

Enhancing Engagement and Student Learning Using a Course Blog

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Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn by simply coming to class, listening to the lecture, watching and following along a powerpoint presentation, or memorizing key concepts but not understanding their meaning or importance in the real world of business. They must become an active participant in their own learning, developing and enhancing skills in analytical reasoning, critical thinking, and problem solving. They must make what they are learning an innate trait which will help them be successful in their future careers. In this article, we provide quantitative and qualitative evidence of the effectiveness of a course blog in creating an active learning environment for students. The sample consisted of 63 students enrolled in a junior-level Principles of Marketing course. The results showed that the course blog resulted in increased student learning and improvement of learning outcomes.

Field of Research: Innovative teaching pedagogy, Student engagement, Web 2.0 technologies, Course blog

1. Introduction

The Principles of Marketing course is an important foundational course in all business programs. For many students, it is their only exposure to marketing concepts and practice. As a mechanism to enhance student's learning of marketing, critical thinking skills, and analytical reasoning abilities as well as create an environment for student engagement and interactivity, a course blog was developed for the Principles of Marketing course. A blog or weblog, as it is formally known, is a webpage maintained by an author on a specific topic that is frequently updated with posts arrayed in reverse chronological order. As an important component of Web 2.0 technologies, blogs facilitate communication, information sharing and collaboration via the ability of readers to comment on blog postings. The growth of blogging has been exponential. In 2004, two years after blog tracking began, there were 4 million identified blogs (Technorati 2004). Currently, there are more than 181 million unique blogs online (NM Incite 2012). While blogging has become de rigueur marketing practice in the business and professional communities, the use of blogs in higher education and, more specifically, in marketing education has only recently begun to be reported (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol 2010).

Incorporating a course blog not only allows students exposure to marketing approaches and technology used in the workplace and society at large, it also is a mechanism to enhance their critical thinking, analytical reasoning and communication skills in an active learning environment. While today's students are often cited as technologically sophisticated, it has come at the cost of weaknesses in critical thinking, analytical

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reasoning, and the ability to communicate effectively (Weiler 2005; Trealeaven & Voola 2008). The use of a course blog where students must read, reflect, write, integrate concepts and apply knowledge provides a mechanism for developing their intellectual processes, gaining an increased understanding of what is going on beneath the surface, reflecting on the world around them, and articulating their thoughts coherently and persuasively (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol 2010).

This paper focuses on the development, implementation and assessment of a course blog in two sections of a junior-level Principles of Marketing course. Though there have been other studies that highlight the use of blogging in a business educational setting and demonstrate how faculty can use this tool, previous research did not demonstrate the linkage between the incorporation of a course blog, increased student engagement, and improvement in achieving learning outcomes.

The sections which follow will provide a review of the literature on the usage of blogs in courses, a description of the development and implementation of a blog in a Principles of Marketing course, the results on student engagement and learning, and a discussion of considerations and implications for faculty who may want to integrate this Web 2.0 technology in their courses.

2. Literature Review

Companies hiring new graduates in today's marketplace want employees who can solve problems using sound analytical processes, communicate both orally and in written form, think critically, work in teams, and possess a strong work ethic (Casner-Lotto, Barrington & Wright 2006). Not surprisingly, these same outcomes are expected by business programs from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). A recent survey of business leaders noted, however, that "though most say graduates are reasonably well-prepared in a variety of areas, they are not exceptionally strong in any" (Marklein 2008, p. 8B) and in a report titled "Are They Really Ready to Work?" a study of employers concluded that "the future U.S. workforce is here-and it is woefully ill-prepared for the demands of today's (and tomorrow's) workplace" (Casner-Lotto, Barrington & Wright 2006, p. 9). There is also the consistent challenge of dealing with millennial students who are often focused on the end-product of a college degree rather than the learning process itself.

All of these have led to important shifts in marketing education. With an increasing emphasis on outcomes assessment, student learning is now the mantra that defines marketing education practice (Duke 2002). The role of the marketing educator has also changed dramatically. Traditionally, the role of the marketing educator was teaching using a standard lecture-based format. This has evolved today where marketing faculty best educate students by serving as facilitators of learning who help students enhance their critical thinking skills rather than simply as disseminators of facts, figures, and concepts (King 1993). Research has consistently shown that students learn best when they are actively involved in course concepts and material and that marketing students in particular "tend to prefer active, applied, real-world pedagogies" (Karns 2005, p. 164). The shift toward student-centered and non-passive learning have resulted in marketing educators placing an increased emphasis on experiential learning activities (Gremier et al. 2000; Kennedy, Lawton & Walker 2001; Smith & Doran 2004). This coupled with the increasing integration of information technologies into educational pedagogy has resulted in

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increased pressure on marketing educators to experiment with using the Internet as an instructional medium (Kaynama & Keesling 2000; Lincoln 2001).

The current generation of Web technologies, Web 2.0, has provided educators with a variety of mechanisms to facilitate communication, information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration in courses (Harris & Rea 2009). Web 2.0 offers possibilities for new approaches to enhance student engagement and learning (Lawton 2007). Web 2.0 changed the nature of the web from primarily a source of information and content to a new tool for fostering the development of communities, creating information and knowledge, and sharing ideas (Maloney 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that research has shown that when students participate in the creation of knowledge through social interaction and collaboration, their learning is enhanced. The challenge for faculty is to match the technology tool with student learning needs to achieve proper learning benefits (Durrington, Berryhill & Swafford 2006).

While there have been a variety of Web 2.0 tools used in various ways for instructional purposes, the most commonly reported business education application of Web 2.0 is the use of a blog. It should be noted, though, that the use of blogs as an educational tool is still relatively new and research on its effectiveness in enhancing student learning is limited. Blogs are of interest to faculty as an instructional tool because they provide a mechanism for course interactivity (Williams & Jacobs 2004), specifically by engaging students in discussion, exploration and discovery (Glogoff 2005). This is believed to increase students' involvement and motivation in a course (Kaplan, Piskin & Bol 2010). Blogs also enhance learning efficiency by providing students with an easy to use mechanism for self-expression and communication, an effective way to receive timely feedback on postings from both peers and the instructor, and a means for self-assessment by comparing the quality of their individual posts to those of other students (Du & Wagner 2007).

Although blogs have been a widely touted Web 2.0 instructional approach, the results of studies using blogs in business and marketing education have resulted in contradictory findings. Research studies reporting positive outcomes from the use of blogs have typically found that they enhance interactivity, promote collaboration, improve skills, and contribute to overall engagement in courses.

Interactivity has been commonly cited as an advantage of incorporating blogs. Williams & Jacobs (2004) found that blogs implemented in MBA courses increased students interactivity in terms of their intellectual exchange. Du & Wagner (2006) reported that blogs helped enhance interactivity among those who participated by posting comments. Similarly, Mishne & Glance (2006) noted that blog comments are essential to the interactive nature of blogs.

Studies have also shown that blogs are effective in stimulating student collaboration. In a large class where it is almost impossible to facilitate large-scale discussions, blogs were shown to provide an environment for student-to-student communication to facilitate online dialogue (Farmer, Yue & Brooks 2008). Lu and Yeh (2008) reported that the development of a course blog enables students to collaborate with each other and improve their overall learning. Gullett and Bhandar (2010) found that one of the benefits of using a blog in an MBA course was enhanced student collaboration.

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Several studies have cited a variety of ways in which blogs improved specific student skills. Du and Wagner (2007) reported that students' knowledge of course subject matter was vastly improved through course blogs. Blogs have been shown to enhance students' creativity, self-expression and communication skills (Huffaker 2005). Individual creativity was also cited as an advantage of blogs by Williams and Jacobs (2004). Kaplan, Piskin and Bol (2010) found that individual student blogs improved "soft skills" desired by employers, specifically written communication and critical thinking. A recent study by Chu, Chan and Tiwari (2011) analyzed students' internships blogs and indicated that students engaged in cognitive, metacognitive-reflective, affective, and social-collaborative learning processes in blogging. Cameron and Anderson (2006) summarized from their research that "whether blogs are incorporated into formal courses, included on the periphery of a course of study or used as purely individualistic tools for personal learning, bloggers will reap the benefits of their use over time - becoming better readers, writers and better self-directed learners" (p. 12).

Studies have also cited enhanced student engagement in courses that incorporated blogs. Lin et al. (2006) reported that blogs were an important motivational tool for students in online courses and caused them to be more highly vested in a class than they would be otherwise. Huang and Behara (2007) claimed that blogs provide students with the ability to delve into course topics more deeply. In a cross-disciplinary study, Davi, Frydenburg and Gulati (2007) found that students became more engaged in course assignments and went beyond a superficial understanding of material when they posted questions and reflections to the course blog.

Other research findings were not as enthusiastic about the use of blogs as an enhancement to business education. Divitini, Haugaløkken, and Morken (2005) reported that blogs failed in motivating students to become engaged in course content. Kim (2008) reported that blogs often do not produce the desired results because of how they are structured and an overall lack of direction. It was concluded that the blame on the ineffectiveness of blogs in a course should be placed on the faculty member claiming that it is the responsibility of the professor to provide clearly defined instructions and structure to a blog project. One of the studies that reported positive outcomes also cautioned that the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs come at the cost of increased workload on the part of the instructor and advised faculty that they must become fully versed in any tool selected so they can easily understand and handle problems as they arise (Huang & Behara 2007).

3. Methodology: The Development and Implementation of the Course Blog

What the research conducted to date has not definitively shown is the impact of the utilization of a course blog on student learning in a course. Does student involvement with a blog improve their overall performance in a course? How well does a blog help in achieving learning outcomes? These are the questions that are examined in this study by developing a course blog and measuring the impact of the blog on student learning in a course.

There are a variety of tools that are readily available for developing a blog. The blog designed for this course was developed using Google Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>). This tool was selected for a variety of reasons: it was easy to set up and maintain the blog (no programming and, although HTML knowledge can be helpful, it is not necessary),

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postings could be made via a traditional internet browser or through a mobile device, and there was no cost for using Blogger. Although the blog provided students with access to course information, class materials, and announcements, this was not the purpose of using the blog as these tasks could easily be accomplished with a learning management system such as Blackboard that most universities provide for instructional purposes. These additional items were included to make the blog more inviting to students and serve as a “central hub” of communication for the course. Although learning management systems typically have the ability to host discussion forums, a blog is superior for interactivity in that the a student can easily comment on an instructor’s or fellow student’s post in a way that is simpler and easier to follow than a threaded discussion. It also provides an effective way for a student to receive feedback from both peers and the instructor and allows a student a means for self-assessment by comparing their posts to others (Du and Wagner 2007).

The blog was implemented in two sections of a junior-level Principles of Marketing class during the Fall 2011 semester. Sixty-three students were enrolled in the two course sections. A total of 9 blog posts were assigned throughout the 14 week semester. A sample blog post is shown in Table 1. The instructors used articles from current practitioner-oriented business and general news publications and online resources such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, *The New York Times* and mashable.com. For each article posted to the blog, students were asked specific questions that were multi-faceted and based on the cyclical model of experiential education developed by Kolb (1984). This model states that students learn from concrete experience (e.g., using practical, real-world examples from the assigned articles), reflective observation (e.g., observing how others think), abstract conceptualization (e.g., thinking about why things work in the manner they do), and active experimentation (e.g., seeking answers to resulting questions and testing hypotheses that emerge). Kolb’s (1984) approach forces the student to participate in his or her learning. In other words, a student takes psychological ownership of their individual education rather than assuming it is solely the responsibility of their instructors (Wood 2003).

Table 1: Sample Blog Assignment

Wal-Mart Tries to Recapture Mr. Sam's Winning Formula

An article in today's Wall Street Journal talks about some of the problems facing Wal-Mart. Same-store sales at Wal-Mart stores in the U.S. have declined for the second year in a row. It is clear from reading the article that Wal-Mart has made some marketing missteps. Please read the article and post your response to the following questions to the course blog no later than the beginning of class on Thursday, February 24th:

1. What are your thoughts about Wal-Mart's recent back and forth merchandising and store changes?
 2. What are your thoughts about Wal-Mart's pricing strategies discussed in the article? What changes, if any, do you think Wal-Mart should make to its pricing strategies?
 3. What should Wal-Mart do to regain its customer base and return to its core values -- customers and value -- that helped Wal-Mart become the giant (and #1) retailer it is today?
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Each blog post provided a brief introduction to the topic with a hyperlink for the student to access the article, the deadline for posting comments (typically two to four days after the assignment was posted), and the specific questions for student comment. The questions provided revolved around the specific focus of the article and tied directly to course material that was covered in class. The Wal-Mart blog post presented in Table 1, for example, was assigned after the initial lecture on pricing strategies and tied directly to previous coverage of product lines, merchandising strategies, and target marketing. When the assignment was posted to the blog, students were sent automatic notifications to their university email accounts (this can be done easily through the Settings feature on Blogger). The blog was also set up to allow students to follow the blog on Twitter. This was done by setting up a Twitter account for the course and setting up a Twitter Feed so that all blog postings would show up on the course Twitter page. Although setting up access via Twitter is not a necessary condition for using the blog, it was done to better facilitate communication with students who are tethered to their mobile devices.

As students became more comfortable engaging with the course blog, they often began commenting on others' posts in addition to addressing the questions presented in the assignment. Students were told that while they were free to disagree with their peers and debate points of view, comments back to a fellow student needed to be made respectfully and professionally. The variances in responses were interesting and eye-opening. They also provided insight as to which course concepts were more clearly understood. For example, one of the blog postings dealt with the legal price discrimination practices of online retailers. It was evident from students' postings that they were having difficulty discerning between legal and illegal price discrimination with the prevailing view that any person being charged a different price, regardless of circumstance, was a victim of price discrimination. Without reading the students comments, this misunderstanding of price discrimination may not have been noticed until a course exam on the subject. Discussing the blog posting and student comments in class provided an opportunity for that necessary clarification and distinction between legal and illegal price discrimination to be made.

Student comments to the blog posts were graded using a rubric. The rubric was developed to facilitate the grading process and as a way to provide standardized feedback to the students. The rubric measured the quality of the written communication, critical thinking ability (how well the students tied in course concepts to the questions posed), organizing their comments in a logical and rational manner, analytical reasoning, and the ability to present opinions in a professional and persuasive manner. Each item on the rubric was assessed using a 4-item scale (1 = inadequate/unsatisfactory, 2 = developing/needs improvement, 3 = satisfactory/adequate, and 4 = excellent/professional) resulting in a total of 20 possible points for each assignment. Brief comments were also provided where necessary or appropriate.

4. The Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used in order to assess the effectiveness of the course blog. First, analyses were conducted to assess the impact of the blog on elements of course performance (see Table 2). A correlation analysis was run to determine if there was a relationship between students' scores from the blog post rubrics and their exam scores. Three exams were administered during the semester and the blog postings were paired with the exam that covered the same content area. The first two blog postings dealt with material covered on the first exam, blog posts three through five related

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to the material covered on the second exam and the final four blog posts reflected topics

Table 2: Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Course Blog

Blog Postings	Correlation Coefficient with Corresponding Exam	Assessment Score Average (out of 20)
<u>First Set:</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing Benefits, Wants and Needs • Market Segmentation 	.26 ($p \leq .027$)	10.43
<u>Second Set:</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pricing • IMC • Viral Marketing 	.32 ($p \leq .012$)	12.02
<u>Third Set:</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics • Social Responsibility • Global Marketing • Marketing Research 	.35 ($p \leq .001$)	15.25

from the third exam. There was a significant, positive correlation between the blog posting sets and the corresponding exam with the correlation increasing over the course of the semester. Thus, as students participation in the blog increased their exam scores also increased. Additionally, as students began to see the value of participating in the blog and as they incorporated feedback from the grading rubrics and blog discussions, their assessment scores showed an increase throughout the semester. Unlike previous research which typically highlighted enhanced student participation through the use of blogs, the findings here show that the blog actually correlated to enhanced performance in the course and ensured that students were better equipped to meet the course learning outcomes.

In addition to these direct performance measures, qualitative feedback on the value of this approach was solicited. The sixty-three students enrolled in two sections responded to one simple, open-ended question at the end of the semester, "What are your thoughts about the blog used in this course and what could be done to improve the blog for use by students in future semesters?" This open-ended approach was used so that students' unbiased thoughts and opinions could be solicited rather than having students evaluate items on a survey that may or may not have been important to them. The students' responses were content analyzed and comments were categorized based on the frequency with which they were mentioned. The vast majority of students, 83%, provided positive comments about the blog. An additional 4% reported neutral comments, while 13% provided negative thoughts. Most of the negative reaction to the blog was not about the approach but, rather, about specific technological issues (e.g. browser compatibility issues), students not keeping track of due dates, and instructors using a variety of tools creating more complexity for the students (e.g. this course used a blog; other courses use a learning management system such as Blackboard; while other courses use a textbook publisher-provided platform such as McGraw-Hill's Connect).

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The most frequently mentioned positive comments were that the blog (1) allowed the students to apply marketing concepts to the real world, (2) improved student learning and understanding of course concepts, (3) engaged students in the material covered by allowing them to express their thoughts, and (4) allowed students to view a scenario from multiple perspectives. A few representative comments highlight these findings:

“The blog was interesting and gave us a chance to not only express our thoughts but also use the new knowledge we’ve obtained to evaluate the article and express it in concrete terms.”

“The blog is great. It allows students to read and understand what’s really going on in the real world. Also, it forces critical thinking as well as general knowledge. I personally found it very helpful.”

“The blog was a unique way of engaging student participation. It was good to see how other students responded, see points I had not thought of and being able to agree or disagree with them.”

5. Summary and Conclusions

As with any new pedagogical approach, the incorporation of a blog in a course did present some challenges. Although Blogger is an easy mechanism for setting up a course blog, some students did have difficulty in their initial posting of comments. Although instructions were provided and students were told they did not have to create a Blogger or Google account to post to the blog, some students were confused initially about how to ensure that their comments were self-identified. This could be easily resolved by simply demonstrating how to properly include the student’s name on a comment in class at the time of the first blog assignment. Additionally, some students initially voiced concern about expressing their points of view on specific topics. Very early on, ground rules were established to let everyone know that the blog was designed to be an open and professional forum where all views were to be respected. After the first couple of rounds of blog assignments, students seemed to be much more comfortable with the format, articulating their perspectives, and debating with their peers.

The use of a course blog also does require a certain time commitment on the part of the instructor, although it is one that we believe is worth the additional effort. The instructor must be willing to find articles that relate to the topics covered in the course that are timely, interesting, freely available and of reasonable length. One approach to make this easier is for the instructor to subscribe to Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds for business-oriented publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *Fast Company*, etc. This will allow potential content for the blog to be “pushed” to the instructor. Additionally, many marketing texts provide a variety of potential articles to instructors through monthly newsletters. It should also be noted that reading and grading the comments posted to the blog do take time but the use of the rubric greatly facilitated this task.

During the application of any new pedagogical method, lessons are learned and opportunities for improvement are discovered. Below are some of the lessons learned through the implementation of a blog in the Principles of Marketing course.

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- The blog provided a means for students to respond to opinions of others – something they might have felt uncomfortable doing in class. This was particularly true for shy students who may have been very attentive in class but only occasionally contributed their own opinion or debated the opinions of others.
- The articles provided in the blog offered students a gateway to expand their knowledge of the principles of marketing by guiding them to other sources of information. Students came to realize that the text and presentation materials only scratched the surface of the importance of these principles in the real world of marketing. An enhancement to the blog will have students search for relevant articles, post them to the blog, and then provide feedback to other student posts. |
- Blogging provided a way to engage students in active learning by having them write and write often about contemporary business news. This provided repeated practice in written communication and encouraged critical review of their own work and, as a result, self-editing.
- Through the adoption of the blog technology, student engagement and learning occurred quickly. Today's students are technologically savvy with technology being an innate part of their vocabulary, skills, behaviors, and interests. The blog built upon this.
- The blog permitted students to read, write, and reflect on blog posts from anywhere and at anytime they have an internet connection. This moved learning far beyond the walls of the classroom.
- The blog assisted in the development of a student's analytical thinking and reasoning skills. The blog provided time for each student to read, reflect, analyze, and draw conclusions in making sense of the contemporary marketing issues and problems assigned to them. Through the integration of a set of interrelated intellectual processes, students' reasoning skills were enhanced.
- The blog provided each student with feedback, thus facilitating student learning. It also provided a means for the instructor to gauge the extent to which course materials were being correctly understood and then to make necessary corrections or clarification.
- The blog facilitated interaction between students. Students could read and review what other students said about the same article, which encouraged critical thinking as students debated and reflected on the posts of the instructor and fellow students. This interaction encouraged critical reading as students learned to carefully read what others have written in order to write meaningful comments.
- The blog facilitated students to learn from each other. By reading the posts of fellow students (something not typical in a traditionally taught class) each student was able to compare the quality of his or her comments, form and content, to other students' posts.
- The blog creates an archive of all postings. This provides students with a portfolio of their work over the entire semester. This provided the ability for both formative and summative assessment and guidance to students.

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The lessons learned here are not specific to Principles of Marketing as a course blog could be easily adopted in virtually any marketing course. As the blog is implemented in future semesters, new lessons will be learned and the blog will continue to evolve.

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