classroom.
- I had friends I did not know.

Views of pre-services teachers about whether the course blog encouraged them to try informal blogging:

The majority of pre-service teachers (76%) said that the course blog encouraged them to try



informal blogs. Blogging became a hobby. They signed up to different blogs to publish their viewpoints on whatever topics interest them; they also shared pictures, music and videos. Blogging provided them with a chance to communicate with family members and friends. Moreover, they started chatting with people they did not know. About (24%) of the participants said that because of study load they did not try informal blogging, although they enjoyed their course blog experience.

Views of pre-services teachers regarding trying to design a personal blog:

From the group of participants who tried informal blogging after the course, (62%) of them said they had personal blogs. They added that creating a personal blog was a simple activity. They spent a few minutes to set up a blog but developing the appropriate content was difficult.

8. DISCUSSION

The results of the study generally revealed that female Saudi pre-service teachers had positive attitudes towards using the course blog to enhance learning. They were very enthusiastic about academic blogging. The course blog assisted their learning in different ways. For instance, it was an extension of the class lectures. It was an informal way to reflect on their personal views, thoughts, beliefs and reactions. It engaged them in discussion, exploration and discovery. Discussing the issues included in the course blog required them to practice critical thinking and problem-solving strategies. Furthermore, the course blog gave them complete freedom to experience personal knowledge creation, since each learner used her own way to solve problems. This autonomy assisted pre-service teachers to build self-confidence and they assumed responsibility for their own learning, which led to forming positive attitudes towards blogs. In addition to learner-centered instruction, the course blog supported community-centered instruction. It enabled pre-service teachers to work, read, and judge and share their learning experiences within and beyond the classroom walls as it provided them with a doorway to a global audience. Interaction with peers and other learners in a flexible environment stimulated learning and increased learners' involvement.

However, the findings of the study indicated some disadvantages. One was related to the usual access problems which sometimes interrupted the process of learning. Another

serious disadvantage was plagiarism. Some students complained that their colleagues copied and pasted their assignments or posted them under their names. According to the instructor, their unethical behavior was attributed to their lack of blogging experience; limited awareness of online citation skills.

9. LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The major limitation in this study was the small number of sample size. This was justified by two challenges. The first was the lack of Internet access inside the campus. Home access was another challenge for some participants, because of lack of personal computers and /or family disagreement to browse the net. Some conservative families refused their daughters' participation in online activities so as to protect them from the inappropriate material available on the Internet. Future studies of incorporating blogs in Saudi higher education are needed to be applied on larger samples, because search in this area is still new and not sufficiently tested.

10. CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of the study indicated that blogs are indeed an authentic, interesting and communicative resource that can serve a variety of purposes. They can provide a rich and easy-to use environment for both learners and instructors. The participants of this study were willing to embrace this tool as part of their learning environment and to make use of it when teaching. However, in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges, careful planning is required to align this tool with the existing curriculum to promote collaboration, communication, social interaction, critical thinking and problem solving skills which are important for future careers

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