Chapter 31
The Use of Blogs as Knowledge Sharing in MBA

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Abstract Blogging is becoming imperative in today's Internet world. A literature review on blogging was presented in order to understand the importance of blogging in the action research approach. The present study, therefore, performs a more detailed investigation into the basic elements of action research in blogs and presents a case study, with a view to filling some gaps in the research concerning this topic. This paper addresses how blogs could be used for MBA education. The present study is an exploratory attempt to analyze the influence of blogs on MBA education. The process of action research offers a promising approach to achieving this objective. In the collaborative processes of action research, including context analysis, planned actions, and reflections on the lived experience, it develops the students' own knowledge of complicated consumer behaviors. The study challenges practices that separate the students' knowledge from the tacit knowledge and recognizes the importance of experience in MBA applied learning environment.

Keywords Blogs · Action research · Knowledge sharing

31.1 Introduction

The MBA program emphasizes the sharing of experiences, and in an e-environment academic staff members retain their traditional role of being 'facilitators'. It is commonly delivered through competency-based education, with a clear picture of what the students will be able to learn. However, the question of whether these competencies are being taught in the classroom is yet to be answered. The ultimate

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goal in MBA is to apply business knowledge in real life situation. Students should acquire and apply knowledge in the program. The dominant discourse discussed in the education literature often avoids addressing the importance of the tacit knowledge of consumers. The wisdom of MBA intellectuals is grounded in personal experience, rather than formal academic settings.

Modern notions of business education emphasize autonomous learning, independent critical thinking, analytical capacity, and excellence of teaching. In contrast to the traditional 'one-to-all' teaching mode, increasing emphasis is being placed on interactions among students and lecturers with a view to discovering the 'best option', rather than the 'right solution'. Learning communities are therefore becoming an important aspect in the MBA education.

Learning communities have traditionally operated through social interaction; collaboration is important in learning. According to Pedlar [18], learning communities consist of the following components: mutual interdependence; acceptance of differing learning needs among members of the group; equality in terms of knowledge, skills, status, and power; sharing; and offering. McFadzean and McKenzie [14] suggested that the essence of online learning is the collaborative process among the learners in the same group—thus facilitating team sharing. In this regard, advances in technology, especially advances in computer networking, make it possible for students to work and collaborate via the Internet after class, and thus build a lively interactive case-sharing community. Moreover, lecturers have more channels, time, and space available to communicate with individual students.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the experience of the author by using blogs for part-time MBA evening class in consumer behaviors. In the paper, the intention of using action research and content analysis to understand how knowledge in terms of tacit and explicit knowledge exchange and transfer among students in the class is recognized. The investigation may help schools to develop their e-learning portals more effectively. It offers an alternative to other explanations of e-learning adoption decision among those adult learners.

31.2 An Overview of Blogging

In the 1990s, when the Internet began to be commonly used by the general public, it was used mainly in the form of e-mail communication. Afterwards, as broadband Internet connection became widespread, companies began to use websites to communicate with their customers. The Internet has provided many benefits to consumers, the most well known of which is the speeding up of the communication process, including the consumer-to-consumer information flow. Online communities are the product of Internet applications [13]. The term "blog" is a shortened version of "Web-log" [23], and refers to individuals' online diaries. People organize their contents into smaller sections and display them in reverse chronological order [8]. More than 112 million blogs were available in 2008 and

over 175,000 new blogs are created every day [21]. Rather than traditional static Web contents, people update their blogs frequently and add new articles daily. These attract readers to visit their preferred blogs daily to read their new articles.

Blogs can be either personal or commercial. A personal blog is referred as to as an online diary, which may contain personal opinions regarding a specified topic or factual information [8]. Blogs consist of a person's opinions and feelings and their own views. Most articles in personal blogs are written by one person, but there are blogs that have several authors, which are named group blogs or community blogs. A commercial blog can be used internally or for marketing purposes. Most personal blogs and commercial blogs are complementary; visitors are allowed to comment on their articles. Direct offline interaction among people is possible through blogs. The importance of conducting action research focuses primarily on the ability to visualize the level of collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. Blogs tend to be transparent and are available for everyone on the Internet to view, comment on, and share.

31.3 Action Research in Blogging

Qualitative research emphasizes heavily the collection and interpretation of the available data. According to Denzin and Lincoln [5], qualitative research is "multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (1994, p. 2). Blogging, therefore, provides rich qualitative data for research.

Blogging is full of knowledge. Davenport and Prusak [4] defined knowledge as "a fluid mix of framed experience, contextual information, values and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information" (1998, p. 5). Knowledge can be either tacit or explicit [20]. Tacit knowledge represents knowledge that cannot be codified and is inexpressible. Tacit knowledge always refers to knowledge that people acquire from experience and practice. Alternatively, knowledge that can be expressed in a written form is called explicit knowledge. Alternatively, Nelson and Winter [16] suggested that explicit knowledge is technological knowledge that can be defined well in a book or other media. Two issues associated with tacit knowledge were identified by Gourlay [6], i.e. whether tacit knowledge is an individual trait or shared by others and whether tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge. People can freely drop by others' blogs and make comments. In other words, it is an ideal that blogging enables researchers to capture explicit knowledge from people's blogs, as well as gaining tacit knowledge from the actual participation in blogging.

The importance of blogging originates from the fact that people sometimes do not know what they are supposed to learn. Action research is possible in blogging. As suggested by Vignali and Zundel [22], action research enables researchers to

build knowledge or theory from actual participation in the problem-solving process. As stated by Greenwood and Levin [7], action research is "carried out by a team encompassing a professional action researcher and members of an organization or community seeking to improve their situation. Action research promotes blog participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders" (1998, p. 4). With blogs, people can read existing articles, join the discussion, comment, and even add their personal remarks or create articles. They provide a platform that makes action research possible and easy.

Coghlan [3] addressed three main managerial issues in action research for practitioners. First, it is ideal for action research that the research subjects are real events that are managed in real time. Second, research provides effective action and learning. Last, the findings can contribute to the development of the theory of organization. Again, the actual participation in blogs could be expected to be a suitable method for action research, i.e. the research takes place with the subject matter. It is a continuous process and all the parties in the community should be involved.

Blogging brings all people on the Internet together to act collectively. Action research in blogging can be undertaken in free interactions continuously. The process is people-centered. Lewin [12] classified action research as the process of action, research, and training. Chein et al. [2] further added the essence of cyclicality in action research. It begins with the problems the people in the community are currently facing. In the course of executing action research in blogs, there is a need to incorporate real problems into the cyclical process, which can be viewed as consisting of five components: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning. Berger and Luckmann [1] named this relationship "action-reflection-theorising." It allows students to be involved in meaningful ways.

Given the fact that many elements of action research have been developed, blogs can facilitate the following:

1. identification of the real problem as the topic of blogs;
2. intervention in the real problem situation as the commentaries in blogs.

31.4 Case Studies

The MBA program emphasizes the sharing of experiences, and in an e-environment academic staff members retain their traditional role as "facilitators." The course "Consumer Behavior" was selected for a pilot test of the use of blogs for marketing education. It was tried initially in the academic year 2008–2009. The course ran in a 6-week cycle, in parallel with other MBA elective courses, with 6.5 h' class contact per week. In total 50 MBA students registered for this particular course. Most of them were studying part-time, with two full-time exchange students. The course examines the psychological processes underlying consumer

buying behavior. With the use of qualitative data in blogs, the students can develop personal critical reflections on the theoretical and analytical implications in the consumer buying process. For example, what makes a consumer choose one product/brand over another? Do social effects and advertising really change their perceptions of certain brand names? The students are assessed individually on their participation in blogging. They are told to share their real consumption experience in blogs and share their own views on others' articles (i.e. peer review).

The course emphasizes the sharing of experiences, and in an e-environment academic staff members retain their traditional role as "facilitators." In particular, the course examiner can make use of the blog (see above) by posting discussion questions on particular topics. The student participants are notified of the posting of these topics. Suggestions and experiences can be sent back directly. The blog can thus provide a rich environment for case studies and feedback from participants. Because it can be accessed at any time from any place, it is a convenient and effective method of stimulating learning.

The blog-based platform employed for the course is named "Journal LX" and is hosted by the university. Students can simply select the title they want to read or comment on. They can also submit their own blog articles in electronic format through the Web connection. The blogger provides five main features for students:

1. "New entry" – where students can create their entries (i.e. articles) as easily as clicking "new entry"; they can compose their articles by using a simple text editor provided system. They can still edit those articles they have published previously
2. "Recent posts" – where students can obtain the latest articles posted in the blogger
3. "Comment" – where students can comment on others' articles by a simple click
4. "Archives" – where students can acquire articles posted earlier
5. "Export" – where students can download all the articles as a compressed file for content analysis.

31.5 The Action Research Process in Blogs

Building on the preliminary qualitative data obtained above, the theoretical model presented here posits the student as an active agent within the context of his or her social environment. This paper investigates students' buying experience from their case-sharing in the blogs. The students engaged in a collaborative writing exercise as blogging. They could gain five points for each new entry and two points for each follow-up comment as the assessment. At the end of the course, they needed to submit a final write-up on the topic of "consumerism" based on their own insights developed and earned from the blogging exercise. Therefore, the students were actively involved in the cyclical research process. The students did raise

some questions concerning the experience and ideas shared by others in the blogs. Problematic discussion then turned to the research process. It was consistent with the qualitative research methodology named "Netnographic," suggested by Kozinets [11], i.e. ethnography on the Internet. The students were assumed to be independent of what they observed in the blogs. As with most action research projects, the inquiry was developed in a series of cycles that consisted of real experience shared, critique, and identification. The students created a new entry as a starting point. The entries typically comprised a mix of personal experience, opinions from others, self-reflections, and actions.

The main objective of the study was to examine systematically the content of statements offered by the students, and to sort them according to the message they posted in their blogs. All messages posted in their blogs were unobtrusively downloaded and screened for references to the student ID. Contents of the blog messages were classified according to the topic (i.e. meaningful variables) written by the students. An emphasis was placed on capturing the students' feelings and perceptions in the course. We seek to develop analytic interpretations of the qualitative data. Once collected and organized according to this dichotomy, line-by-line analysis of these online messages was done.

31.6 Findings and Discussions

The main objective of the study was to examine systematically the content of statements offered by part-time evening MBA students, and to sort them according to the topic discussed. Once collected and organized according to this dichotomy, the verbatim transcripts of the messages were content analyzed using the software package "Nudist," a computer program for qualitative research. Some phrases that appeared frequently in the message were identified by the computer program. These phrases were identified as content analysis variables. Analysis of the sample revealed four main factors, or recurring themes, that appeared in the 345 cases (i.e. blog articles created by students) and 1,045 comments (i.e. follow-up comments on the blog articles from students other than the original author). The discussion themes, together with the frequency of occurrence, are shown in Table 31.1.

The importance of assessing the use of blogs in MBA education focuses primarily on the ability to visualize the level of collaboration and the sharing of

Table 31.1 Content Analysis Variables

	Meaningful variables	Frequency of blog articles	Percentage (%)
1	New case related to the topic discussed in class	215	62.319
2	New case not relevant to the topic discussed in class	84	24.348
3	Follow-up on the in-class case discussion	32	9.275
4	Asking questions about the subject matter	14	4.058
Total		345	100
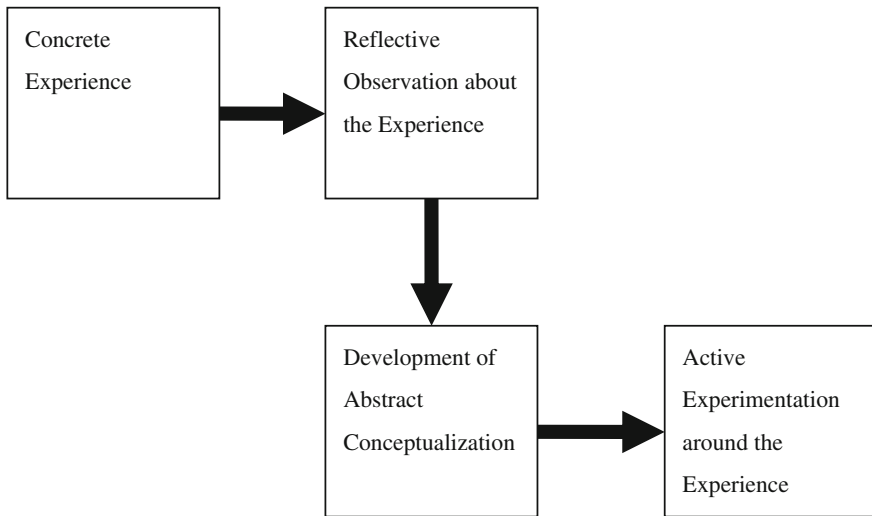
Fig. 31.1 Kolb's Learning Knowledge Cycle [9]

knowledge in the learning community. The common characteristic of all the blog messages contributed by students in the study is that they spent time reflecting on their own experience with other classmates in order to apply the concepts they had learnt to real-life marketing cases. We can evaluate whether the discussion in the blogs met its original objectives. It was noted that new cases dominated the blog discussion (in total, 86.667 % of all the messages discussed in the blog).

Kolb [9 p. 38] observed that learning is "… a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." To achieve this, Kolb and Fry [10] argued that effective learning requires four distinct abilities: (i) concrete experience abilities; (ii) reflective observation abilities; (iii) abstract conceptualization abilities; and (iv) active experimentation abilities. According to Kolb [9], a complete model of a learning cycle therefore entails all of these elements, as illustrated in Fig. 31.1.

Blog discussion stimulates student reactions. With 345 blog articles there were 1,045 follow-up comments received, on average 3.03 follow-up comments for each blog article, which suggested that peer-led discussion in blogs enables Kolb's [9] learning cycle.

Knowledge can be either tacit or explicit [20]. Tacit knowledge always refers to knowledge that people learn from experience and practice. Alternatively, knowledge that can be expressed in a written form is called explicit knowledge. "Knowledge conversion" is a process that makes tacit knowledge explicit and codified. As suggested by Nonaka and Takeuchi [17], tacit knowledge is not easily converted into explicit knowledge because of the nature of tacit knowledge, and social interaction is the key in knowledge conversion.

Blog discussion also enables students to present their concepts visually. In the following example, a student posted his photo taken in the street to illustrate his case.

Original blog article titled "Be the first mover—According to the traditional culture, people purchase these products non-rationally." Six comments received from other students on the photo posted in the blogs.

This example shows that students can make good use of blog technology in sharing the marketing concepts in which they have personal experience. This was in line with the four different categories of knowledge transfer defined by Nonaka and Takeuchi [17]. They are:

1. tacit to tacit (the knowledge transfer happens during socialization, e.g. mentoring, learning by doing);
2. tacit to explicit (the knowledge transfer happens in externalization, where the knowledge is written or communicated in some permanent or semi-permanent way, e.g. stories, narrative, presentation);
3. explicit to explicit (the knowledge transfer happens in a systematic procedure, e.g. computer database, expert system);
4. explicit to tacit (the knowledge transfer happens in the internalization process, e.g. active participation and repetition).

Blogs, therefore, can be the tool for knowledge conversion in MBA education. In addition, students can even apply their knowledge learnt in class in real business cases in which they are involved.

31.7 Conclusion

MBA education has undergone dramatic changes in the last decades. Online learning is a hotly debated educational issue. The importance of MBA education originates from the fact that people sometimes do not know what they are supposed to learn. Moller [15] applied social reinforcement with the help of the Internet, and found that asynchronous distance learning was enhanced through an online community. Piccoli et al. [19] also investigated the effectiveness of a Web-based learning environment. They postulated that higher-level learning online would be correlated with higher test scores and greater satisfaction with the online learning environment. In terms of social interaction, traditional collaboration with fellow students and academic staff is often cited as being an important feature of traditional learning. However, with the help of technology, interaction and collaboration are made possible without personal physical direct contact.

The demonstration in this paper provides rich evidence to support the concept. The study focuses on marketing education from participatory action research in blogging. It uses a collaborative inquiry approach. As a result, blog discussions should be in place in order to protect intellectual assets and help students to acquire, store, and utilize knowledge in a flexible and effective way. It is generally accepted in modern education that the learning processes of individuals are facilitated by interactive communication with fellow students and academic staff. Indeed, this interaction and this collaboration are, in many ways, more flexible and extensive than traditional learning. They provide another alternative for people who are looking for high-quality learning opportunities while still conducting other aspects of their ongoing lives and careers. Flexibility is thus one of the major advantages for people who choose online courses. For these reasons, it is likely that traditional teaching and executive training will increasingly shift to online distance learning using the Internet.

Traditionally, an MBA participant must physically attend the university campus for mass lectures and tutorials. Students enjoy learning with blogs and it promotes after-class discussion. The continuous postings from students in the blog create an ongoing discussion to extend their learning process and act as a resource for others. A blog opens up personal opinions, ideas, and feelings to other classmates in the free-form writing space. It enables students to become independent learners in the action research approach. This framework also provides some directions for future research on the assessment of knowledge exchange in blogs.

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