

# Privacy Considerations in the Selection of Blogging Software

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## Abstract:

There are several benefits to using weblogs in education to support both collaboration and reflective practice. Results from an initial study which examined the effectiveness of weblogs are discussed. These results have shown that weblogs are useful tools for collaboration and groupwork, but that deep reflection was not evident in weblogs. It is suggested that this may be due to the public nature of weblogs. In the design of a second study, several types of blogging software have been considered, based on the privacy options they can offer. Wordpress is recommended as a suitable blogging tool for both collaboration and reflection. It provides students with the option to password-protect reflective posts to their blog, while leaving the rest of their weblog posts open to the public, thereby providing a means for collaboration with classmates.

## 1. Introduction

A weblog (or blog) is a website that contains dated entries (or posts) in reverse chronological order. Weblogs are published using 'blogging' software. Weblogs are often part of a larger community, as they link together using features such as permalinks, trackbacks and commenting. Weblog authors often make content available to their readers using RSS (Rich Site Summary) technology, which allows readers to receive notification of weblog updates using an 'aggregator'.

In education, weblogs are useful as a tool for both collaboration and reflection. Ferdig and Trammell (2004) suggest that weblogs provide a space for students to reflect on their learning. They also propose that weblogs can increase student interest, and provide students with ownership of their learning. A study at Brisbane Graduate School of Business (Queensland University of Technology) concluded that weblogs provide students with a high level of autonomy while also providing an opportunity for interaction with peers (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Another recent study found that weblogs can be used to support collaborative learning (Du & Wagner, 2005).

## 2. Initial Study; Results and Issues

An initial study as part of this research concluded that students found weblogs easy to use and easy to set up using Blogger, a free web-based tool (Birney, Barry & Ó hÉigeartaigh, 2006a). It was also felt that the use of weblogs increased the levels of online interaction between members of the class. During this study (which took place in a face-to-face environment) students peer-reviewed one another's work. Students reported that they found the

feedback on their work to be helpful. In a statistical analysis of the number of comments in student weblogs, a correlation was found between the number of comments a student received and the number of comments a student left for others (Birney, Barry & Ó hÉigeartaigh, 2006b). In addition to this, it was found that there was a higher level of peer-peer interaction on the weblogs than peer-tutor interaction, which suggests that weblogs are a suitable tool for groupwork.

In this initial study, students were asked to reflect on their experiences of using weblogs, and to post these reflections to their weblogs. However, it was found that deep reflection did not take place. Bourner (2003) differentiates between surface learners and deep learners. He states that surface learners “describe their experience but do not ask searching questions of it”, whereas deep learners “engage with their experience in a questioning way” (Bourner, 2003). Samples taken from students’ reflective weblog posts can be seen below. These samples demonstrate the brevity and descriptive nature of students’ reflective weblogs posts.

*“I found the overall experience of using weblogs very useful”*

*“It was very helpful to go through the setup of weblogs and use of tool”*

There may be several reasons that deep reflection did not occur in the initial study. Firstly, reflection was not a required element of students’ coursework. Secondly, students were not given reflective practice training. In addition to this, students may have felt uncomfortable revealing personal thoughts on their weblogs, as their weblogs were available on the Internet for public viewing. A recent study found that most weblogs are currently hosted in a public arena, and that bloggers increasingly encounter privacy-related issues (Viégas, 2005).

### **3. Further Study; Privacy Considerations**

It is now planned to conduct a second study with a greater focus on reflection. In this study, students will use their weblogs as online reflective journals. These reflective journals will be a required element of students’ coursework, and they will be given reflective practice training in advance. However, there are several concerns regarding the open nature of weblogs. These include the risk of plagiarism and whether students will feel comfortable posting their private reflections to their weblogs. For these reasons, a blogging tool which provides privacy options is necessary. The blogs will also be used by students to share information on coursework with one another. Therefore, a tool is needed which can offer students the privacy they need when creating reflective posts, while also allowing them to collaborate with their classmates using non-reflective posts.

Blogger has recently released an updated version of their blogging software, which provides many additional features ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)). This new version of Blogger does offer bloggers the option of making their weblog private; however, this option makes the entire weblog private. The weblog author can then invite people to read their weblog, but once a reader has been invited they can then read all of the posts on the weblog; there is no way to differentiate between private, reflective posts and public, non-reflective posts. Divitini, Haugaløkken & Morken (2005) suggest that the strength of blogs lies in their collaborative capabilities, and that tutors should take care to create the correct balance between accessibility and privacy.

WordPress (another free, web-based tool) can offer such a balance ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)). It allows users to password-protect certain weblog posts. They can then provide their tutor with the password, so that only he/she can view reflective posts. However, the rest of their weblog is still publicly available on the Internet, and accessible by their classmates. This approach may also prove suitable for peer assessment, where one trusted peer is given the password which allows him/her to read another student’s reflective posts. It has been suggested that collaboration is an important part of the reflective process (Rose, 1992). The commenting features of weblogs may provide a way to bring collaboration into the reflective process, as students can review and critique one another’s reflections as part of the peer-assessment process. Jenkins (2004) states that weblogs are useful tools for group and peer assessment.

## 4. Future Research

In the upcoming second study, the text of reflective weblog posts will be collected as qualitative data. The text will be examined using NVivo software, and it is hoped that this analysis will provide evidence of deep reflection in student weblogs. It may also be possible to identify keywords that are common in reflective posts, and use these keywords to build an ontology which describes the characteristics of a reflective weblog post. An ontology is an explicit formal specification of a domain, and contains information about objects, properties of objects, and relations between objects that are part of that domain (Chandrasekaran, Josephson & Benjamins, 1999). A Reflection Ontology, which describes the characteristics of reflective writing, could then be used to assist in the automated assessment of reflective weblog posts. This would greatly reduce the tutor's workload, and could potentially provide students with automated formative feedback.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

In an initial study, it was found that the use of weblogs increased the levels of online interaction between students. Also, there were high levels of peer-peer interaction on student weblogs, suggesting that weblogs are a suitable tool for groupwork. However, deep reflection did not occur on student weblogs; this may be due to the public nature of weblogs.

An upcoming study will examine the use of weblogs as both online reflective journals and as a means of online collaboration. Therefore, a tool which provides both privacy for reflective posts and accessibility for non-reflective posts is needed. WordPress is an online tool which can provide both of these features by allowing students to password-protect reflective posts while leaving non-reflective posts open for viewing by their classmates. The password for reflective posts can then be provided to the tutor, or also to a peer-assessor, which can bring elements of collaboration into the reflective process.

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