

Blogging in the Classroom: Using WordPress Blogs with BuddyPress Plugin as a Learning Tool

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Abstract

In an effort to speak the social media language of our students, better prepare them for today's advertising jobs and seek the helpful learning aspects of social media, three professors used WordPress blogs with 130 students one semester in three different advertising courses. Descriptions of how blogs were used to enhance student participation, engagement and skill building are included along with students' quantitative and qualitative assessments. The use of course blogs led to multiple positive self-reported student learning outcomes. Based on the researchers' self-evaluation and analysis of students' survey feedback, and research into the current advertising and teaching environment, this article offers insights for using blogging to provide added benefits to advertising courses including improving the learning environment and increasing student skill development.

In recent years, the traditional teacher-centered classroom structure has slowly been replaced with new learner-centered approaches. Engagement and interactivity have become the goals of many teaching philosophies, while inclusion of new technologies has been useful in achieving these goals. These approaches are evident in advertising education. In fact, when it comes to the advertising jobs our students seek, most agencies now look for employees with digital and social media skills. This article looks at the use of blogging in online, traditional and hybrid course structures as a learning tool and for digital skills development.

The *New York Times* reports in "Advertising Companies Fret over a Digital Talent Gap" that ad agencies are hiring for digital at all levels. Allison Kent-Smith, director for digital development at Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, says about prospective employees, "You have to get very close to technology. You have to get your hands in it." Are we letting our students get their hands in technology? Doug Weaver, who provides digital training to publishers and agencies, says we are not. "Colleges and universities are not teaching the skills they need to survive in this environment," he says (Vega, 2011). Similarly, *Advertising Age* reports digital skills are no longer a plus but rather are expected. Mobile and social media are the two areas most in demand and hybrid roles are here to stay.

Technology is playing a greater role in

the education of college students. The latest annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education by the Babson Survey Research Group reveals that the proportion of higher education students taking at least one online course is at an all-time high of 34% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The *Chronicle of Higher Education's* report on online learning reveals that the university system of Maryland now requires undergraduates to take 12 credits in alternative learning modes, including online. The state of Texas has proposed similar rules and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system has pushed to have 25% of credits earned online by 2015. Private entities are also pushing technology use in the classroom. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has made blended learning a cornerstone of a \$20-million education technology grant program (Mooney, 2010). The technology now available for the classroom is revolutionizing both teaching and learning.

The push to use online technology isn't only coming from the advertising industry and educational institutions. Web communication has become socially and culturally embedded in students' lives. Students not only consume digital content, but also are increasingly creating their own public digital content (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

The Forrester Research Social Technology Profile Tool, based on a survey of more than

25,000 respondents, categorizes consumers into seven levels of social technology participation. Creators are defined as those who publish a blog or website or upload personally created videos, music, stories and articles. Critics post ratings and review content on others' blogs, contribute to online forums and contribute and edit wiki articles. Joiners are those who maintain a profile on a social networking site. According to Forrester Research, some 46% of all U.S. 18-24 year olds are considered Creators, and 50% are Critics. A full 85% are Joiners, and only 3 % are considered Inactives. Compare this to 45-54-year olds where only 19% are Creators, 37% are Critics, 38% are Joiners and a full 21% are Inactives (Forester Research, 2012). Today's students use technology not just for information gathering, but also for public information creation much more so than older generations (Robin, 2008).

Students' lives are integrated with social technology, and they are now bringing these expectations to the classroom. Students increasingly expect instructors to use online technology in the classroom, and that use, or nonuse, can impact perceptions of value and effectiveness (Pearson, 2010). Kroeber (2005) found that when comparing two sections of the same course, class evaluations of perceived value of the course and the professor's effectiveness were higher for the sections of classes using technology versus all traditional classroom instruction.

Contrast this push to digital and social media with the most recent results of a Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group report that shows faculty are willing to embrace social media in their personal and professional lives, but they are less likely to use it for teaching purposes. Fifty-nine % of faculty indicate the interactive nature of online and mobile technologies can create better learning environments, yet 75% feel that online and mobile technologies are more distracting than helpful to students (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013).

Perhaps we need to stop thinking of technology as a distraction from learning and instead make it an integral part of our instruction. As we debate the effectiveness and positive and negative benefits of computer technologies in the classroom, our students continue to use emerging technologies in their personal lives, and technology use continues to increase in everyone's professional lives (Robin, 2008). Instructors can teach effectively with or without technology, but technology is the language that our students now speak, and digital is the skill most in demand for the jobs in the advertising

agencies they seek. In an effort to speak the "social media language of our students," better prepare them for today's advertising jobs and seek the helpful learning aspects of social media, three professors embarked on a project to integrate blogs and social networking features into a set of diverse advertising courses. This was part of a larger initiative by a large northeastern research university's teaching and learning center's program to increase technology use in classrooms.

The study sought to engage students in learning through the use of class blogs in an effort to positively impact learning. Wheeler and Lambert-Heggs (2009) describe the main characteristics and benefits of blogs. As online reflective diaries, they offer the opportunity to interact with writers through posting of comments that promote dialogue with a like-minded community (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Kop, 2007). The archive feature of blogs provides users access to a complete record of what has gone before – a history presented in reverse chronological order. The ability to embed hyperlinks, images, video and audio also enriches the content options for blog writers. Blogs promote collaboration and the sharing of best practices (Hramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Ojala, 2005), as well as encourage deep, continuous learning through regular reflection (O'Donnell, 2006). We found many of these benefits and more.

Literature Review

The use of blogs as an educational tool is a recent development. However, existing research in this area has shown that blogs can support learning through the development of knowledge communities (e.g. Oravec, 2003), supporting meaning-making (Fiedler, et al., 2004), sharing of resources and opinions (Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and providing a tool for reflection and feedback (Smith, et al., 2009).

Blogs also have been shown to reinforce critical thinking and engagement (Lawrence & Dion, 2010) and to be useful for pre-class preparation as well as post-class reflections (Al-Fadda & Al-Yahya, 2010). In addition, blogs have been found to support collaboration and interaction among students and to help produce significant improvements in student's soft skills (Wang, et al., 2008; Saeed & Yang, 2008; Chang, et al., 2008; Kaplan, et al., 2010).

Writing assignments focused on current issues and events have been found to attract student attention and facilitate understanding (Malcolm, 2006). These assignments also require students to develop and improve communication as well as organizational and ana-

lytical skills (Pearson, 2010). Ammarell (2000) found that participating in online news group discussions (similar to blogging) improved student writing and critical thinking skills and involved students more actively in the learning process.

Professors have seen success in integrating social media into course instruction. Pearson (2010) found that the use of online blogs in an introductory sociology course enhanced participation, engagement and skill building. Hettche and Clayton (2012) demonstrated that using a student's prior knowledge and experience with social media could help achieve student engagement, comprehension and learning in digital marketing and advertising courses. Braender, Kapp and Years (2009) used a WordPress blog in an information technologies management course that produced numerous benefits in student learning and engagement as well as instructor feedback. They found students were pleased with the content and felt it contributed to their learning of material. The researchers also found that the commenting system provided instructors with a better understanding of students' opinions, perceptions and experiences than a traditional learning environment. It provided more immediate feedback, which gave instructors the opportunity to continuously improve the learning environment (Pearson, 2010).

Muwanga-Zake, Parkes and Gregory (2010) found that incorporating information and communication technologies (including blogs) supports constructivist and active learning, and they observed an overall shift toward virtual and open spaces, where the distinction between lecturer and students is obscured. Their observations suggested that pedagogical blogs must require rules at the outset, including planning exact times when scaffolding would be offered to students. The authors also suggest that students should be informed from the outset that their posts will be assessed and accessible to the public.

Wang, Lin and Liao (2012) focused on gaining a better understanding of why students are willing to blog. Data collected from a sample of 358 students at seven universities in Taiwan indicated that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and personal innovation in information technology have a significant influence on perceived enjoyment, which in turn significantly influenced blogging intention.

Zinger and Sinclair (2013) noticed that students spend most of their free (and classroom) time participating in social media. In response, they incorporated social media (blogs, specifically) into the classroom as a way to increase

student engagement, retention and achievement. To translate complex science into something a broad audience could understand and appreciate, students created their own health blog to share what they learned in class. The authors found multiple benefits. The blogs drew knowledge from many fields and educated the student in a holistic, cross-curricular manner. The blogs also provided a forum for academic discourse that reached beyond the university and augmented knowledge in the education program. Students were excited to have the community view their blogs, which took their writing assignments into the real world. Blogging decreased writing anxiety, boosted overall writing scores and served as a useful networking tool. Blogging encouraged collaborative teamwork and communication skills; and students' enthusiasm improved their engagement and retention.

Blau, Mor and Neuthal (2013) investigated student interactions in a blog-based learning community of 56 graduate students who wrote individual blogs. They found that choosing the appropriate type of content (such as sharing experiences rather than providing information, calling for feedback and providing the blogger's own comments) augmented peer interaction. Group interactions with comments were seen as non-intrusive and prompted interactions with offline and online peers.

Alterman and Larusson (2013) studied a single class of 25 in which students participated in a blogging activity. The authors saw the activity as participation in both a discourse and knowledge community with many learning benefits for students. At one level, blogging was viewed as an activity of writing, reading and commenting. At a second level, students were able to share their thoughts in their own voices. At a third level, student posts and commentary formed a commons of information that could be mined later for other learning activities. The persistence of content enabled students to create common knowledge and share their understandings of the course material on their own schedules. As an example of mining the aggregated information, in the three days before written papers were due, there was a significant rise in students reading the blogs. The blog gave students a base of common knowledge for the concepts that appeared in required papers.

Further insights were found from a longitudinal study conducted by three professors who incorporated blogging as an instructional strategy (Hungerford & Kresser, et al., 2011). A main conclusion from this study was that it is important that blogs are not simply another task for students. The blogs must have their

own purpose. The researchers also found that it is helpful to take note of student needs and insert or remove instructor feedback from blog discussions accordingly. Offer direction when needed, but don't let professor intrusion shut down conversation. Blog discussions also should be incorporated into face-to-face class time to let students know you hear what they are saying on the blogs. Benefits also come from encouraging students to respond with more than text and to use a variety of multimedia.

Other researchers have found blogging for internships specifically useful. Chu, Kwan and Warning (2012) studied the social nature of blogging in a single internship course and described blogs' ability to facilitate learning and communication between student interns. Undergraduate information management students used three different blogging platforms in the course of their internships and evaluated the use of blogs through a questionnaire. Students had positive perceptions of blogging as a tool to facilitate information management and mutual support. Students said writing blogs was useful for self-reflection and communication but expressed dissatisfaction with comments because of their lack of depth and frequency. Researchers explained the students were more focused on writing their own blogs than on commenting. They concluded that blogging is perceived to support collaborative learning, but there is a need for consistent guidelines and recurrent reminders of the purpose of the task.

Past research into blogging in university courses provides many useful insights. However, the research has mostly been isolated in a single class or a non-advertising subject. The exploratory research described in this article sought to measure the learning effects of class blogs across a diverse set of subjects and courses specifically within an advertising program.

Course Descriptions

Three professors from a school of media and communication decided to use the Internet to increase student engagement and interest in learning. They did this through the creation of public class blogs. These were built on the popular WordPress blogging platform with a BuddyPress plugin that added social networking updates and group features students are accustomed to using on popular social networks such as Facebook. For example, BuddyPress enabled threaded discussion to happen in public and private groups versus the more formal posting of individual articles with comments in blogs. Each course blog was designed to be an integral and required part of the course

structures.

In two summer courses, the blogs were implemented and tested by incorporating course designs and suggestions from previous research. From the summer experience, best practices were developed for using the technology in the full fall courses. Collaboration occurred among the three professors of this study on how best to modify the use of the blog to fit into their diverse course topics. Ultimately WordPress and BuddyPress were incorporated into the following upper-level courses for Fall 2010: one section each of Morality, Law & Advertising and Advertising Internship; and two sections of Interactive Media and Advertising.

Approximately 130 students were taught using this instructional technology, and a post-semester online survey was administered to ascertain self-reported student learning outcomes and course evaluation. All professors indicated that it was a positive experience and that their students were optimistic about the use of the course blogs. In fact, all of the courses continued to use blogs after the study.

Below are descriptions of the courses and the various roles the blog played in course design.

ADV 4196 Morality, Law and Advertising.

This upper-level, writing-intensive course focuses on the legal and ethical constraints on advertising practice. Federal laws and regulations, media standards and practices, and professional ethics are studied to determine what can or cannot be done in advertising. Topics include deception, copyright, publicity, comparative advertising and moral philosophy. The course is offered both on campus and online. The online version of the class was used for this study and the course blog.

The course was structured around weekly text chapters, written lessons and other readings delivered via the university learning management system (Blackboard). The course also had several writing assignments and two exams that were collected and administered via Blackboard. Blackboard also contained students' grades. Class discussion occurred on the WordPress class blog with students creating a blog post that answered a weekly question related to a main topic covered that week (See Figure 1). Then students were required to make comments on other classmates' blog posts. Students were informed of the public nature of the blog from the beginning. Weekly written assignments submitted directly to the professor were offered as an alternative option to public posts, though no students selected the nonpublic option.

The course blog also contained a nonpublic

Q&A and Social Forum, which offered discussion boards where students could post Facebook-like updates (threaded conversations) to obtain answers to commonly asked questions from other students or the instructor. The Social Forum provided a forum for university or life topics, such as football games or weekend activities not directly related to the course subject.

A single class blog was designed to be an integral part of the course and accounted for 20% of the students' final grade. The professor set up the free course blog following simple WordPress tutorials offered on the WordPress.com website. Students were added as authors and sent login instructions and links to WordPress tutorials on posting and commenting. Each week students were required to make one blog post answering a weekly question (providing relevant current examples) by Wednesday evening. They were then required to respond to at least two of their classmates' blog posts with comments by Friday evening. Blog posts had to be substantial to earn full credit, including support of arguments and examples via hyperlink citation. Late posts were not counted in order to ensure a more active and current discussion. Students also were encouraged to take advantage of the multimedia capabilities of blogs by imbedding photos and videos. Blogging activity was monitored each week and the professor participated actively

with comments. All outside comments had to be approved before being published. Participation grades were calculated at the end of the semester by looking at the blog activity log.

ADV 4101 Interactive Media and Advertising. This advanced course covers the dynamic space of interactive web-based media. Specifically, it explores how advertisers can use best practices in digital to create branded programs, which are seamlessly integrated with offline, general advertising and marketing efforts. Attention is paid to creating interactive tactics that consider the client's business objectives and audience experience. Lectures and practice focus on information architecture, interaction design, compelling copy and audience usability. Through group and individual projects, testing and in-class assignments, students solve brand problems and extend brand personality to interactive media (web, mobile, etc.) in a way that connects with audiences while engaging and persuading them. The course focuses on the process and tactics of brand interactive programs versus building websites.

The course outcomes of Interactive Media and Advertising were designed for students to examine the conflicts between user-centered design and business goals; develop solutions to meet both business and user goals and learn about usability testing and its role in

Figure 1:
Mortality, Law and Advertising Class Blog Featuring a Student Post



interactive media development. Students were required to contribute to a class group blog that was integrated into the course via a social media exploration assignment that was ongoing throughout the semester and was worked on both individually and within assigned groups. Students were provided with a blog tutorial and given links to other WordPress support materials (See Figure 2).

The purpose of the first blog entry was to identify goals for the client and brand. Students were asked to consider whether reach, reputation or engagement was the goal. This exercise helped students to understand that each social media application serves different functions and is dependent upon community members.

The second blog entry asked students to include a list of influential brand ambassadors for their brand's category. They were asked to explain where the influential people were found, give examples of what they are saying and offer links to their entries. Each student was required to comment on at least two peers' blog entries each week. The BuddyPress system was very well received by the students and they enjoyed commenting on each others' entries and offering live suggestions to their peers signed in to the course community. The blog posts counted as 20% of a student's final course grade.

ADV 3185 Advertising Internship. This course offers hands-on, organized, professional work, under supervision, in selected advertising agencies, marketing communications or advertising-related businesses. The internship enables students to acquire new skills, to assess their employability, to seek mentoring, to make contacts, to earn academic credit and, ideally, to earn payment as well.

The internship program oversees 120+ students per year in dozens of large, medium and small companies across the region and, in the summer, across the nation and occasionally internationally. Interns must complete several reflection papers throughout the semester. Most of the papers had been so well written and inspiring that the instructor felt that the students should share their feedback publicly with other students, faculty members and the internship hosts.

Therefore, the fall 2010 internship class required students to post their reflections, experiences and ideas about their individual internships to the departmental blog rather than share them only privately with the instructor (See Figure 3). Each student was required to post to the blog twice during the semester. The professor set up students' names as contributors, and they were given a tutorial on how to use WordPress. The blog tutorial included technical information and links to tutorial videos, a

Figure 2:
Interactive Media and Advertising Tutorial Explaining BuddyPress Features



reminder that the blog was public and tips on what and what not to post. Students were told that the blog assignment was designed to help them develop their social media skills, build their resume and build their portfolio as they prepared to graduate. The blog posts counted as 5% of the student's final course grade.

Method

Research Questions

The purpose of the survey was to ascertain student perception and learning outcomes of blog use in the classes. Specifically, the study set out to answer these questions:

RQ1. Did the class blog help increase overall satisfaction with the course and should a class blog be used in future classes?

RQ2. Was receiving peer and instructor feedback a positive aspect of the class blog?

RQ3. Did the class blog help students to better know their classmates and instructors better know their students?

RQ4. Did the class blog help increase attention to the course and did students feel more engaged in their learning?

RQ5. Did the class blog help students with practical application of theory and enhance understanding of course material?

RQ6. Did the use of a class blog help enhance student's communication skills and did students consider the use of web technology worth their time?

Research Design

At the completion of the semester (after final grades had been entered), students were contacted via their university email accounts and asked to participate in an online survey about the class blogs. Student emails were obtained by professors through their university class lists and a link to the online survey was sent with an invitation for the students to participate. Students signed an online consent form and were informed of the confidentiality of the survey. The sampling frame included email addresses of students collected from the Blackboard class lists in the four advertising department courses that used blogs during the fall 2010 semester.

After final grades for the semester were submitted, a mass blind copy email was sent to the entire student population who completed one of the four courses. The online questionnaire was created in Google Docs and consisted of 25 questions through which respondents evaluated their experience with the class blog. Respondents were asked to rate 23 statements

Figure 3:
Student Post about their Internship in the Advertising Internship Class Blog

AD LIB

blog

temple university's department of advertising blog · what's happening in advertising

Advertising. Photography + Illustration. Social Media. Career Scoop. Events. Teaching High School.

A 9 to 5 Surprise (actually, I only work 9 to 2)



Obviously for an internship, your hours aren't going to be the same as your full-time job. I work downtown at ChatterBlast and one of the first things they asked us – even before our orientation day – was what kind of schedule we'd like and our vacation plans. My only experience before this was for a designer, where there was no set schedule and I'd come in with night-before

Written by **Brian M Warner**
Posted on **June 20, 2014**
Filed under **Internships**
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- Ask a Copy Writer
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- Danny Hakim on **Creative Intern at College Glasses**

RSS Links

- All posts

on a 4-point Likert scale indicating their level of agreement or disagreement. Both positive and negative statements were included to avoid bias. Due to the diverse nature of the course topics, not all questions were applicable for all students. Thus, a fifth response option of "Not Applicable" was included. These closed-ended questions were followed by two open-ended questions. Students were given a time frame of three weeks to complete the survey during winter break between the fall and spring semester.

A total of 62 responses were collected out of 130 students taking the courses representing a response rate of 48%. In 2008, Macias, Springston, Lariscy and Neustifter published a content analysis of 46 communication journals and 565 surveys over 13 years. The average mean response rate for email was found to be 30%. The authors concluded by stating, "With the exception of personal interviews, which are not often practical, it appears that yielding minimum response rates of 50% ... is often not realistic in contemporary times" (Macias, et al., 2008). Thus, the response rate of this survey was deemed to provide useful insight.

Results

Results of the student survey indicated overall positive outcomes. Mean, standard deviation and percentage of agreement were calculated for analysis. The scale used was 1 = Completely Disagree to 4 = Completely Agree so that higher numbers indicate more agreement. "Not Applicable" responses were set as missing val-

ues. Table 1 summarizes the students' opinions on using blogs in various advertising courses

RQ1. Students were split on whether the class blog helped increase overall satisfaction with the course, with 51% of students indicating they somewhat or completely disagreed that the blog increased their satisfaction and 49% saying it did (see Table 1). Some of this response may be explained by the diverse course subjects and course structures within which the blogs were used. When asked whether the blog would be useful, some students said, "I don't think it would be, unless it played a bigger role in the course structure," while others said, "I think a blog is always helpful if students are active in participating." The blogs were integrated in varying degrees among the three course types, and this seems to have produced the mixed response.

In another question, 58% of students somewhat or completely disagreed that the blog was the best part of the course. This indicated that other aspects of the course were more important. However, the blog did seem to have significant additional benefits. For example, when asked if a class blog should be used in future classes, a full 81% of students somewhat agreed or completely agreed that a class blog should be used (see Table 1). Individual student responses ranged from "It depends on the class" to "If you graduate from college with a media degree and do not understand blog usage, effects or the collaborative aspects of successful blogs, you are unprepared to graduate."

RQ2 was designed to look at the effect a

Table 1:
Students' ratings on the usefulness of blogs in four advertising courses

Survey questions	N	Mean	SD	%Agree
Blog increased overall satisfaction with course	59	2.6	1.0	49
Blog should be used in future classes	62	3.2	.07	81
Instructor feedback was a positive aspect of blog	50	3.5	.07	62
Peer feedback was a positive aspect of blog	54	3.0	.09	55
Blog helped to better know my classmates	58	2.5	.09	55
Instructor knew me better through the blog	60	2.7	1.0	62
Blog increased my attention to the course	59	2.8	1.0	64
Blog helped me feel more engaged in learning	61	2.9	1.0	67
Blog helped with practical application of theory	57	2.8	1.0	61
Blog enhanced understanding of course material	57	2.9	.09	69
Blog enhanced my communication skills	61	2.9	.09	67
Blog improved my skills using Web technologies	62	2.9	1.1	65

Note: Using the 4-Point Likert scale where 1 = Completely Disagree and 4 = Completely Agree

class blog had on students' perception of peer and instructor feedback. Did the blog increase or decrease perceived feedback in the course? Of student respondents, 94% somewhat or completely agreed that having instructor feedback was a positive aspect of having the class blog, and 70% somewhat or completely agreed that having peer feedback was a positive aspect of the class blog structure (see Table 1). In terms of professor feedback, student comments included, "The blog was also useful because the professor posted notes/tips about our projects there, so they were easy to reference while at home," and "I liked the comments available to us from our professor." Individual student comments further explained, "It gives a broader sense of learning from each other," "If I didn't understand a topic, the blog would be beneficial in learning material through students' words," and "I liked seeing every student's opinions."

RQ3 was designed to ascertain if the use of a blog would help deepen student-to-student and student-to-professor relationships. Slightly more than half (55%) indicated they got to know their classmates better through the blog (see Table 1). Even more students agreed – 62% – that they felt the instructor knew them better through the use of the class blog (see Table 1). One student indicated the blog "... provides students with a more comfortable environment to express their ideas, options, etc." Other students said, "The blog was a way to share our experiences with each other," "I liked that my peers were reading what I said and commenting/having discussions with me" and "I liked being able to interact with my class mates [sic] and get feedback."

With RQ4, the focus was whether students felt like the inclusion of the class blog increased their overall attention to the course and whether it helped increase engagement in the course. Almost two-thirds (64%) somewhat or completely agreed that the use of the course blog increased the attention they paid to the course (see Table 1). In terms of engagement, 66% indicated that they somewhat agreed or completely agreed the class blog helped them feel more engaged in their learning (see Table 1). One student said, "The blog keeps you more engaged with the learning compared to classroom settings." Other students said, "I feel students would be more comfortable participating in a blog than speaking in class" and "This interaction outside of the class room is very useful and gives a broader sense of learning from each other."

RQ5 questions looked at whether students felt the use of the class blog helped them with practical application of course theory and

enhanced their overall understanding of course material. More than half (56%) somewhat or completely agreed that the class blog helped them with practical application of course theory (See Table 1). In addition, 61% somewhat or completely agreed that the discussion on the class blog enhanced their understanding of course material (See Table 1).

Other questions asked students about preparation for their future careers. More than two in three (69%) somewhat or completely agreed that participating in the course blog helped them develop important career skills. Student comments included "It gets a conversation going and requires you to actually take a deeper look into the subject matter," "The class blog helped me relate events that I found on my own to what we were learning in class" and "It is a good way to learn some of the online skills necessary for the advertising profession."

RQ6 went beyond course-specific learning goals to see if the course blog helped improve student abilities in other areas. Did the use of the course blog help provide them with the digital and social media skills sought by today's advertising agencies? Did the additional learning required to use the WordPress blogging technology enhance digital communication skills or distract from the course experience? Two-thirds (67%) somewhat or completely agreed that using the class blog enhanced their overall communication skills (see Table 1). Additionally, 65% of students somewhat or completely agreed that the use of the blog helped improve their overall skills in using web technology (See Table 1). Comments in this area included "I think this can increase my overall writing skills," "It is better for sharpening writing skills" and "The class blog was nice because it taught [me] how to use a blog forum."

Discussion

Overall the experience of using a blog in these classes was positive, yet not necessary for the learning of course-specific material. This was expressed by one student who said, "It was helpful, but I don't think it was absolutely necessary." However, when looking at the broader perspective of additional skills, students could see many added benefits of utilizing a class blog.

Added benefits. Students saw many added benefits from using a course blog. They indicated they "liked being able to apply the material I learned in my own way to the situation," that "It made me realize I wasn't alone in my thoughts," and "It's just a helpful tool for bringing a class together and encouraging communication that helps everyone learn." Blogs also can help

certain students participate, such as the student who said the blog “gave me the opportunity to express my opinions because sometimes in typical classroom settings, I do not feel comfortable speaking in front of others.” Other students simply said knowing how to blog should be a necessary skill to learn anyway. One student said, “Introductory media courses should be required to use blogs; they need to learn about social media and the interactive world to be successful in their careers, and what better way to learn than through hands-on experience?”

Open-ended questions revealed other benefits not considered in the close-ended questions. One was the value of the blog and the BuddyPress social network features in facilitating group work. When asked what they liked about using the class blog, students said it was “easy to share documents with your group,” it was “MUCH better than emailing the document back and forth,” and “I liked the workspace it provided. So much better than endless chains of emails.” Another said, “I found the class blog to be very helpful in our group project. We could all post, edit and contribute. It was also great to have our previous research on the blog when it came time for the final presentation.”

Many of the students’ open-ended comments indicated that they liked being able to interact with their classmates, receive feedback, and learn from each other. This occurred in the internship class where they could learn from other students’ workplace experiences. Even the employers said they enjoyed reading what the students wrote. In the interactive class, students indicated that it gave them a great workspace for their group project. In the law and ethics course, one student said that she used the link to the class blog to help her get a job. There was also an instance where the editor of a magazine commented directly to a student’s post. One student simply said he/she “felt more prepared for the real world.”

Integration is key to success. Other important insights were obtained from the open response questions. If professors are considering use of a blog in a course, structure and blog integration is important. Suggestions for success include making the blog central to the course design and including required elements that count toward the student’s grade. It is important to require posting, as well as commenting, on a set schedule. Students indicated that the professor should emphasize the blog as important to the course and participate on the blog themselves. It should not be seen as a “novel” add-on. When sufficient scaffolding

and participation wasn’t provided, frustrations were expressed such as one student saying, “It just seemed like busy work because I don’t think anyone cared enough to read or follow the blogs.” Another student said, “The blog wasn’t the main focus of the class, so it was easy to forget about, especially if not reminded when posts are due.” Another student indicated that blogs should not be used “because there is not [a] guarantee that others will read it.” It is apparent that the different levels of integration of blogs and requirements across the three course designs produced various student opinions.

One student’s response sums up this insight. “In my experience, other classes that have used blogs I did not find helpful at all. I didn’t see the point, really, because I don’t think students were using the blog as a means of communicating with other students. They’re only on there to do what they need to do to get credit for their work.” Simply adding a blog to a course is not enough. A blog needs to be required but also has to become an integral part of the course structure and culture. Will the class blog be an assignment to check off or will real class communication take place?

Concerns and barriers to blog adoption.

What are the main concerns or barriers to use of social media (including blogs) in education? According to a recent Allen and Seaman (2014) Pearson/Babson survey, the top concerns of social media use among faculty are integrity of student submissions (72%) and concerns about privacy (63%). In the area of privacy, 91% of faculty are concerned that others outside of the class should not be able to participate in class discussions, 89% are concerned that others outside of class should not be able to view class discussions, and 87% are concerned about risks to personal privacy of students.

As of January 2014, 89% of U.S. 18-29-year olds are active on social networking sites (“Social Networking Fact Sheet,” 2014). Also, recent surveys indicated 92% of companies use social media for hiring. Three out of four hiring managers and recruiters check candidates’ social profiles (Beese, 2013). For anyone seeking an executive role, a social media presence via LinkedIn, company blogs or Twitter is almost mandatory, according to Irene McConnell, executive coach. She says “Executives are expected to have an online presence which casts them as a thought leader, passionate about what they do and able to inspire others” (Garone, 2014).

Establishing a professional blog presence in college could give students a leg up in the job market. In fact, 68% of hiring managers indicate they have hired someone because of their online

presence (Swallow, 2011). It is also important to note that not all classroom conversation has to occur on a blog. If some courses or specific sections of a class deal in more sensitive subjects, those topics can be kept within a password-protected learning management system or simply discussed exclusively in the physical classroom. Overall, public discussion via a social media blog helps provide students social media skills and a professional online presence. We want our students to be placed in industry jobs, and advertising agencies are desperate for social media-savvy candidates. Individual students worried about privacy concerns can and should always be given the option of replacing blogging assignments with private, written reports. In eight years of one professor's experience using blogs in the Advertising Law and Ethics course, no student has objected to the public nature of the blog. To the contrary, many students have indicated the public blog has helped them secure industry internships and jobs.

Integrity of student submissions has also been raised by faculty as a concern over social media use in the classroom. In surveys conducted by Donald L. McCabe, he found that roughly 40% of 14,000 undergraduates admitted to copying a few sentences in written assignments and that the number of students who believed that copying from the Web constitutes "serious cheating" is declining from 34% in 2006 to only 29% in 2010 (Gabriel, 2010). Plus, a Pew Research Internet study indicates some 55% of college presidents say plagiarism has increased in college students' papers over the past ten years (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). Yet, we must not confuse access to the Internet with using blogging as a tool. What this research tells us is that plagiarism is an Internet problem and not a blog problem. Are students more likely to cheat in publicly published and searchable blogging assignments versus privately submitted written assignments? Plagiarism due to increased access to the Internet is a broader education issue for any type of assignment in higher education. The overwhelming majority of college presidents (89%) believe that computers and the Internet have played the major role in this trend (Parker, Lenhart & Moore, 2011). However, computers, the Internet and social media are not going away. The possible negative aspects of the use of blogs and other social media should not dissuade professors from the positive role that blogs and other social media can play in learning and skill development.

Given the results of this study and the review of social media in the classroom research, the

following guidelines are recommended when incorporating blogging into a course:

1. Inform students from the beginning the blog is public and offer alternative assignments.
2. Make blog posts and responses required elements that count towards the students' grades.
3. Make blogs central to course design – students shouldn't perceive it as a "novel" add-on.
4. Professors must participate on the blog themselves and emphasize it in class.
5. Emphasize the importance of the blog, and bring up posts in other parts of the course.
6. Create private areas for non-public discussion and workspace for group projects.
7. Encourage use of the blog for professional development, networking and job placement.
8. Use a free, simple and universal blogging platform such as WordPress.com

Limitations and future directions.

This study has limitations. Information gathered from the 62 student respondents does not provide a complete picture of all 130 students taking the course. The lower number of responses could be due to surveys being sent after the courses were complete and grades posted. Motivation may have been low. Perhaps in the future surveys could be fielded toward the middle or the end of the semester to elicit more responses.

Because of the diversity of course subjects and structures, further studies may find it useful to delve deeper into specific course designs. Which specific course blog structures were more effective than others? That said, the purpose of the study was to measure blog effectiveness across varied courses to see if a blogging design in general can have added learning benefits regardless of course topic or structure. In spite of limitations, the study provides useful insight and consideration into the use of blogs in classes and suggests best practices for design.

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