The Refuseniks of Blogging

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Abstract
"Refusenik" is in English colloquial used about individuals who decline performing certain actions. To empirically illustrate it, I explore how a class in vocational studies consisting of male students studying the subject English in a Norwegian high school, partly refused participating in a teacher initiated blog project. By employing an open coding approach, the intention is to examine what types of decision-making arguments students used to disengage from a formal learning regime, where Web 2.0 technologies were introduced and applied.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION
Web 2.0 has been used as term to describe new Internet applications as blogs, wiki, and social network sites (O'Reilly 2005). Others have understood it as a form of social software that can promote new divisions of labour as collaborative approaches (Guenter 2008), but researchers still disagree on what social web "is" (Bloch 2008). They are also engulfed in debates, where scholars disagree to what extent social web has any learning effect, reflecting a covert stand between postmodern theory-driven critical approaches and an emerging domain dedicated to ascertaining evidence. Certain scholars dispute the value of technocentristic arguments, and claim that it is not about embracing or rejecting new media, but to think "positively and negatively about technologies as the situation demands" (Selwyn 2009:75). Recent studies on Web 2.0, however, are criticised for their limitations, poor use of methods, research design, and failure to provide in-depth on how use is truly experienced (Wang & Vásques 2012). An interesting point in this regard, however, is underlined by McGrail and Davis (2011). They contend that teachers have great difficulties in *implementing* Web 2.0 software as part of their practices – which often appears being a forgotten point in current analysis.

The introduction of innovations carries with it some degrees of risk, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Lessons from the study of innovations, nonetheless, show that actors perform an innovation-decision making process, when considering if they choose to adopt or reject an innovation. A central part of this process is what Rogers (2003) calls innovation-decisions. And this brings me over to the intention with this paper. I explore how a class consisting of male students partly rejected use of blog as part of a formal learning regime. The empirical examples relates to a class in vocational studies at a Norwegian high school. I ask the following research question; how do students classify, evaluate, navigate, and understand blog? By the use of an open coded approach anchored in the sociological research tradition called constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin 1990; 1998), I aim at analysing what types of decisions making arguments the students constructed when opposing blogging.

I start the paper with a short review of current research literature on blogging. I then proceed to account for methods and data analysis, before ending with a conclusion.

BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON BLOGGING

Educational research on blogs is not a recent field. Earliest work, for example, dates back to 2004 (see Hernández-Ramos 2004), but the area has been growing the last ten years. Interesting research patterns display. The previous idea of blog as a written online journal is up for review. Researchers currently study video blogs, audio or multimedia content (Hung 2011; Papastergiou, Gerodimos, & Antoniou 2011), but also analyse blogging interchangeably with other Web 2.0 software, as wikis, social network sites (Miyazoe & Anderson 2010).

Recent research can be classified into different topics. Higher education is a well-researched domain (Chong, 2010; Chu, et al., 2012; Laru, Näykki, & Järvelä 2012; Papastergiou, Gerodimos, & Antoniou, 2011; Pearson 2010; Sun 2010; Wood 2012; Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole 2009). The lower levels of the education system have also been given focus, but researchers agree more knowledge is needed (Lai & Chen 2011; McGrail & Davis 2011). Distinct subjects are studied as foreign language and history (Arslan & Şahin-Kizil 2010; Ducate & Lomicka 2005, Manfra & Lee 2012). Enquiries take on the task of analysing blog as part of formal learning regimes, emphasising it as part of pedagogical learning strategies, a trait identified in the choice of research topics. Research literature concentrates on literacy practices (Liew 2010), meaning often investigations of written texts (Miyazoe & Anderson 2010). But its role is seen beyond text production, as learning processes have been analysed as part of larger learning contexts (K. T. Wang, Huang, Jeng, & Wang 2008). Research work has also showed how blog is used as a tool for students' self-expression (Deng & Yuen 2011; Ducate & Lomicka 2008), reflection (de Andrés Martínez 2012; Killeavy & Moloney 2010; McGrail & Davis 2011), peer-learning (Li-ou & Peng, 2009), collaboration (Yang & Chang 2012), and being part of learning communities (Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy 2010). Studies advocate as well as for blog's advantages or disadvantages (Kim 2008; Y. S. Wang, Lin, & Liao 2012, Jimoyiannis & Angelaina 2012). A much used argument is that blog represents a new opportunity for teaching. Others take a sceptical stand, contending that blog contributes with little to enhance learning processes. Many studies have reported that blogging has positive learning outcome, while others take their reservations (Goktas & Demirel 2012).

METHODS, SAMPLE AND DATA ANALYSIS

The fall of 2011, I was allowed to follow the work practice of a language teacher who employed different types of Web 2.0 software as part of her teachings. She taught in English and Spanish and was assigned a class consisting of male students in vocational studies. A central learning objective was that her students were to blog on regular bases in English. Among other, her aim was to replace students' work books with online web submissions. For this purpose, she created a blog project aimed at blending face-to-face interactions with mediated web content. Her students were to become critical thinkers by using critical literacy. Inspired by a scaffolding strategy, students were to see beyond the bias opinions communicated on the web. Blogging was an innovation that could aid students from being consumers to become prosumers of web content. The blog project was supposed to run throughout the year. My teacher had applied blog with great success from previous years. Blogging had a concrete learning objective; to educate students in becoming good writers in English. Each student was supposed to create a blog. Publishing of assignments were aimed at occurring on a weekly basis. The project started in August 2011, but was stopped after two months.

I used two qualitative methods; semi-structured interviews with students and study of blog posts. I collected my data from August 2011 to March 2012. Interviewing took place the first quarter of 2012. I interviewed 11 students. Six interviews were completed; five in pairs, one as single. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour. They were transcribed. Interviews and blogs have been analysed by an open ended coded approach framed within the research tradition constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin 1990; 1998). This is used to code and categorise data in order to identify local concepts, principles, structures and processes. The data analysis resulted in these categories: (1) "The gap in formal knowledge of the education system", (2) "The privacy issue", (3) "Management Learning System over blog", (4) "The genderisation of blogging".

DATA ANALYSIS

This section has two parts; one analysing the content which some of the students published, while the second one explores their experiences.

Published content

Table 1: Content published on students' blogs.

	Published and created blog	Number of posts	Number of comments	Use of pseudonym	Completed assignments	Task: Social background	Task: Safety rules	Task: The hammer	Task: Student 'interests
Student 1	Y	6	2	Y	3	Y	Y	Y	N
Student 2	Y	7	1	Y	3	Y	Y	Y	N
Student 3	Y	3	0	Y	3	Y	N	Y	Y
Student 4	Y	4	0	Y	4	Y	Y	Y	Y
Student 5	N	0	0	Y	0	N	N	N	N

The table shows the content the students published. It has interesting traits. First, all posts were assignments given by teacher. The majority of the students did not create a blog. Only five out of twelve did, while four of five published posts. Second, all who participated published all posts anonymously. Third, there is no data suggesting reflective discussions among the students. Among those who fulfilled their assignments, one sees small variations. Students were given goal-driven tasks, which were related to the national curriculum in English. The topic in each post was concrete, in the sense that they could apply to future work situations where English would be a required competence. Their first task was to write about themselves or explain their social background. Four students completed it. The second concerned an important aspect with the carpentry profession; Health Safety and Security. They were to write about safety rules. Three students fulfilled it. The third assignment connected to a tool that any carpenter use and has a long-standing relationship with; the hammer. Four students finished it. A fourth was given, but it was framed to meet the interest of the students themselves; they could write something that interested them. This resulted in two posts on football.

In sum, the learning outcome shows distinct categories. There are layers of division on the organising of participation and acceptance of formal learning. This is

expressed between those who choose to blog, those who created one, those who published, and the volume of written content, factors generating differences on students who take the role as prosumer or consumer.

1. The gap in formal knowledge of the education system

One argument for refusing to blog connects to that many students did not want to display their skills in written English to an unknown audience. Blogging is about writing, and to do it on another language, constitute risks and uncertainties, especially that of online bullying. The students knew English, yes, but the teacher learned that they were not at a desired level. They were not on the level to meet the expectations of the formal learning culture. This was identified on different levels, on cultural insights, grammar, spelling, reading and writing. In class, the teacher struggled in having dialogues in English. When she attempted initiate one, students would often respond in Norwegian. Students entered class with a disadvantaged in language training, a trait that can perhaps be attributed to that somewhere earlier in the education loop, they made a decision to give in the acquisition of the knowledge framed within the logics of formal learning culture. Perhaps students had this insight, and knew that blog's public nature – that anyone can read what they write – meant exposure to a gap in language.

2. The privacy issue

The privacy issue was an important topic among the students. Blogging was classified as too public, meaning that they had an understanding that others – who appear anonymous – can possibly abuse their school work. Publishing is associated with a risk and students felt that they had a moral right to seclude themselves. It pertains applying a confirmative strategy or a decision to remain unspoken. Several students made clear distinctions on norms for who should have access or who they are willingly to share their school work with. Blog had for example dichotomised meaning as individual:collective, private:public. This was a theme when considering who is classified as an acceptable receiver of homework and where it is suitable to publish:

S 1: It's exactly the same as posting your homework in the cafeteria. It's not something you do.
I: You find that it violates your integrity as a person?
S1: Yes. I feel that homework is something a teacher should see and evaluate, and that not everybody can just read and watch.
I: Is it the same with you? That it is a private thing and that it's a girl thing?
S 2: Yes. Fronter is for texts and blog is for girls.
S 1: It's not a big deal that others can see it, but it's the principle, it is only the teacher who really should see your homework.
I: But how to get evaluations from your classmates?
S 1: That's something else, but it would be ok if it had only been within the class. You do not go around asking "what do you think about this?"

Students look for a safe space, where they can exercise trust in a strong tie. Evaluation of home assignments is understood as private, and can only be shared in an individual dialog between student and teacher. Sharing of homework is socially exclusive. Blog challenges this and has the possibility to suspend that privacy. To yet again safeguard oneself from an imagined audience, self-censorship increases as an important practice to execute:

S1: I have no need to tell others what I do on my spare time. That, I feel is a private matter and it there is no need for others to know anything about it, or, they don't need to know.
I: Although it is a simple school assignment?
S1: We were supposed to write about things that we did.
I: You felt that it violated your right to privacy?

S1: I've never been a fan of blogging. It had been much easier from start, if we had stored it at Fronter, where we could hand in the assignments instead having a blog.

S2: She said that all the tasks we were supposed to do, we could have done on Fronter. It is so much easier. There it is a place for all your homework, instead of uploading and such clever stuff. I don't have any blog. It's not happening. I made one, but I did not post anything on it.

3. Management Learning System over blog

Another argument for rejecting to blog related to the relative advantages between Web 2.0 applications and breach in students' established user patterns. Students were used to Management Learning Systems (MLS) from prior schooling, where they submitted their homework. Students used a standard affordance argument that MLS had qualities that blog could not match; easier protocols for submission, prior experience, restricted interface infrastructure allowing only limited numbers of individual access, etc.:

> Fronter is an educational tool, blog is not. Blogging is for those who like to publish their life for the entire world. One should not publish one's homework on a blog. It does not belong there. (Student)

MLS is less associated with risk but safety, and means preservation of anonymity. It also acts as a technological alternative to blogging. The students employed typical benefits arguments when choosing MLS over blogging; it offers something that blog cannot, knowing who is in the unknown audience; their work and skills can only be seen by one authority, their teacher, a trait that pertains the decision for not to blog.

4. The genderisation of blogging

Another argument was blog's highly multiple layers of gendered meanings. This was related to the digital social phenomenon, "pink blogging". Unclear on its true nature, it can be understood as a form of an individualised young adult consumer culture lifestyle, dedicated to the experimentation on feminine practices. Young females blog about their everyday life, emotions, love-life, social matters, and endorse commercial products, acting as role models. This online social category has somewhat risen to be a symbolic embodification of a successful young person, and reflects and creates public perceptions on what a young life should be.

I: What do you think about blogging?

S: Totally uninteresting to me.

I: Why?

S: I've never had any interest in blogging, to write what you eat, when they go to the bathroom. I have no interest it, to be quite honest.

I: But do you read blogs?

S: No.

I: Is it a girl thing?

S: Yes, for me it's a girl thing.

I: Why do you say that?

S: Because they are most concerned about makeup and what they wear.

The students had a clear perception on that the volume and the content of female's production and consumption of blogging, surpass a social boundary which breaks with a notion of male intimacy. This extends when the students categorise what web content is defined as "relevant".

S1: I really do not care about it. I have never read a blog. I have only looked at pictures.

S2: I do not really see the point. It is only an egocentric side of yourself.

I: You think that?

S2: I think so, yes.

S1: I think it is silly to tell about your private life. I'm at the café with the girls, no.

S2: Why should people care, I'm wearing this today, post photos of your pants bought at Wagner and shoes I bought some other place. Why should people care about it? Why should I do that? I think that people really do not care about what people wear each day.

I: Is there a reason for why one does not want to use blog?

S1: No, blogging is embarrassing. A guy should not have a blog.

S2: I created a blog, but I did not put my name on it. One does not post any pictures on it, only texts we wrote at school. I didn't have anything against it, since there is nobody who knows that I have written on it. I do not think there are so many people who go to that website, of the people I know.

CONCLUSION

The intention has been to discuss what types of arguments students used in the innovation-decision making process, especially what concerned if they adopted or rejected an innovation, which in this case was illustrated through the use of a blog project. The students performed decision-making similar to what Rogers (2003) calls "collective innovation-decisions", where the students, partly, in consensus refused to participate. Four types of decisions arguments were identified; (1) "gap in formal knowledge", (2) "privacy issue", (3) "MLS", (4) "Gender". Use of them had consequence of acceptance of the learning outcome. Data shows a degree of layers of distinct differences. The obvious pattern displays in form of two parts, those who participated and did not create a proper or individual blog. This is clearer when looking at nuances in the web content published by the students. Data shows that only five of the 12 students produced, completed and performed the goal-driven assignments. Among those who created a blog, one of five students did not publish any content. All students created and published anonymously. Among those who blogged, there is also little data suggesting that students reflected on their topics, meaning difficulties in creating dialogue in English. The last finding is that the project stopped, and the teacher continued under the dominant cultural logics of the education system: having class in front of the blackboard and using textbooks.

Another intention has been to introduce the term "refusenik". This term can for example be used to understand how social actors in any given social system choose to refuse using social web in an educational setting. This is a field that scholars realise needs more research. Not all social actors participate and sometimes they can perform a collective action, which in this case is illustrated trough a form of collective social inhibition. Students can reject Web 2.0 applications, meaning that how an innovation is introduced and the process that follows are a crucial competence that any educator must have in mind. And, they can perform complex decision-making strategies characterised by social inhibition. This means that the current web has also the affordance to create ways of rejection of technologies. Blogging evokes socially constructed notions of ambiguous concepts of transparency and an imagined audience, which has the potentiality to create disorder for the ones who exercise the role of the publishing button. Exposing assignments to that audience requires enforcement of rigid self-controls, although it is most likely that none of the blogs will ever be read by others than themselves, their teacher, and a researcher.

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Biography

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