Analysing weblogs in university teaching

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Abstract

University lecturers are relying on the publication of blogs for complementing traditional lectures or as an e-learning tool. However, the usefulness of blogs is still unclear. Therefore there is a need for studies that may show the real value of blogs in university education. In this paper, several studies regarding this topic are reviewed, and their conclusions will be contrasted with the findings of a research carried out among the students of the University of Alicante. This research is based on a double perspective analysis. On the one hand, a qualitative assessment was conducted to evaluate the perceived satisfaction and usefulness of the students when faced with blogs, both as writers and readers. On the other hand, a quantitative survey was passed to the same students in order to estimate their level of participation and to refine the qualitative perceptions aforementioned. The conclusions show that, even though most students had not used a blog before this experience, they are motivated and consider this tool as an enhancer of their learning processes. Moreover, the students have increased their implication level in the teaching-learning dynamics by using blogs.

Keywords
Weblogs, blogs, web, online education, e-learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educative Web 2.0 enables students to participate in distributed research, an approach to learning in which knowledge is collectively constructed and shared. Wikis, weblogs, and other similar applications are taking the place of traditional overheads and slide presentations, even going further by reducing the need for mass lectures and classroom attendance.

The objective of this research was to obtain information regarding the usefulness of weblogs for Higher Education students, in their everyday life, as well as in their teaching- learning dynamics. An empirical study was carried out, for there seems to be a gigantic gap in the knowledge corpus regarding the practical implications of weblogs in the classroom.

The next section of this paper presents a theoretical review regarding the use of weblogs in education, followed by a description of the application. The fourth section explains methodology employed for this the research, and the fifth section presents and discusses its main results. The paper finishes with a number of conclusions, among which stands out the apparent dissociation between weblogs for personal use and class work.

2. RELATED WORK

Unfortunately, there is not many published material on the subject of weblogs in education. In 3], it is described an interesting teaching technique whereby students document their learning activities and learning results in a concurrent journal (log). According to the author, "A learning log is a tightly focused academic journal that is created as the student becomes knowledgeable on an individually assigned topic. The log can serve as the basis for generating Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), support class discussion, and provide the basis for the creation of a class presentation and web site".

In [8], the authors explore the idea of turning learning logs into weblogs. The authors provide an overview of weblogs. Weblogs are defined as "personal web pages written in chronological diary form

and maintained through weblogging software". The authors argue that the benefits of weblogs include "ease of publication, sharing of results, and instructor monitoring".

In [11], the authors explore the potential of blogs as learning spaces for students in the higher education sector. The authors believe that "blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning".

In [2], the authors investigate the impact of weblog use on individual learning in a university environment. This study indicates that learning with weblogs enhances students' cognitive and social construction of knowledge.

3. WEBLOG OVERVIEW

According to the Wikipedia [10], *"A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. […] A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic".* A weblog entry typically consists of the following:
- Title, the main title, or headline, of the post.
- Body, main content of the post.
- Permalink, the URL of the full, individual article.
- Post Date, date and time the post was published.

A weblog entry optionally includes the following:
- Comments, for weblog visitors.
- Categories, subjects that the entry discusses.
- Trackback, links to other sites that refer to the entry.

Regarding the weblog software, the leading weblog sites are Blogger (http://www.blogger.com/) and the leading weblog software are WordPress (http://wordpress.org/) and Movable Type (http://www.movabletype.org/). A complete weblog software comparison chart can be found in [online journalism review].

4. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research was to obtain information regarding the usefulness of weblogs for Higher Education students, in their everyday life, as well as in their teaching- learning dynamics. An empirical study was carried out, for there seems to be a gigantic gap in the knowledge corpus regarding the practical implications of weblogs in the classroom.

In order to empirically assess the impact of weblogs in the classroom from a comprehensive point of view, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. The first one consisted of a structured questionnaire with 15 questions, regarding two concepts: the top six questions aimed to show the change in attitude towards weblogs during the course period; and in the last nine questions the students were to give a scalar value of the main characteristics of weblogs as teaching-learning devices. As for the qualitative side of the research, three open questions were added to acquire more detailed information about the quantitative results, and therefore help their interpretation, and to observe behaviours towards their use of other applications of the web 2.0.

This questionnaire was addressed to a class of a Master course in the University of Alicante. These students were enrolled in a subject in which they had to develop and publish a weblog as a means for presenting their assignments and contacting the lecturer. Therefore, they had certain knowledge of the tool, even if some of them had never heard of a weblog before.

The questionnaire was tested in a former class of the same subject, at the end of the previous academic year, when they were no longer enrolled. The results of the pilot experience were processed, and the information was used to refine some of the questions, reject others and rewrite others for a better comprehension.

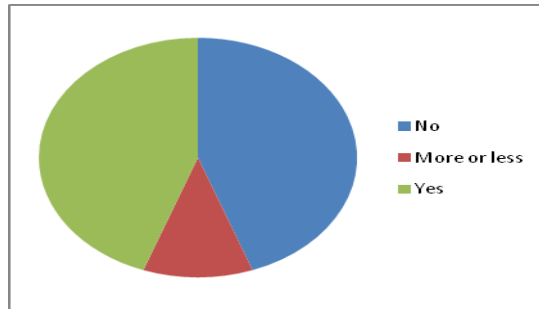|	Question	A	B	C	D	E
1	Before enrolling for this subject, did you know what a blog was?	No	More or less	Yes		
2	Before enrolling for this subject, had you ever wrote a blog?	No	Yes			
3	Before enrolling for this subject, were you reading any blogs?	No	Yes			
4	Will you read blogs now?	No	Yes			
5	Is your interest in blogs professional?	No	Yes			
6	Is your interest in blogs personal?	No	Yes			
7	What is your overall opinion about blogs?	A fading fashion	Just another way to publish in the Web	A way to allow people to express themselves freely	Very interesting	The means to change the Web
8	Do you think using blogs in education is innovative?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
9	Do you think using blogs in education is interesting?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
10	Do you think using blogs in education is interesting?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
11	Do you think using blogs in education allows for a greater implication of the student in class?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
12	Do you think using blogs in education encourages a good communication atmosphere between students and lecturers?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
13	Do you think using blogs in education improves the learning process?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
14	All in all, are you satisfied with using blogs for learning in this subject?	Totally in disagreeement	Partly in disagreement	Neither in agreement nor in disagreement	Partly in agreement	Totally in agreeement
15	Besides the compulsory blog for this subject, are you thinking of writing another blog in the near future?	No	Yes	I don't know		

Table 1: Questionnaire

75% percent of the regularly attending students answered the questionnaire, although it was a 100% on the day it was passed. To ensure such a high response, they were promised anonymity (data were processed by the University's Data Processing Center) and no repercussions on their final qualifications. However, the qualitative questions had a lower rate of response, since 33% of the respondents chose to not answer them.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the sake of clarification, only the most relevant results will be shown in this section.

5.1 Quantitative results

The first question was to determine the previous knowledge about weblogs in the class. It seems somehow worrying that almost half of the students had none, especially considering that they had enrolled a class on new technologies. This means that there are two different starting levels for learning, and therefore two different approaches should be needed when teaching,.

Fig. 1: Question 1: Before enrolling for this subject, did you know what a blog was?

The third and fourth questions are related in meaning, and in results. Thus, it can be seen in figures 2, and 3 that the same percentage of people that knew what a weblog was beforehand (see figure 1) are the only ones using it before and after the course started. We presume that they are the same individuals also, considering the small population interviewed. This shows that the people with no previous interest or knowledge do not fully appreciate the potential of weblogs, even after they become "forced" users.
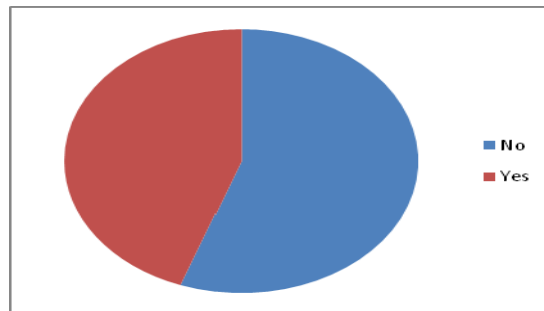
**Fig. 2: Question 4: Will you read blogs now?**
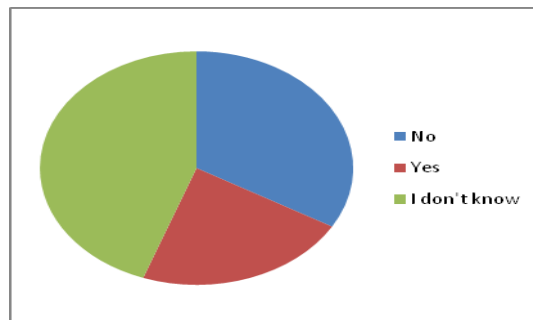
Fig. 3: Question 15: Besides the compulsory blog for this subject, are you thinking of writing another blog in the near future?

Figure 4 shows that weblogs are mainly seen as a means for free self-expression, and that they are here to stay, and even change the way people use Internet. Its positive traits and uses are recognized by our students, even if they are not regular users.
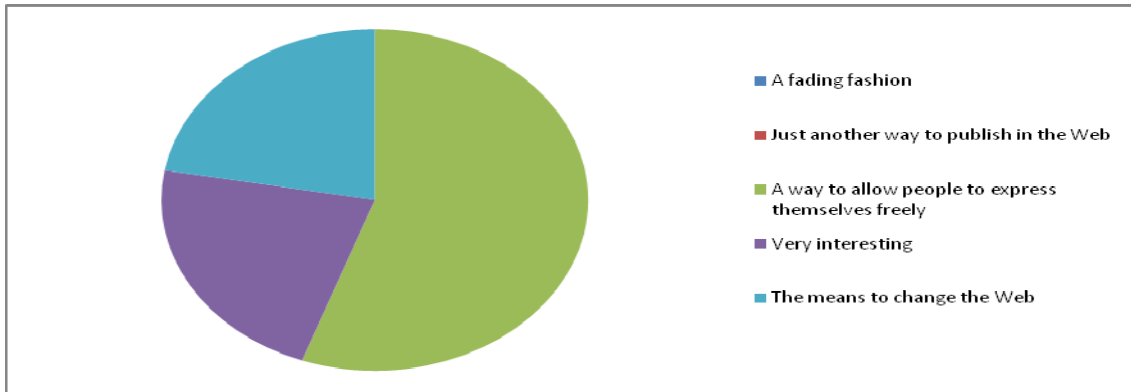
Fig. 4: Question 7: What is your overall opinion about blogs?

The following figures illustrate the effects of weblogs on the teaching- learning process, according to the interviewees. Weblogs are regarded as bearers of innovation by only 44% of them (see figure 5) and the rate is higher when asked about their being interesting (see figure 6).
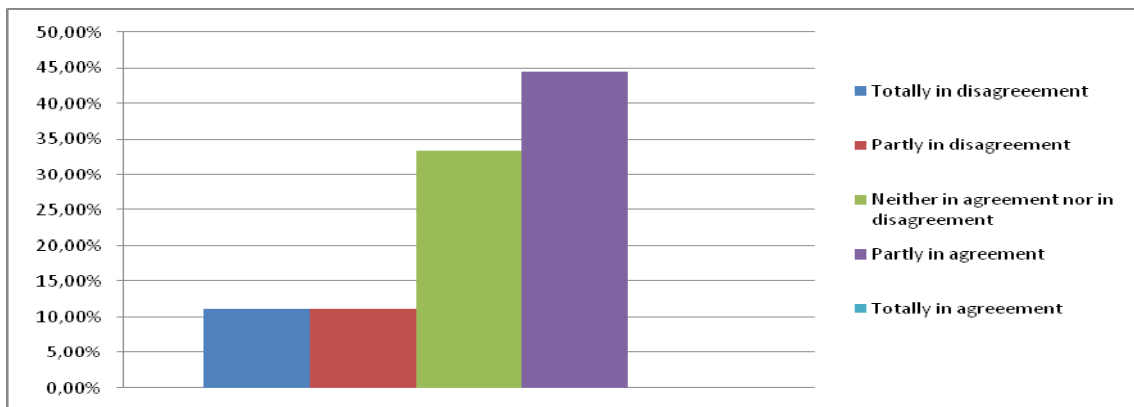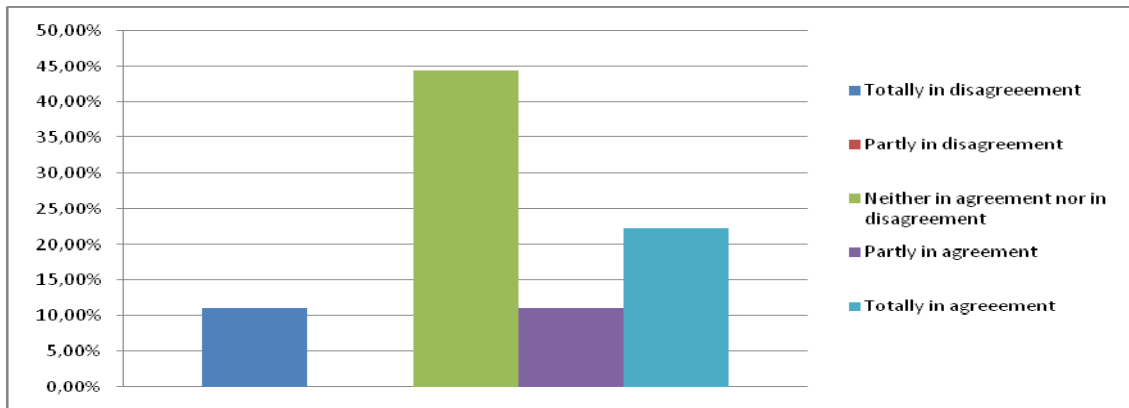

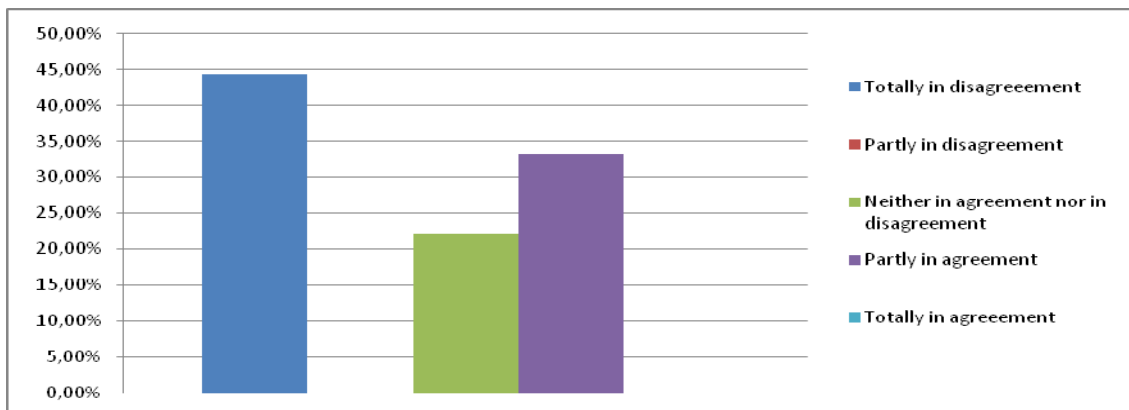**Fig. 5: Question 8: Do you think using blogs in education is innovative?**
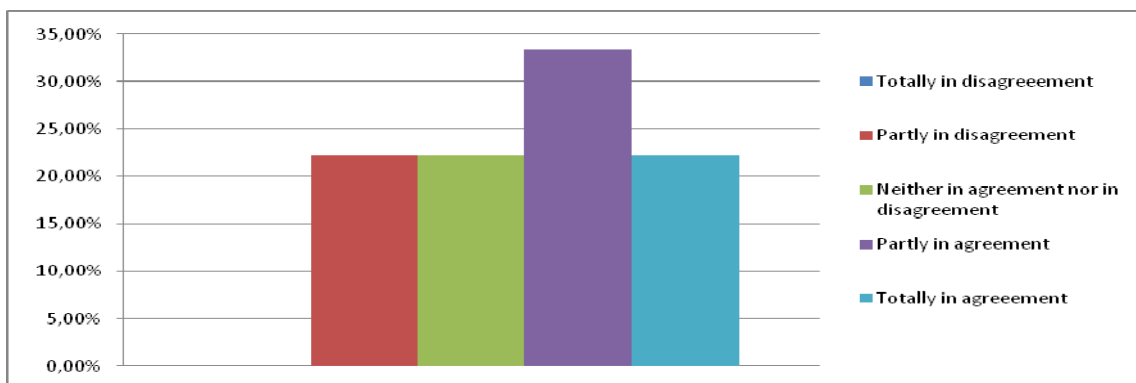
Fig. 6: Question 9: Do you think using blogs in education is interesting?

However, their usefulness is only recognized by 33% of them (see figure 7), which is low enough to make us think twice about the worthiness of introducing this tool and teach it to people if they do not find it useful. The contents of figure 8 follow this trend, where it can be seen that 44% of the students do not notice if using the weblog has increased their implication with the course.
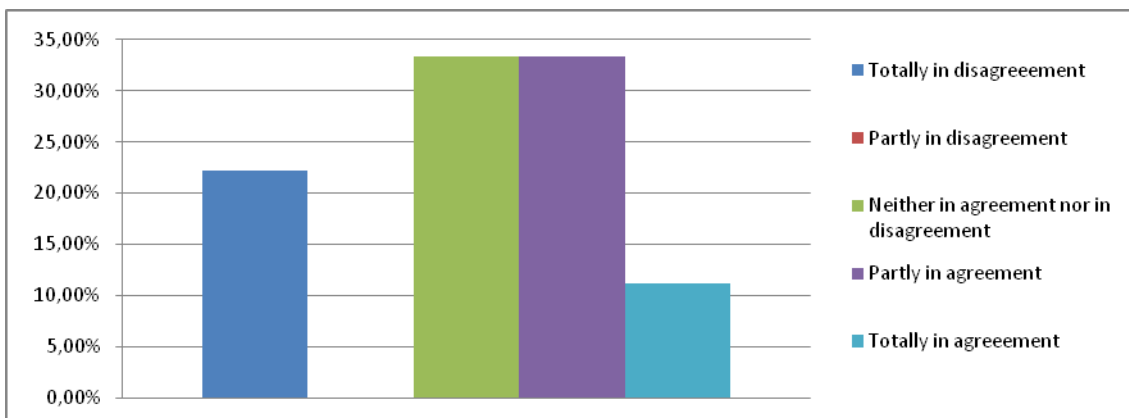
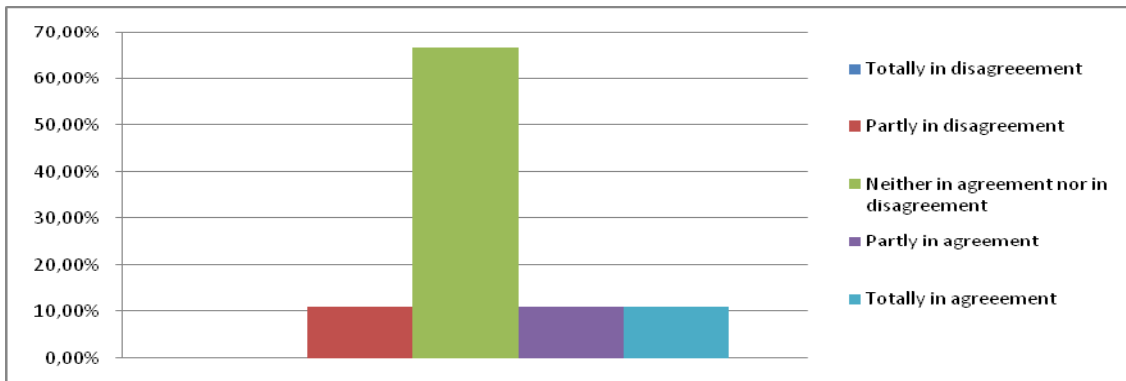**Fig. 7: Question 10: Do you think using blogs in education is useful?**

Fig. 8: Question 11: Do you think using blogs in education allows for a greater implication of the student in class?

This negative thinking gets worse with the results of figure 9, which shows that, even though weblogs are essentially means of communication, they do not fulfil this purpose in practice in the course environment.


Fig. 9: Question 12: Do you think using blogs in education encourages a good communication atmosphere between students and lecturers?

Similarly, figure 10 shows that the vast majority of the students don not have a formed opinion about whether weblogs improve the learning process. A high rate of neutral answers may be due to the fact that the course had not finished by the time of the research, and therefore they felt compelled to reserve judgment until the time of the final evaluation of the course.

Fig. 10: Question 13: Do you think using blogs in education improves the learning process?

Finally, figure 11 demonstrates that over 30% of the students strongly disagree with being satisfied with this tool for learning, opposed to the meager 10% that (partly) support their use. A reason for this negative picture may be caused by the nature of the subject itself, and the expectations of the students. Besides, this result is consistent with the prior answer, since they are more conscious of the evolution of the course work for this subject than over learning as a general concept. Also, it must be kept in mind that over 40% of these people had never been in contact with this tool before, and their lack of experience in its use may make them wary of its positive effects in their learning dynamics, merely seeing them as something interesting and fun, but not really useful.
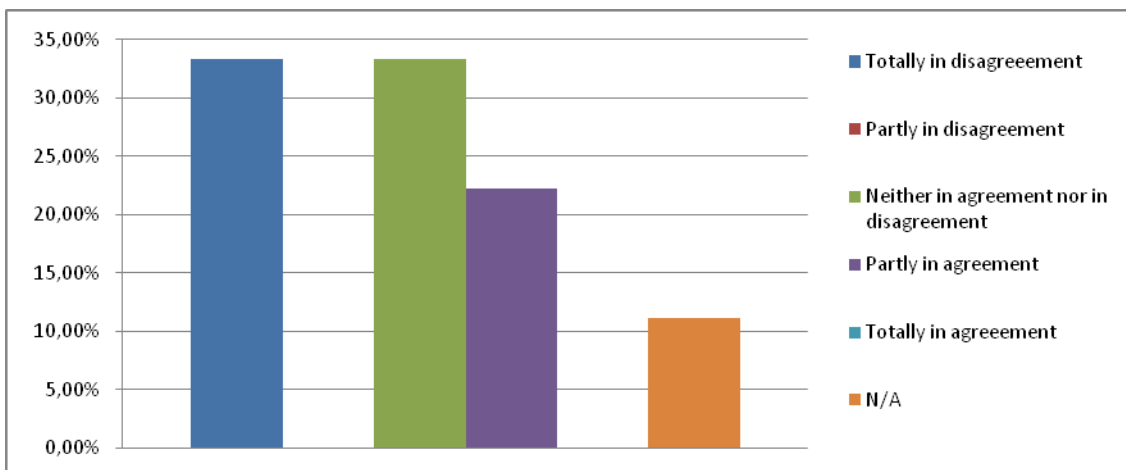
Fig. 11: Question 14: All in all, are you satisfied with using blogs for learning in this subject?

5.2 Qualitative results

The first open question, "*Do you know any blogs related to this subject?*", had an affirmative answer for just one person. The rest of the students had not tried or succeeded in surfing the web and finding other blogs that may serve as an example for their course assignment. These results concur with the quantitative findings in the apparent lack of interest of the students about weblogs as a learning support. It is specially enlightening the comment from student #4: "I did not think about it".

To the second open question, "*Do you use other Web 2.0 tools?*", 33% of the students have answered that they use Wikipedia, and 22% Youtube. Also, virtual photo albums are fairly popular (22%). Other applications were chosen by individuals, such as virtual hard disks and Google calendar. However, 44% of the students affirmed that they did not use any applications, maintaining the apathic attitude shown before.

The last question was a mere open space for the student to write whatever comments he/she thought relevant. The general opinion for 66% of the respondents is that weblogs are an interesting tool for communication, "sharing knowledge" (student #8), and "not bad for expressing oneself" (#6). They

also believe that it is a very personal instrument, and that it takes a lot of time. Nevertheless, the comments are not so complimentary in regard to the coursework ("not so useful for this subject", according to student #8), although they believe in their goodness for studying, assessing and providing "learning resources and utilities" (#1).

All in all, the qualitative findings confirm the trend of students professing a general interest in weblogs but in practice the hands-on approach is close to nil. Students work with weblogs only because of the course assignment, but only the people that were aware of the potential of weblogs are regularly using them, or other web 2.0 technologies, for class work, and even those are not really convinced of their usefulness. They seem to be motivated in their personal aspects, but maybe the nature of the particular subject in which the research was carried out does not allow for perceiving their full potential as teaching-learning tools.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Weblogs popularity is due to being a method that allows everybody to publish directly to the Web on the blink of an eye, regardless of technical skill or even content.

The results show a general interest in weblogs, although the influence of the subject is practically non existing. The students appreciate the communicating potential of weblogs as a means of information sharing and publishing. However, this information is not related to the content of the subject in which the blog has been applied. In order to see if these results are a consequence of the frame of mind of the students or the nature of the subject itself, complementary research should be carried out directed to other students and other subjects.

As for our future lines of work, our next objective is to analyze and categorize PLEs (Personal Learning Environment) and MLEs (Managed Learning Environment).

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