



Personal blogs or communal blogs? Pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding the contribution of these two platforms to their professional development



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Personal blog: perceived as a platform for genuine reflective writing and self-exploration.
- Communal blog: perceived as a platform for sharing ideas and helping other participants.
- Both platforms were viewed as contributing to pre-service teachers' writing skills.
- The personal blog users exhibited heterogeneous preferences.
- The communal blog users exhibited homogeneous preferences.

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1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a growing trend of integrating technology platforms into academic research and teaching dimensions since they are interlinked and mutually inspired (Badley, 2002). The present study focuses on the integration of blogs in the context of teacher education with the dual intentions of furnishing a technological infrastructure that advances pre-service teachers' training process and professional development (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014).

The blog may be viewed as an evolved form of personal webpage or home page that includes different types of records or posts presented in chronological order (Sim & Hew, 2010). Internet users can utilize these records for the purpose of reading and writing comments (talkback). Blog owners are known as *bloggers* and the blogger community is dubbed the *blogosphere*. The blog is a platform for mass communication since it facilitates the introduction and publication of information on the web by means of

chronologically-displayed records (from newest to oldest entry), thereby creating links to websites and other blogs and affording the blog readers an opportunity to respond to the information published in it (Blood, 2002; Williams & Jacobs, 2004).

It is customary to classify blogs according to four dimensions: (1) personal-individual (log network: personal online diary of one blogger), (2) private-public (group support: team of bloggers discussing personal matters), (3) topically-individual (column: a blogger's personal interpretation of a new theme with each entry), and (4) topically-public (shared content: community of bloggers writing about local and global social matters) (Krishnamurthy, 2002).

All blogs share the following characteristics: individual ownership (the blogger is responsible for publishing and editing content, determining readers' rights, and designing the blog), hyperlinked post structure (the blog permits the creation of links to external information), updates displayed in reverse chronological order, and the creation of an internal blog information search according to different categories and tags). Blogs are often interactive and encourage feedback, especially in the form of comments that readers add to the original blogger's posts (Terblanche & Goodwin-Davey, 2013). As regards these characteristics, blogs may promote ownership of work and encourage an exchange of ideas (Lee, 2009).

In recent years, there has been increasing evidence that the use of blogs in diverse academic contexts is becoming more commonplace, particularly in teacher education (Duarte, 2015; Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011; Powell, Jacob, & Chapman, 2012). In this context, the blog is seldom used as a study journal in which pre-service teachers document relevant information from college courses and practical work at the school, publish reflective records, voice their opinions regarding educational issues, and express their

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feelings and emotions vis-à-vis academic study. Moreover, since scholars have portrayed the blog as a space where discourse can occur among learners, between learners and instructors, as well as between learners and the larger internet community (Sim & Hew, 2010), it seems that teacher education may consider blogs to serve as platforms for encouraging both online and face-to-face communication and social interaction.

Right from the outset of the training process, pre-service teachers are exposed to teachers' professional practices such as writing reflections on the basis of teacher-student discourse analysis, developing integrative thinking and professional language based on the connection between practical experience and various educational theories, and implementing 21st-century technologies. Pre-service teachers usually find these professional practices unfamiliar and obscure, and often perform them reluctantly, struggling to implement them and failing to understand their purpose or their contribution to their professional development and training. The aims of this research, therefore, were to explore: (1) whether blogs can act as an online space that enhances pre-service teachers' understanding of the importance of these unfamiliar practices to their professional development; (2) pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits of integrating blogs into their training practices; and (3) the type of blog (personal or communal) that is preferable in teacher training.

It is crucial for teacher educators to discover how their students perceive the contribution of the blog to the development of their professional practices. This will enable them to grasp the implications of using this technology for their trainees' professional development as well as for advancing and improving teacher education (Tondeur et al., 2012).

1.1. Blogs in teacher education

For over two decades, the empirical educational research corpus has paid a great deal of attention to the advancement of teacher education that is tailored to the 21st century (Handler, 1993; Niess, 2015). However, research on the contribution of the blog platform to the advancement of teaching, learning, and assessment in academia is still in its early stages (Deng & Yuen, 2011). Apparently, despite the availability and the user-friendly accessibility of this platform, its integration into teacher education is relatively limited (Fisher & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, there is only a vague understanding of how its implementation affects college students' training (Tang, 2013). Evidence from empirical studies conducted around the world reveals that when teacher educators integrate blogs into their course requirements, it exerts a significant effect on their students' learning process (Tang & Lam, 2014; Top, Yukselturk, & Inan, 2010). For example, in a study conducted in Turkey, Okan and Taraf (2013) found that students who were specializing in foreign-language teaching and utilizing blogs in their learning process perceived the blog as a platform that supported professional preparation and advanced their ICT skills.

A broad overview of studies dealing with the integration of blogs into teacher education reveals that in general, the contribution of the blog is reflected in an improvement in student teachers' reading and writing skills as well as in their professional reflection (Harland & Wondra, 2011). Other studies point to the blog's contribution to critical thinking and social interaction (Deng & Yuen, 2011; Yang, 2009).

Some studies have suggested that blogs contribute to flexibility of time and space in the learning processes while increasing the satisfaction derived from learning, academic achievement, a deeper understanding of the material studied, and sharing ideas and practical experience with faculty members and peers (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). When a blog accompanied the practical work at

school, it was considered to be a platform supporting the cognitive, social, and emotional dimension of learning (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012), and could encourage the creation of a community that had an impact on the student teachers' professional identity (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). In contrast, there are a few studies that indicate the relatively small contribution of blogging to the advancement of student teachers' professional development as concerns enhanced higher-order reflection (Jones & Ryan, 2014; Killeavy & Moloney, 2010; Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2008).

1.2. Blogging approaches

There are two main ways to use blogs in teacher education (Fisher & Kim, 2013). The first way is by means of a personal blog (a kind of personal journal) in which the college student posts reflections about her practical work at school or in other contexts (e.g., news about national or global educational reforms, or educational theories and information presented in other courses taught in the training process). One of the main characteristics of a personal blog is that posts are revealed to the course instructor but not to the other course participants. This signifies that personal blogging may be considered tantamount to implementing cognitive-constructivist theories of learning (Piaget, 1968) since the focus is on the construction of self-knowledge from practical work. At the same time, the blog is displayed as a platform where the college student reveals her personal voice and reflections while integrating experience with the theories and ideas that are being studied in other courses. Thus, the pre-service teacher undergoes a process of *assimilation* (i.e., tailoring new information to existing knowledge) simultaneously with a process of *accommodation*, (i.e., adjusting existing knowledge as a consequence of new knowledge) (Selwyn, 2011).

The second way to use blogs in teacher education is by means of a communal blog in which all college students participating in the course publish their posts in one blog space with the result that both the course instructor and all the course participants can read the posts and add comments. This signifies that communal blogging may be considered as tantamount to implementing sociocultural theories of learning and technology (Vygotsky, 1986) since the focus is on the interaction among the course participants as well as on their cooperation and sharing of ideas while creating a collaborative learning community (Tang & Lam, 2014; Top, 2012).

Although educational blogging is not a new phenomenon, the use of blogs in teacher education in Israel is still in its early stages. In line with the above-mentioned study aims, which focused on exploring the pre-service teachers' perceived usefulness of blogs in their professional development and training, the following two research questions were examined:

- What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the contribution of personal blogs and communal blogs to their professional development?
- Which platform do pre-service teachers prefer: the personal blog or the communal blog? and why?

2. Research context and procedure

The study was conducted at a college of education located in a major city in the center of Israel. As part of the teacher education program, pre-service teachers engage in a full school day of practical work once a week throughout the academic year (two semesters). Each pre-service teacher's practical work includes the following: (1) planning lesson experiences with one student or more, selected by the pre-service teacher in consultation with the teacher educator, (2) implementing the lessons, (3) receiving

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