EL WEBLOG COMO RECURSO DIDÁCTICO EN UN ENTORNO UNIVERSITARIO

WEBLOGS AS A DIDACTIC RESOURCE IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

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RESUMEN

El presente estudio tuvo como objeto describir y analizar la experiencia de creación y uso de weblogs (bitácoras) vivenciada por estudiantes de Inglés II de la Universidad Simón Bolívar durante el trimestre enero- marzo 2018. El grupo recibió un taller de inducción para crear y desarrollar su propio blog sobre un personaje célebre o una institución exitosa, y como plataforma de publicación de los ejercicios del curso. Durante este período, cada alumno creó y mantuvo una bitácora personal sobre el tema de su preferencia; en este lapso, se dirigió, evaluó y se les dio la retroalimentación respectiva al grupo para presentarla como proyecto final del curso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: experiencia; aprendizaje; creación de blogs; Internet; web 2.0.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the experience of creating and using weblogs by English II students at Simon Bolívar University during the quarter January-March 2018. The group received an induction workshop to create and develop their own blog about a famous person or a successful institution, and as a publishing platform for the exercises of the course. During this period, each student created and maintained a personal blog on the topic of his or her choice; during this period, the group was directed, evaluated and given the respective feedback to present it as the final project of the course.

KEYWORDS: experience; learning; blogging; Internet; web 2.0.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Blogs are websites based on Web 2.0 applications: their platform is the web, information moves through the Internet promoted by a participatory architecture, and innovation arises from independent developers (Van Der Hernst, 2005).

Weblogs, or their abbreviation *blogs*, are usually informal sites, personal pages with photos, texts, and links. Almost all of them function as open diaries to the online community, and in most of them, there is the possibility of participation or contrasting opinions. They are presented on a single page and can include comments about one or several topics.

They can fulfill various functions, either as a tool for information exchange and communication for people related to a specific topic or simply as a space for the author's dissemination and entertainment. Currently, there are blogs for all tastes and in all languages, from the most trivial to the most academic and formal.

A weblog combines different Internet resources; it serves as a search engine as it recommends links, it resembles email due to the informal style in which it is written, and it includes opinion forums where readers can comment. Additionally, it essentially responds to user interactivity; hence, it is considered a new way of creating dynamic websites since it resolves most of the problems that static pages have, such as the lack of a search engine and index, difficulty in updating, and the expiration of internal links.

These characteristics of blogs make them a valuable educational tool in the construction of virtual environments for teaching and learning. In this sense, blogs support e-learning, establish an informal communication channel between teachers and students, promote social interaction, provide students with a personal medium for experimenting with their own learning, and, finally, they are easy to use based on some prior knowledge of digital technology.

If we add to this the fact that students currently entering university have grown up with the Internet, and their way of learning is interactive, we realize that this new textual form offers, on one hand, the opportunity to give a different approach to the teaching-learning process, and on the other hand, it provides teachers with a tool of high didactic potential.

This research addresses these two aspects: the renewal of the teaching-learning process and the didactic potential of the blog. It utilizes the experience of university students in creating and using their own blogs to study the potential of this technological resource in the academic field.

2. OBJECTIVES

Based on the aforementioned, the following objectives were established:

- Investigate students' perceptions about the possibilities and limitations in creating weblogs.
- Determine the learning outcomes achieved by students through their experiences in designing, creating, and maintaining their blogs.

3. ABOUT WEBLOGS

3.1. Concept and brief historical overview of weblogs

Weblogs or "blogs" are online publishing formats characterized by the reverse chronological arrangement of entries, collecting a set of links, news, and individually authored opinions in a diary-like fashion, often written in a subjective and informal style. Blogs are considered the first native genre of the Web, where the unit of content is the news or posts. Occasionally, content may also be organized into thematic sections, but the reverse chronological order is always maintained.

These characteristics of virtuality and free interaction make blogs a resource that connects technology with social exchange.

> A blog is a sociotechnical assemblage where the technical component or technical architecture is continually redefined by its users, who make certain potentialities implicit in it effective while discarding others (Sandoval, cited in Sandoval, 2004, pp. 1-2).

According to this author, weblogs are websites based on a dynamic publishing system that incorporates content in the form of texts and/or images from any Internet-connected device using a web 3.0 interface.

The term "weblog" is attributed to Jorn Barger, who introduced it in late 1997 to refer to his own website, Robot Wisdom, and along with other pioneers such as Dave Winer, Lawrence Lee, and Cameron Barret, they launched the first weblogs as they are known today. This term is a combination of "web" and "log," and it was quickly adopted by early practitioners of the art.

In Spanish, the English terms are used interchangeably (with a certain preference for "blog" and "bitácora"). For "publishing," the Anglicism "postear" has been adopted, and the activity of using blogs is informally known as "bloguear."

The pioneering site was "What's new in '92," published by Tim Berners-Lee since January 1992, where he used it to disseminate the news of the World Wide Web project he was promoting from Geneva.

It is important to note that the history of blogs has been compiled in the article published in the year 2000 by Rebecca Blood[2]. In that article, it is indicated that blogs emerged in 1993 with the What's New Page of the NCSA (National Center for Supercomputing Applications)[3] and Justin Hall's page titled Links from the Underground in 1994..[4]

In April 1997, David Winer published the first entry of Scripting News, the oldest weblog that is still functioning today (Orihuela, 2007)[5], In January 1999, Barrett published the entry Anatomy of a weblog, which became the first systematic approach to the medium and was later complemented by More about weblogs.

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[2] www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html
[3] www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/
[4] www.links.net/re/
[5] www.elpais.com/articulo/ocio/weblogs/cumplen/anos/agitacion/elpeputeccib/20070118elpciboci_1/Tes

3.2. Characteristics of didactic interest of blogs

One of the most important aspects for the educational use of blogs is their interactivity, especially compared to traditional web pages. Since they are constantly updated, they allow visitors to react to the entries and function as tools for communicative exchange among people engaged in similar topics. Similarly, images and hyperlinks can be added in the same way as in a conventional word processing program, and their great advantage is that what is edited in them is automatically published on the Internet.

As a virtual environment, blogs are web-based platforms managed as a database of files, hosting shared information and knowledge (text, documents, links, images, and others) by a community. They present advantages in information and knowledge management, where they are used as simple tools for writing and publishing, and they assist bloggers in the formation of virtual communities. These characteristics make them ideal for thematic research, content synthesis, and conceptual and visual organization for appropriate presentation in the medium.

In this regard, Ashley, Lizenberg, and Zapata (2004) describe the use of blogs as environments for posting web-supported information and as a tool for creating, maintaining, and easily updating websites with minimal technical knowledge and requirements.

Hence, the utility of blogs for teaching and learning at any level in the educational field is considered, to the point that a growing group of educators are incorporating blogs into the teaching-learning process as spaces for reflection, sharing, and exchanging ideas on aspects related to the use of technology and education in general. Additionally, they are useful for interactive learning within classes, distance education, and as spaces for collaborative writing and planning.

The use of blogs, compared to conventional web pages, is more advantageous in facilitating their adoption in the educational field. Gewerc (2005) maintains that among their advantages are:
- Facilitates the writing process, allowing students to focus on content creation rather than technical aspects.
- Enables interaction and collaboration among students, fostering peer learning and knowledge exchange.
- Supports reflection and critical thinking through the ability to publish and receive feedback on ideas.
- Provides a platform for showcasing students' work and achievements.
- Encourages active participation and engagement in the learning process.
- Allows for easy and rapid updates, ensuring that information remains current.
- Promotes digital literacy and technological skills development.

In this regard, we consider that weblogs allow students to develop ideas and interact with each other. They are cost-effective, easy to create, and can be quickly and easily updated. Once a blog entry is posted, it can be immediately read, and comments can be obtained in real-time.

These features of blogs were used to design educational activities in a regular English II course in order to identify the challenges encountered in creating blogs and gather information about the learning outcomes achieved by students.

4. CREATION OF BLOGS IN ENGLISH II COURSES (ID-1122)

The experience of using blogs in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language took place during the January-March 2018 trimester with students from four sections of English II (ID-1122) in the International Trade and Business Organization majors.

The subject English II is regularly taught at Simón Bolívar University in the second trimester for the International Trade and Business Organization majors. It is a mandatory course with a duration of 60 hours and a value of 3 credit units. Its general objective is to develop students' English language skills at a pre-intermediate level. The following actions were proposed in order to achieve the objectives of this research:

- Induction of students through a Workshop for Blog Creation, which was conducted in two six-hour sessions.
- Personalized guidance to students when they had doubts.
- Review of progress of the content published in the blogs.
- Feedback in order to enrich and improve the final product.
- Evaluation of blogs taking into consideration the content, bibliographic sources, and technological aspect.

4.1 Activity Development

The Workshop to introduce students to the use of blogs as a technological tool consisted of informing them about the existence of the medium, its characteristics, and the editing and hosting services available on the Web.

4.1.1. First workshop session

In this session, an overview was given of the most relevant aspects for blog creation, including conceptualization, structure, and communicative functions.

Different blog editing and hosting services such as Blogia, Blogger, and Wordpress were explored to familiarize students with the potentials and resources offered by each of them.

Due to its ease of use and practicality, it was decided to use Blogger for students to create their blogs. Subsequently, practical explanations were provided on how to use this tool, allowing students to become familiar with it. The main activity in the workshop involved students developing a blog about a character they considered relevant and keeping the blog regularly updated throughout the trimester.

Students were asked to think about the theme, title, and description of the blog they would create for the subject.

4.1.2. Second session

Students began to incorporate information and use the gadgets and other utilities provided by Blogger, including adding photos, videos, HTML applications, and designing and customizing the template.

When presenting the theme, some students suggested not limiting themselves to famous personalities but also including successful institutions with noticeable achievements. From there, students started to create the structures of their blogs and conduct research on the chosen topic.

Each student progressively configured their blog with the researched material, considering the posted content, consulted sources, and other technological components that give it a personal touch and demonstrate creativity and ingenuity.

At the end of the session, students received feedback on their work, and specific instructions were given regarding regularly updating the blog until the end of the trimester.

4.1.3. Regular updating of blogs

It should be noted that students were requested to keep their blogs updated by posting at least once a week, to practice consistently and make use of the different resources available on Blogger. This activity was not carried out regularly due to various reasons, such as several students considering it unnecessary as they viewed it as just another course activity, or others believing they had gathered all the information related to that character or institution, or because they created it last minute without attending the workshop or seeking guidance.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that 65% of the students updated their blogs and even incorporated additional elements that were not part of Blogger's tools. This is of great relevance as it indicates the motivation that the group had both for the subject and the use of this resource.

4.1.4. Evaluation of the blogs

The evaluation of the students' final products considered the following criteria:

- Formal design, including originality and readability of the content, appropriate use of images, templates, and colors.
- Quality and quantity of the content, in terms of the relevance of the selected theme, the structure and writing of the texts, links, references, and contributions made by the students.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We consider that blogs are of great support to e-learning as they establish a communication channel between teacher and student, promote social interaction, provide students with a personal medium for experimenting with their own learning, are easy to assimilate based on some prior knowledge of digital technology, and can be employed in countless ways in the academic field.

The possibility for students to create their own blog or participate in the teacher's blog, with not only reading but also writing capabilities, implies a more active involvement in their teaching-learning process. In this regard, Leslie (2003) proposes the use of blogs as portfolios, as reflective journals for students, as groups or discussion forums to further enhance their use in the didactic context.

The use of blogs in this experience allowed students to become proficient in a relatively short amount of time dedicated to the subject, increased their interest in preparing suitable content for this virtual medium, and evaluated the quality of their production. From the teachers' perspective, it facilitated the construction of effective channels of participation and an approach to new perspectives of action in their educational environment.

Considering that the learning process is discursive, relational, and of a conversational nature (Vygotsky, 1979), we can conclude that through blogs, students have the opportunity to publish the knowledge they have constructed and transformed, resulting in an open dialogue between teachers and students in an upward spiral that feeds back into itself.

The use of weblogs in education requires a detailed understanding of the specific characteristics of this tool, both as a format to be used and as an ongoing development process, in which it is crucial to establish the distinction between ongoing plural weblogs and weblogs created for a project, presentation, or resource.

This approach requires the support of educational institutions to promote research into new didactics that facilitate learning with and about weblogs as a means of addressing the needs of society, helping to build that new methodology by offering its format and dynamics in order to experiment with new educational models in this century.

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