Weblogs – Virtual Discussion in Educational Settings

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Abstract:
Based on a comprehensive theoretical framework [1] – in which we (Baumgartner, Bergner and Pullich suggest a typology of Content Management Systems (CMSes)) – this article explores more in detail the intrinsic functionality of weblogs from an educational perspective.

I will summarize different aspects of weblogs, which are unique for weblogs and central for their discursive educational usage:
- Personal micro content updated frequently
- Automatic reorganization on a calendar basis (daily, monthly, yearly archiving)
- TrackBack mechanism as a way of establishing a virtual discussion context
- Blogrolls as a means of creating a virtual discussion group and
- RSS Feeds for syndication and subscription

1 Introductory Remark

As outlined in recently published works [1, 2], our research group on educational technology combines Donald Schön’s Action Theory [3,4] with the Theory of Communicative Action by Jürgen Habermas [5,6]. Our goal is to elaborate an action-communication approach and to apply it to everyday problems of eEducation. We are especially interested in providing support for teachers and learners alike for selecting necessary educational technology for their pedagogical goals. This resulted in an educationally motivated categorization scheme where Weblogs are characterized as specifically suitable for building up a virtual discussion context.

Weblogs are one of the most discussed trends in business and education alike. It is clear that weblogs will have a bright future as a personal web publishing tool, but will they also invade the education and business areas? And more important: will their use mean just another tool or a radical change?

In my presentation I will concentrate on the educational field, but I believe that my arguments will hold for cooperate e-Learning as well. In this article I will outline 4 important features of weblogs and characterize their features in an educational setting.

2 Micro Content and Personal Knowledge History

Weblogs are defined as frequently updated websites where the entries – called posts – have a timestamp and are presented in a reverse chronological order with the most recent posts at the top of the page [7]. From a perspective where the teaching-learning relation is essentially seen as a special kind of communication, this intrinsic feature of weblogs has some educational ramifications.
1. A frequently updated website automatically means that it consists of many small parts. Often a post consists of just a few lines. I call this kind of content “micro content”. Small particles of content consist just of one idea and are therefore more focused than long elaborated articles with many interrelated arguments, side tracks and digressions. This is very helpful for a centered and concentrated discussion process: Small chunks of knowledge are easier to discuss and de- or reconstruct especially on a peer-to-peer basis.

2. Normally it is very difficult to refer to specific ideas or lines of thought via the web. There is no way to refer specifically to a certain text passage of a longer web page because the presentation differs for the readers, depending on the width of the browser window, screen resolution and preferred setting like font size and the like. With the special feature of “PermaLink” small text particles characteristic for weblogs can be addressed and referenced. These PermLinks are generated automatically and have an URL, which does not change (= permanent Link) even if the weblog author is reorganizing his or her weblog.

3. A more philosophical argument why small particles of content are more suitable for a discussion lies in the fact that elaborated thoughts or theories have the intrinsic quality to immunize their arguments against critiques from the outside. As Wittgenstein claims in “On Certainty” [8] the truth of certain propositions is defined in their relation to other internal propositions of the theory and not in the proof of their validity in the external world. It is a system of relations, a kind of worldview, where the different arguments support each other. These sophisticated lines of arguments can’t be destroyed by one or two counter arguments. One has to develop an alternative worldview and oppose it to the theory in question. – And this is much more difficult than to discuss micro content.

Another very important feature related to the chronological order and micro content is the possibility to follow the knowledge building process of the weblog author. Posting many personal comments with a timestamp on a longterm basis builds up some kind of diary. The result is a chronological ordered virtual notebook where one can explore and see the personal knowledge history of the weblog author.

This leads to an intriguing result for the weblog author himself/herself: It promotes metacognition, supports a meta view on the personal learning process. But this is not my main argument here. What I want to stress is that the knowledge presented in the weblog is “Personal Knowledge”. This specific term coined by Michael Polanyi [9] is an attack against the still predominant theory of “Objective Knowledge” by Sir Karl Popper [10]. In Popper’s view knowledge is abstracted and generalized in a sense where the knowing subject is not important anymore.

By contrast Personal Knowledge is rooted in the personal experiences of a knowing subject and is therefore more authentic, spontaneous and immediate. This not only makes exchange of knowledge easier and more personal but encourages discussions grounded in everyday experiences. In this respect Weblogs are conducive to concrete, experiential discussions rooted in personal life experiences and do not support mere abstract academic debates.

Instead of delivering just one isolated work or argument the weblog author is constructing incidentally and casually a web of interrelated thoughts grounded in his or her personal existence. The Weblog does not only provide an insight to the intrinsic motivation of the persons, their preoccupations, anxieties, and hopes, e.g. their worldview, but is also a kind of credential we can trust more than a single action. It is more difficult to cheat in a Weblog
maintained over a long time on a regular basis than in a single long article. (Well, to cheat and
to pretend some kind of personality is not completely impossible as a very known fake –
which disturbed the weblog community –has shown [11].) Instead of saying “I love my dog”
you can conclude this by yourself by visiting my dog’s weblog “Negrita” [12] As Esther
Dyson said: “How do you generate trust? Not by saying, I’m trustworthy,’ but by revealing
information.” [13]

3 Archives and Categories

Weblogs are a special kind of Content Management Systems. This means that all the
characteristics for CMSes do apply to Weblogs as well:

- Content separated from the form of the presentation (via templates, stylesheets)
- Management of content components (via metadata and database)
- Workflow Management (via hierarchical and/or participative role concept: e.g.
  Managing Editor, Content Editor, Design Editor, Associate Editor, Member, Guest
  etc.)

But there exist two special features for Weblogs:

1. All posts are archived automatically by a chronological order. The time span of
the posts collected under the same heading varies, depending on the frequency
of the posts and life span of the Weblog. Sometimes it conforms to a multi-
representational mode archiving the posts on a daily, monthly and yearly basis.
The navigational aid for the daily archives is many times a calendar where
those days with posts are active links to the archive.

![Fig. 1: A typical archive section on a Weblog][14]

2. Weblogs provide the feature to categorize every post. In conjunction with the
chronological archive this results in a powerful information retrieval engine.
For instance, using a weblog I could list all my posts related to Negrita’s
friends automatically without manually linking every article of this category.
4 TrackBack, Blogroll and RSS Feed

For my proposed thesis that Weblogs are especially useful for creating a virtual discussion context the TrackBack feature [16, 17] is essential: In many weblogs you see a link saying “TrackBack (x)”, where “x” stands for a figure, including zero.

Essentially a TrackBack is a notification between weblogs. Clicking on the TrackBack link in the lower right corner of the above weblog A opens up a window with links to other weblogs.
The important thing now is that these links (including the short excerpts) are not generated by the author of the weblog A but are generated automatically. Another weblog author mentions, elaborates or criticizes a post of weblog A in her weblog B. Well, she puts a link in her weblog and references (“quotes”) the other weblog. But this is only a connection from weblog B to A. Author A does not necessarily know that his post is mentioned in another weblog.

Weblogs are able to automate this notification process. They send “pings”, e.g. a small message from one server to the other server and include the link from the originated weblog B into weblog A. It is a kind of notification from author B saying to author A: “This is something you may be interested in.” The TrackBack feature is creating a virtual discussion context: Author A becomes aware that other authors are referring to his posts.

Another feature of Weblogs supporting the generation of a virtual discussion context are Blogrolls. Blogrolling is a relatively new name to a very old tradition. Traditionally most websites have had a Links page, where webmasters point to their favorite websites. Weblogs
have carried on this tradition. But rather than gather their links on a separate page, they typically list their favorite links on the side of their weblogs.

Instead of a specific reference to content (text, post) a Blogroll is a collection of links to other weblogs in general. Weblog authors providing Blogrolls refer to other weblogs, which not only cover similar topics, but also share a similar line of reasoning.

In this sense a Blogroll is some kind of “coming out” claiming: “Look, these authors have interesting stuff on their weblogs as well. I’m reading them on a regular basis. They are my peers influencing my thoughts. If you are interested in my way of thinking, you may find these other weblogs interesting as well.”

Whereas the TrackBack mechanism generates a discussion context for a specific argument Blogrolls create a virtual discussion group where peers are engaged in a discussion floating from one subject to another but in a similar line of thought. Including a weblog in his/her Blogroll does not mean that you totally agree with every single post of the other authors, but that you are interested in the same topics and – more important – that you are sharing a similar worldview.

**Fig. 6: A typical Blogroll [20]**

Last but not least RSS is another feature supporting the creation of a virtual discussion context. RSS is an abbreviation, which stands for different terms. The most important ones are “Rich Site Summary” [21] and “Real Simple Syndication” [22]. RSS is a kind of XML format for sharing web content and especially suited for short text particles (news items, headlines).

**RSS defines an XML grammar (a set of HTML-like tags) for sharing news. Each RSS text file contains both static information about your site, plus dynamic information about your new stories, all surrounded by matching start and end tags.**

Each story is defined by an `<item>` tag, which contains a headline `TITLE`, `URL`, and `DESCRIPTION`. Here’s an example:

```xml
...<item>
<title>RSS Resources</title>
<link>http://www.webreference.com/authoring/languages/xml/rss/</link>
<description>Defined in XML, the Rich Site Summary (RSS) format has quietly become a dominant format for distributing headlines on the Web. Our list of links gives you the tools, tips and tutorials you need to get started using RSS. 0323</description>
</item> [23]
```
With special software you cannot only create this special file ("RSS Feed") automatically, but also announce that you have posted a new message. Technically again this is done by "pings", e.g. sending short messages to another server. This process is called Syndication.

Weblogs are able to subscribe to special RSS Feeds and integrate them automatically in their web pages. This could be used in educational settings in a very interesting way: For instance, one could subscribe to different weblogs (even to a specific category of a weblog) providing posts on similar topics and automatically collect all these messages in one web page. This aggregation procedure creates websites with all the desired information automatically. Normally it includes the headlines with small excerpts and a link to the website where the information originated from.

RSS not only facilitates the reading of different weblogs with special software (RSS Reader), but it also creates a shared discussion space. You can hear (read) the different voices of different weblog authors in one place (web site). This is the virtual pendant to inviting different people to a joint discussion or conference.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined various features of weblogs that make weblogs especially suited for a virtual discussion. Individual weblog authors refer as autonomous subjects in their own weblogs to other authors (Blogroll), syndicate and subscribe (RSS Feed) to their postings and relate specific arguments to each other (TrackBack). Small particles of text (posts) improve discussion access (Micro Content) and enable virtual references (links) to point to the exact passages of text (permaLinks) affected by the specific argument. The chronological ordering of posts over a long period of time and time-related archive with different granularity (daily, monthly, yearly) produces a personal knowledge history providing trust in the person behind the weblog. And building up mutual trust is important for every communicative context.

References:


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