

Organisational Blogging: Reviewing Its Effectiveness as an Organisational Learning Tool

Gavin J. Baxter, Mark H. Stansfield

Abstract—This paper reviews the internal use of blogs and their potential effectiveness as organisational learning tools. Since the emergence of the concept of ‘Enterprise 2.0’ there remains a lack of empirical evidence associated with how organisations are applying social media tools and whether they are effective towards supporting organisational learning. Surprisingly, blogs, one of the more traditional social media tools, still remains under-researched in the context of ‘Enterprise 2.0’ and organisational learning. The aim of this paper is to identify the theoretical linkage between blogs and organisational learning in addition to reviewing prior research on organisational blogging exploring why this area remains under-researched. Through a literature review, one of the principal findings of this paper is that organisational blogs have a mutual compatibility with the interpretivist aspect of organisational learning. This paper further advocates that further empirical work in this subject area is required to substantiate this theoretical assumption.

Keywords—Blogs, Enterprise 2.0, Organisational Learning, Social Media Tools.

I. INTRODUCTION

ENTERPRISE 2.0 is a concept that was coined in 2006 by Andrew McAfee that refers to how organisations make use of social media tools from an internal or external perspective to assist them in achieving their business aims and goals. Though certain social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook can be used by organisations for ‘customer facing’ purposes the value of social media tools being used for internal communication and knowledge sharing in organisations is steadily increasing. However, despite this, there still appears to be a lack of empirical evidence on the subject area concerning the use of social media tools in organisations. One particular social media tool that has been established for quite some time though still appears to be under-researched from a corporate perspective is blogs. Several definitions of blogs exist in the academic literature. The word “Weblog” was first coined in 1997 due to the amalgamation of the words “web” and “log” [1]. Blogs are web sites that can be used individually or collectively to illustrate historical or up-to-date content. Blogs have been likened to online diaries primarily due to their ‘diary-like format’ [2]. Blogs can be used privately or publicly. Continuous advances in Web technology has meant that in addition to simple text entries on blogs they can also support multimedia content such as sound, video, animation and

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graphics. In terms of empirical studies associated with blog use it is evident that blog adoption appears to be quite prevalent in educational contexts to support learning among students [3]. However, in contrast, there appears to be a lack of empirical evidence with regards to the use of blogs in corporate settings [4]. Furthermore, it has also been stated in the literature that further empirical work is required in the subject area of organisational blogging to assess whether blogs are beneficial as communication and knowledge sharing tools in corporate settings [5]. Despite this, empirical studies on organisational blogging do exist [4]. Blogs can be used in organisations for several purposes and have been categorised into several types namely: employee blogs, group blogs, executive blogs, promotional blogs and newsletter blogs [6]. The purpose of this paper is to review the use of group blogs, sometimes referred to as project blogs, in organisations and to identify their theoretical link to the concept of organisational learning.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF BLOGS

In the context of corporate settings, it would appear that blogs are applicable tools that can be applied in internal project environments that can aid communication and knowledge sharing among employees. This section of the paper reviews the characteristics of blogs with a view to identifying their salient features.

A. Blogs and Communication

Blogs have the potential to facilitate and support communication. Furthermore, due to their “conversational nature” [7: 135] members of a particular blog can share opinions and views about specific topics and subject areas that are of interest to them, whether they be work related or more social in nature. Similar to most social media tools, blogs have the potential to stimulate dialogue through their topical and diary-like format that assist to facilitate their mode of asynchronous communication. Individuals using a blog can respond to blog posts at a time of their convenience allowing them to reflect on postings prior to commenting on them.

B. Blogs and Reflection

The diary-like nature of blogs means that they have strong connotations towards the concept of reflection. It has been argued that blogs support the process of reflection as they allow users to contextualise information to help them make sense of their thoughts as they write and that comments added by other bloggers helps to add to this context [8]. Furthermore, it has been stated that blogs promote the notion of “thinking by writing” [9: 227] allowing bloggers inserting blog posts to

reflect on personal experience or actions thereby sharing this tacit knowledge with fellow readers.

C. Blogs and Knowledge Sharing

Blogs can also be applied as knowledge management tools. Blogs have the ability to contextualise information allowing users of a blog to impart tacit knowledge that can be shared and stored in an explicit format on a blog. Knowledge stored on a blog can be used to store knowledge that is historical as well as up-to-date.

D. Blogs and Communities

The act of blogging has been characterised as socially interactive and community-like in nature [10]. Blogs can promote a sense of community and when used on a collective basis can be community-driven thereby supporting the concept of a community of practice. Communities of practice (CoPs) are “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” [11: 4]. Dependent on the purpose and focus of a blog, blogs have the ability to engender a community spirit among their members allowing people to share views about communal activities such as general topics of interest.

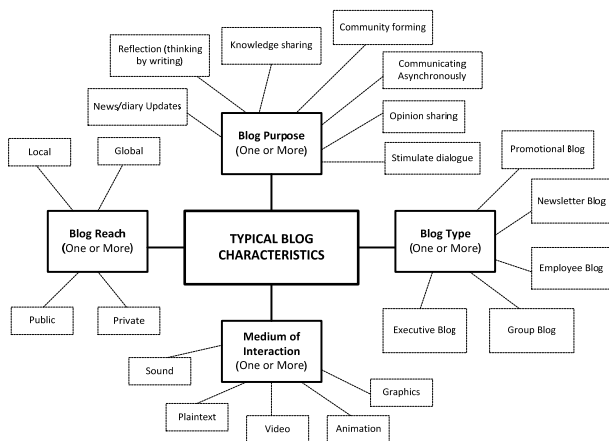


Fig. 1 Common characteristics and types of blogs

III. ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND BLOGS

Blogs have the potential to support the interpretive or social aspect of organisational learning [12]. There are several definitions of organisational learning. One definition of organisational learning that conforms to the interpretivist perspective is the viewpoint that states that organisational learning “occurs through shared insights, knowledge, and mental models...[and] builds on past knowledge and experience – that is, on memory” [13: 64]. This outlook of organisational learning conforms to the social stance of organisational learning which advocates that learning in organisations is a social process [14]. Contained within the social paradigm of organisational learning is the view first and foremost that learning is relationship-based and that learning begins in the form of relationships and through social

construction [15]. In addition, the social perspective of organisational learning articulates that organisations and the individuals that reside within them are predominately social, dynamic and interactive in nature [16].

The social perspective of organisational learning also views knowledge as being tacit and non-quantifiable. Knowledge is perceived to be socially constructed where knowledge is based on an individual’s unique experience, own mental models and know-how. Within this perspective of organisational learning it is generally considered that people can think and act for themselves and that reality is predominately social in nature. Closely aligned to the concept of tacit knowledge is the process of reflection which has also been linked to organisational learning [17]. Reflection, it can be argued, has a direct association with tacit knowledge. Reflection can be described as “the purposeful contemplation of thoughts, feelings, and happenings that pertain to recent experiences” [18: 239]. Through the process of reflection tacit individual experiences can be recorded on a blog for other blog users to further reflect on and to contribute their tacit knowledge to the blog post.

IV. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND BLOGS

A. Blogs, Organisational Learning and Communication

Blogs are tools that can be useful to facilitate communication in organisational settings. From an organisational learning perspective, dialogue articulated on a blog can promote collective thinking and communication within an organisation. For example, an internal company blog could capture tacit knowledge such as shared mental models and technical skills of colleagues in addition to work-related problems for which employees can articulate how they were overcome. A blog would have the ability to record the logical steps taken to resolve a work issue by a staff member who could reflect on their actions and put them into context on a blog.

B. Blogs, Organisational Learning and Reflection

The theoretical link between reflection and organisational learning has already been identified in the academic literature [8]. It can be argued that a blog is an appropriate organisational learning tool that can complement the theories specified in Schon’s ‘The reflective practitioner’ [19]. Schon’s reflection-in-action involves individuals interacting with their own experiences, emotions and theories-in-use whilst engaged in a particular activity. Reflecting-on-action entails people exploring their own experiences, emotions and theories-in-use whilst engaged in a particular activity. Reflecting-on-action entails people exploring their own behaviour after having completed a certain task, and reflecting back on this as well as the context that dictated their actions and helped to shape them. These theories could be applied to group learning in organisational projects so that each individual in a project-based community can collectively learn from one another.

C. Blogs, Organisational Learning and Knowledge Sharing

Blogs can act as ‘information memories’ because “information codified in weblogs is made available as collective knowledge to everyone” [20: 84]. From an organisational learning perspective, the knowledge contained on a blog can be connected to an organisation’s knowledge system. For example, a blog can assist in the socialisation process of knowledge creation in an organisation facilitating the sharing of tacit knowledge among staff members who might be using a group blog for project work. The capturing of tacit knowledge on a blog can also serve as a platform for converting tacit knowledge into a comprehensible format that can be understood by organisational members who may be using that blog. It can be further argued that blogs, when used in project-based environments, have a theoretical association with the organisational learning concept of organisational memory. Organisational memory can be viewed as “[...] stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions” [21: 61]. For example, a project blog could be used to store prior project knowledge about projects that staff members have worked on previously that could allow project members to use knowledge from old projects to bear on current ones.

D. Blogs, Organisational Learning and Communities

The community-driven nature of blogs makes them very applicable towards supporting communities of practice (CoPs) in organisations. In addition, CoPs have been identified as being one approach towards resolving the dilemma of sharing tacit knowledge in organisations. For example, CoPs have a strong adherence to the notion of ‘shared repertoire’ whereby the repertoire of a CoP includes and shares among its members things such as: routines, words, approaches to doing things, stories, actions or new practices adopted by the community since its formation. CoPs can also support the concept of the ‘reflective practitioner’ by accommodating practitioners in a project community and allow them to share their repertoire of prior or current project experiences to the overall community.

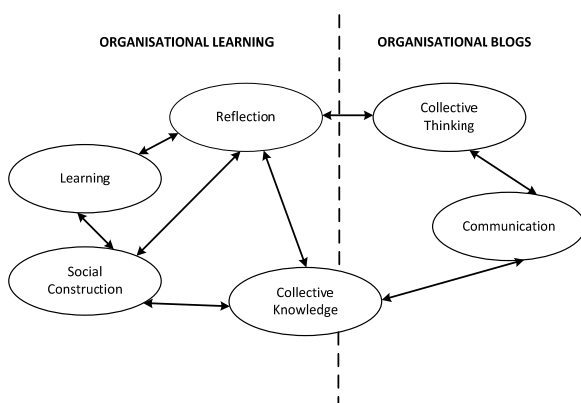


Fig. 2 Relationship between organisational learning and blogs

V. PRIOR RESEARCH ON ORGANISATIONAL BLOG USE

Empirical research into the internal use of organisational blogs has been performed and reported in the academic literature. The results of a systematic literature review undertaken in this subject area found that empirical research associated with internal organisational blog use peaked during 2007 but that further empirical research is required to advance this subject area forward from a theoretical and practical perspective [4]. The majority of empirical studies regarding internal organisational blog use have been researched from both qualitative and quantitative standpoints with studies having researched the use of internal blogs to investigate their potential for storing and sharing knowledge in organisations [22], [23]. Other studies involved in the subject area of internal organisational blog use have reviewed organisational blogging practices in addition to what motivates staff to use blogs as part of their daily working routine [24], [25]. Elsewhere, other studies have focused on the use of internal blogs to support the process of internal communication [26].

These empirical studies have assisted to indicate that blogs, when applied internally in organisations have the potential to support some of the theoretical constructs of the social aspect of organisational learning such as promoting knowledge sharing and sustaining the formation of CoPs. In contrast to these findings these studies also revealed that a salient factor in the success of any internal blogging initiative in an organisation is due to the amount of support provided by senior management to staff who are engaging in the blogging initiative.

VI. ADVANCING THE ‘STATE OF THE ART’ OF ORGANISATIONAL BLOGGING

It appears that research into other types of enterprise social media tools is gradually increasing for example with research also having been undertaken in the topic of using social networking sites in organisations [27]. Technical developments in social media tools in addition to the wide variety of social media platforms available today has meant that organisations now have a greater degree of choice in determining the methods of how they internally communicate and share knowledge. It could be argued that because blogs are sometimes viewed as being one of the more traditional social media tools that their use is being superseded by other ‘trendier’ types of social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook or Google Docs. However, despite this assumption, it can be argued that it is the purpose of using the social media tool in addition to it coinciding with the organisation’s aims that determines its adoption.

This paper does however advocate that there is still an important role for blogs to play in organisations and that when used internally, dependent on their use, they have the potential to support the process of organisational learning, especially in project-based environments. However, further empirical work is required to determine whether the theoretical view that blogs can support the social aspect of organisational learning is a valid one. Prior research in this subject area [4] has

suggested that research into organisational blogging can go beyond the concept of organisational learning and that the use of internal blogs can be explored from various other perspectives that include viewing their application being applied in different areas, namely: (1) different sized organisations; (2) geographically dispersed project teams; (3) different job roles; (4) reviewing behavioural implications in organisational blogging; (5) role of management in aiding transition to blog use and (6) blog implementation in different industry sectors. The comparison of the effectiveness of enterprise microblogging and weblogs is another potential area for research with regards to investigating which type of social media tool is the most effective and in what contexts to support the process of organisational learning. Comparative studies of this nature would be beneficial to advance both subject areas as it has also been stated in the academic literature that enterprise microblogging has the potential to support the interpretivist view of organisational learning [28].

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview of internal organisational blogging and has identified that it has a theoretical association with the social aspect of organisational learning. This paper has also argued that it appears that empirical research associated with organisational blogging is lacking with further empirical research required to advance this subject area from an academic and management practitioner perspective. Though the concept of blogging has been around for quite some time, its use has been researched more in educational settings as opposed to corporate ones. In conjunction with the research being undertaken in other types of enterprise social media tools there are several avenues of research identified in this paper that are applicable to organisational blogging. Only through the undertaking of further empirical studies in this area, in different organisational contexts will comparisons and generalisations be allowed to be made not only about whether blogs are applicable organisational learning tools but to also identify the potential challenges in introducing blogs into corporate settings [5].

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