

# Leveraging Course Communication using Weblogs: a Report on Students' Satisfaction

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## Abstract

This paper reports on an experiment carried out on a group of students studying a course in Operating Systems (OS), at the Information Technology department – King Saud University, to expose them to Weblogs technology and to measure their level of satisfaction interacting with such a technology. The method used to carry out the experiment and the results of the students' feedback are presented.

## Introduction

The current era of the Internet, or best know as Web 2.0, has changed our daily life by redefining the meanings and processes of commerce, marketing, publishing, education, research, etc. Wikis, blogs and social bookmarking services, to name but a few are all signatures of the Web 2.0 phenomenon.

Nowadays, these technologies are gaining more popularity overtime and many educators are trying to develop new techniques to utilize them in the classroom. Among the well-know Web 2.0 technologies, is the use of Weblogs in teaching and learning.

Weblogs, or blogs for short, can be defined as “*a website where entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order.*” (Wikipedia, 2008). They can vary in types, purposes and communities (Herring et al., 2004). For instance, there are video blogs, audio blogs, photo blogs, multi-user blogs, special purpose blogs (e.g. for social activities), etc.

Typically, in the educational field, Weblogs constitute an important medium for sharing ideas among educators and students and also soliciting discussions and feedback through the comments function. This advantage can be extended to span multiple fields and to benefit other parties. As an example, the author of this paper has been an active blogger<sup>1</sup> for about four years and during her blogging lifetime she had made successful attempts in promoting the knowledge of new Web and E-learning technologies.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tech2click.net](http://www.tech2click.net) (in Arabic)

Based on the extensive use of Weblogs technologies in education, this paper will report on the author's personal experience of using Weblogs in the context of classroom communication for an undergraduate level course in Information Technology. The organization of the paper is as follows: in section 2, we review some research on using Weblogs in classroom interactions. Then in section 3, we describe the method used to conduct our experiment. Finally, sections 4 and 5 respectively, report on the evaluation of the usefulness of our approach and conclude the paper with some observations and lessons learned from this experience.

## **Weblogs in Education**

Many studies that address the use of Weblogs in the classroom have focused on the pedagogical aspect of the technology and proposed various approaches to exploit it. While an extensive review of research on the use of Weblogs in teaching and learning is beyond the scope of this paper, the author will try to shed some light on samples of research in this field.

Among the early studies, a paper presented by Martindale and Wiley (2004), where they describe two brief scenarios of using a learning Weblogs as part of teaching college courses. In the first scenario each student was given a Weblog where (s)he writes the course assignments. In the second scenario the course instructor created a course blog where (s)he posted syllabi, assignments, news items, and regular updates for students to access. The results of the two scenarios were very rewarding in terms of students' satisfaction and experience.

On the other hand, Xie and Sharma (2004) in their study have interviewed nine participants, who maintained Weblogs in a graduate course. Initial data analysis indicates that participants found Weblogs helpful for learning, reflecting, and building a sense of community. However, participants expressed concerns over the lack of structure for Weblog usage and the public nature of the reflective process.

Du and Wagner (2005) also used Weblogs on an information systems undergraduate course with 31 students. The results indicated that Weblogs appear to have highest predictive power for high and low performing students, but much less predictive value for medium performers. Results also suggest that there is a learning effect for Weblog authoring.

Coutinho (2007) presented an experience of Internet integration in an Education Program of the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal. The project was developed in the first semester of 2006/2007 and integrated 23 undergraduate students who attended Educational and Communication Technology (ECT) class. Students, in small groups, were encouraged to set up and maintain a Weblog as a portfolio of the team work. They worked together to maximize their own and each other's learning. At the end of the semester students filled an online questionnaire evaluating their experience. The results

showed that Weblogs are versatile educational tools that can promote learning whilst developing social skills.

As we can see from the previous studies most research has focused on Weblogs either as a medium for classroom communication (i.e. a course blog) or as a student participation tool. However, the former method of using Weblogs has been adopted in this paper.

## **Method**

The experiment was applied on a group of 105 female students studying a course in Operating Systems (OS) at Information Technology department in the College of Computer and Information Sciences, King Saud University, Riyadh. The experiment was carried out over the course of a complete semester.

The main purpose of the Weblog was to serve five types of classroom communication, which are:

1. Students' inquiries (e.g. homework, exams, etc.)
2. Course announcements and course materials dissemination (e.g. canceling/postponing lectures/tutorials, uploading slides, assignments, etc.)
3. Collecting students' opinions and feedbacks.
4. Sharing information (e.g. posting useful links).
5. Encouraging students' interactions among them selves and between them and their instructor.

The Weblog was hosted by a free blogging service called wordpress.com (see Figure 1 for a snapshot of the course Weblog). The service provided a flexible and free platform environment for blogging and it also allowed us to invite more moderators to monitor and contribute to the Weblog. This feature helped us in inviting the course TAs to be part of the course Weblog.

The students were allowed to add comments to the course Weblog without requiring any registration. This flexibility made some students more relaxed while asking their questions, since they can post questions anonymously.



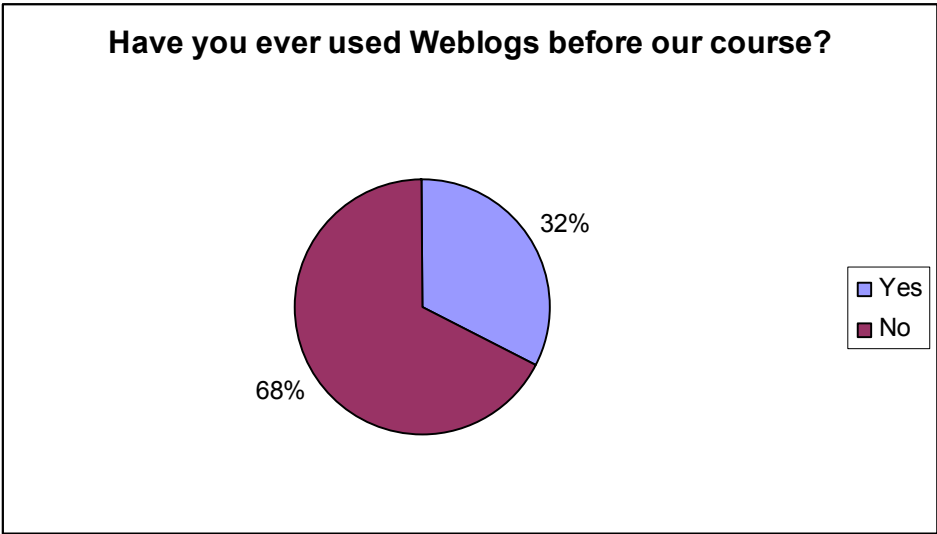
Figure 1: A snapshot of the OS Weblog showing two kinds of communications used in the course, namely: students exam inquiry and course material dissemination [http://cs332.wordpress.com/].

## Results

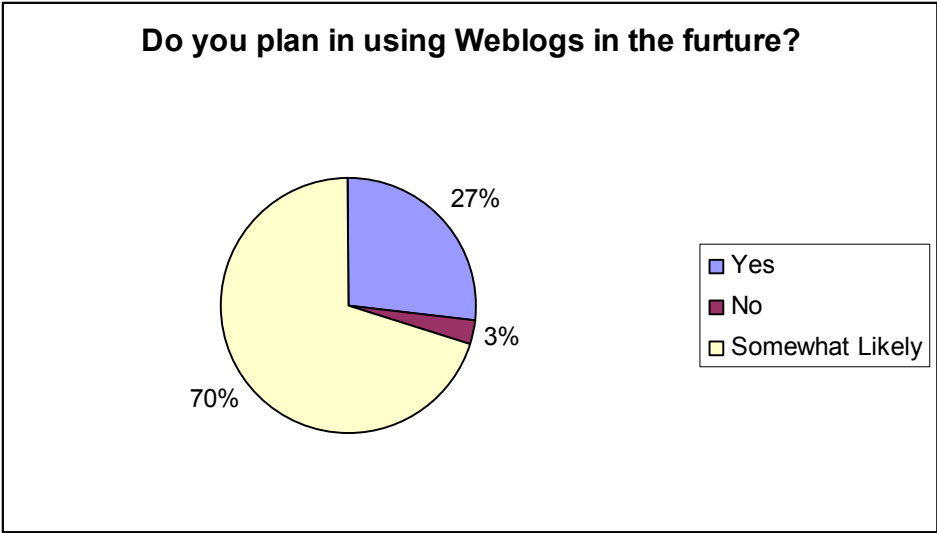
Approaching the end of the semester a survey consisted of seven questions was distributed among the students to provide the course instructor with a conclusive feedback on the usefulness of using Weblogs in course communication. The initial sample consisted of 105 students of whom 12 did not complete all of the survey.

Investigating students' prior experience with Weblogs, the survey showed that around 68% of the students have never used Weblogs (Figure 2). Knowing this fact about the students derived us to ask them about their future plans of using such a technology in their daily life or work. Interestingly, 27% of the students were very interested in trying this technology in the future. Moreover, one of the students have commented on this question by saying *"I am planning on using Weblogs for a secondary school teacher to enable her to communicate with her students effectively!"*, another remarkable comment was *"I will be using Weblogs to enrich the Internet with Arabic content"*.

On the other hand, 70% of the students were not sure if they are going to use this technology in the future, while 3% do not have the intention of using such a technology (Figure 3).

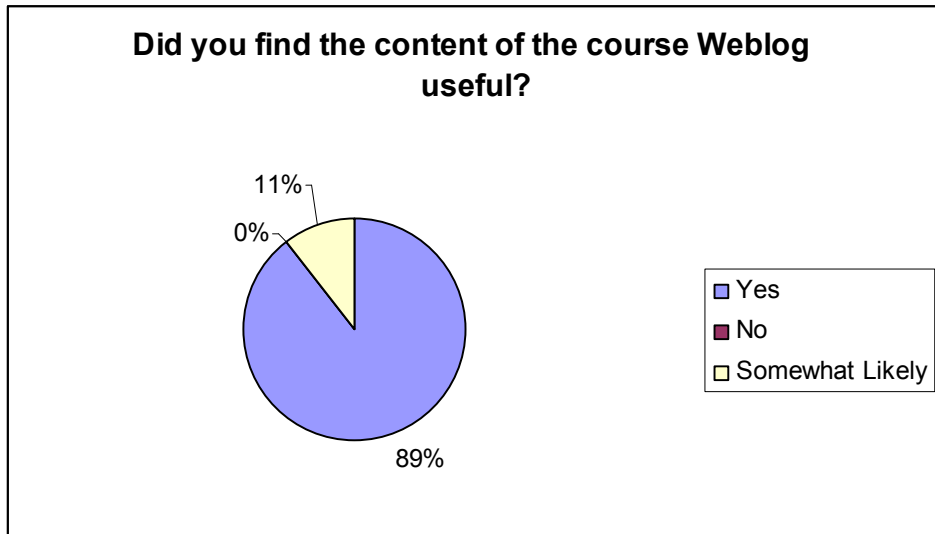


**Figure 2: Students' Prior Experience with Weblogs**



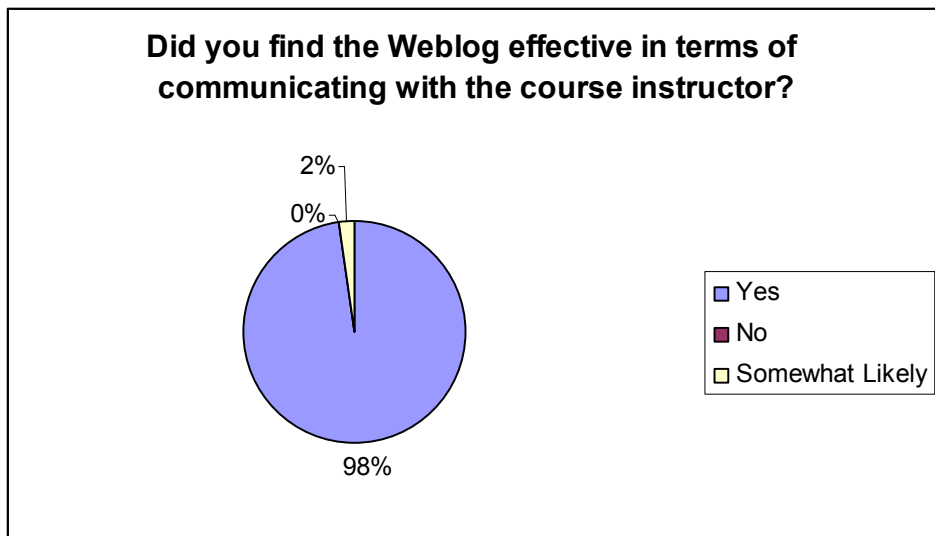
**Figure 3: Future use of Weblogs**

We also asked the students about the usefulness of the Weblog content. Figure 4 shows that 89% of the students found the content of the course Weblog useful; while 11% found that it was somewhat useful.



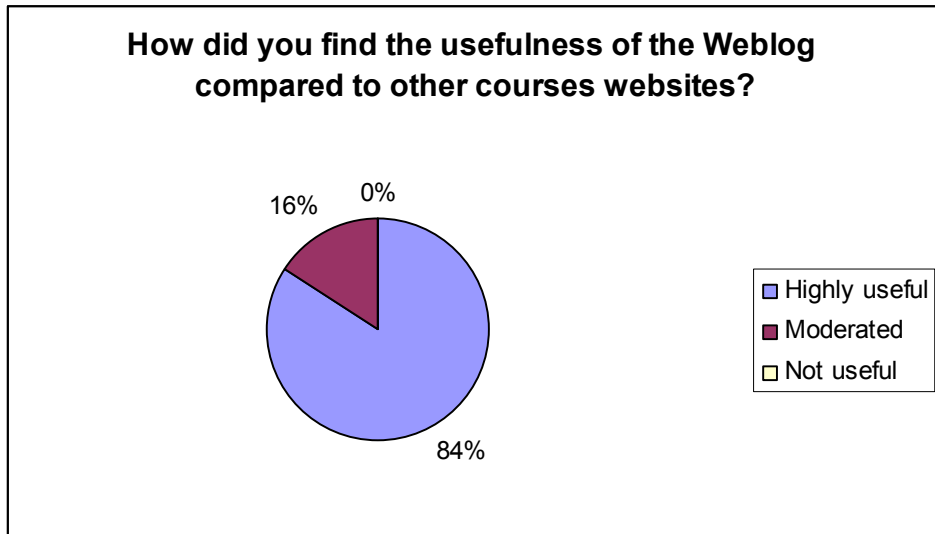
**Figure 4: Weblog content satisfaction**

Furthermore, we asked the students about the effectiveness of the course Weblog in terms of the ease of communication with the course instructor. Figure 5 shows that 98% of the students agreed on the effectiveness of the Weblog to communicate with the course instructor. This result was complemented by 2% of the students who sees that the Weblog was to some extent effective for communicating with the course instructor.

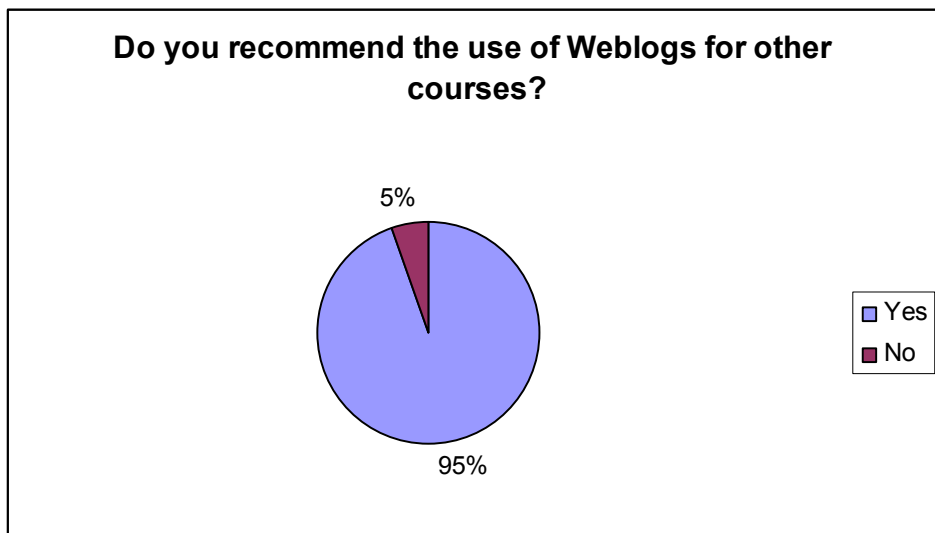


**Figure 5: Weblog communication effectiveness**

Surprisingly, when we asked the students about the usefulness of the course Weblog compared to other courses' websites. The results showed (Figure 6) that 84% of the students highly agreed on this fact while 16% were moderate in their opinion.



**Figure 6: Weblog usefulness compared to other courses' websites**



**Figure 7: Students recognized the importance of Weblogs by recommending that other courses should use them**

To further question the students opinion about the use of Weblogs as a replacement of regular courses' websites. Figure 7 shows that 95% of the students recommend that other courses use Weblogs for course communication.

Finally, it seems from the previous responses that the majority of the students had a positive experience interacting with the course Weblog. These results were quite encouraging, which will help us in promoting the use of such a technology in other courses and using other scenarios.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we demonstrated and discussed the results of a pragmatic experiment using Weblogs technologies to leverage classroom communication. It is evident from the results that most students accepted the idea of using Weblogs in classroom communication.

Weblogs provided an excellent opportunity for educators to receive direct inputs and feedbacks from students without any barriers. It also showed that such a technology can be used across academic disciplines as a viable tool for enabling the use of online technologies in the classroom.

## **Acknowledgement**

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