Chapter 8
University Students’ Self-Motivated Blogging and Development of Study Skills and Research Skills

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents and analyzes an empirically grounded investigation into the self-motivated course-related blogging activities of undergraduate and Master’s-level students, and research-related blogging of doctoral students. It focuses on how blogging may help students to develop their study skills and research skills. Analysis of students’ blogs and semi-structured interviews with the participants shows that writing in the public domain can encourage networking, commitment to goals, articulation of research ideas, development of confidence in writing, and facilitation of critical and reflective thinking skills. The blog can be a useful repository of ideas and resources, and can be a public platform for the synthesis of ideas. Blogging can facilitate the creation and membership of an online community where academic events are flagged, resources are shared, research is advertised, and ideas and comments are exchanged. The authors conclude with a discussion of the ways in which blogging can support the development of key study and research skills, such as time management, academic writing, and effective communication. It is hoped that the findings will help in guiding students, educators, and institutions considering the use of blogging in university education.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
The term Web 2.0 or “social software” covers a wide range of software tools that enable users to interact and share ideas and resources such as photographs and bookmarks, with other users, primarily via the World Wide Web. The Web 2.0 or “read/write” Web is in contrast with the original “read-only” Web (Web 1.0) in which users were
passive consumers of other people’s information (e.g., on websites maintained by an individual, organization, or institution). Blogs, wikis, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), media-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, SlideShare, Flickr), and social bookmarking sites (e.g., delicious) are examples of some of the tools that are being used to share and collaborate in educational, social, and business contexts. The key aspect of a social software tool is that it involves wider participation in the creation of information that is shared (e.g., Boyd, 2007, Franklin & van Harmelen, 2007; Leslie & Landon, 2008).

Social software tools allow users to gather and share resources to inform others and receive feedback. In collaborative endeavors using social software tools, the creation of shared content takes place in a networked participatory environment that breaks down the barriers between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge (Bruns, 2008). Bruns refers to the concept of “produser” implying the hybrid role of a participant as producers of content and also using the content or “produsage.” Thus, there is a collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement.

Social software tools emphasize the importance of interpersonal interaction in groups and can facilitate social equality, collaboration, cooperation, and mutual support. Boyd (in Owen, Grant, Sayers, & Facer, 2006), specifies three types of support provided by social software:

1. Support for conversational interaction between individuals or groups, from real-time instant messaging to asynchronous collaborative teamwork, including blogs;
2. Support for social feedback, in which a group rates the contributions of others, producing a digital reputation for participants;
3. Support for social networks to explicitly create and manage participants’ personal relationships and to help them develop new ones.

The ethos of social software tools seems to match well with modern thinking about educational practice. In particular, these tools enable individual learners to be expressive, to be aware of what others are doing, and to engage in collaboration. Social software tools therefore support and encourage individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity, and relationship (Anderson, 2008). Some of the perceived benefits to the students by using these tools are developing the skills of communication, problem solving, research, and collaborative working, which can equip students well for the world of work (Minocha, Petre, & Roberts, 2008; Minocha, 2009).

Social Software in Education

The underlying pedagogy of social software tools has been considered by Dalsgaard (2006), who argues that social software can support a social constructivist approach to e-learning by providing students with personal tools and engaging them in social networks, thus allowing learners to direct their own problem-solving processes. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of the learner being actively involved in the learning process and knowledge is constructed in shared endeavors with other learners. Social constructivism is in contrast to traditional educational viewpoints (e.g., instructivist approaches) where the responsibility rests with the educator to deliver knowledge while the learner passively receives it. Felix (2005) proposes the synthesis of cognitive constructivist and social constructivist approaches. In the cognitive constructivist approach, the focus is on cognition that occurs in the mind of the individual, with the learners making intellectual sense of the materials on their own. For example, collaborative writing in a wiki or writing in a blog, and participating in online discussions in forums.