A Blog Repository

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Abstract

The blog, even if it has been in use for more than ten years, still provokes great interest among scholars for its multiple potentialities, above all in didactics. Among the uses for this instrument, let us consider the case where the teacher collects material to put at the disposition of the students, as a support for the activities done in class. This type of blog-repository is little studied because it utilizes a minimal part of the functionality of the instrument: in particular it puts the collaborative aspect into second place because communication is one way only, the teacher to his or her students. However it accomplishes the important functions of organization, through the chronological archiving (registration) of the documents and through stimulating the studying in depth by means of the insertion of chosen resources to help learning and to motivate the students.

This contribution proposes to describe an experience of the blog as a repository for didactic material with three aims:

1) To analyze the choice of this instrument as an archive, preferring it to the sharing environment (such as Google Drive and Dropbox): describing the realization (themes, widget, tag), the didactic activities and evaluating the efficiency;

2) To suggest this experience to those teachers who must familiarize themselves with technology, favouring the approach of computer science instruments from the viewpoint of education. In fact the blog is considered easy to use because it does not require technical skills; furthermore its updating does not generate pressure because the material can be inserted periodically and, since comments are not foreseen, no moderation activities are needed;

3) To propose to the students as an activity, the realization of a personal portfolio or logbook under the supervision of the teacher. With respect to Cloud, where the documents can be archived, the blog allows the students a personalization through the choice of themes and instruments; furthermore it permits the categorization of the resources, making research easier, contributing to ameliorating the method of studying.

1. Introduction

Even though the blog dates back to the 90's for its simplicity, immediacy and its multiple functions which it can adapt itself to, the blog knows no crises. This explains the continually strong attention paid to an instrument which has already been studied from a technical view point [1] and whose uses have already been described, but which continues to capture great interest, in different fields: it can make one reflect on the concept of identity [2] [3], it lends itself to media discussions, to politics and to marketing.

The complexity of the blog phenomena can be understood by the taxonomy proposed which is generally based on the technology, the author (blogger) and on the contents. The classifications suggested by Rebecca Blood [4] Giorgio Nova [5], Gino Roncaglia [6] are unable to cover all the varieties of the experiences [7].

For didactic blogs on the other hand, Campbell [8] suggests subdividing those managed entirely by the teachers, those managed by the class and those by the students; instead Richardson [9] talks about blogs for the class, like a portfolio or like a collaborative space for work groups. For Anne Davis [10] five types exist, while Leslie Scott divides them into those of the students, the teachers, reading and writing. Monica Banzato [11] proposes a first distinction between class blogs and for web publishing.

None of these blog classifications is represented exclusively as a repository, and being an archival instrument is marginal to its other peculiarities.

The aim of this article is to concentrate solely on the repository function, which offers interesting opportunities; it simplifies the work of the teacher in the distribution of the didactic material to the students; it

can be an educational tool for Information and Communication Technologies (from now on it will be referred to as ICT in this text); it can start off an activity with the students of saving didactic material and notes.

2. Archiving with the blog

Let us imagine a scene in which the teacher wants to make the students download didactic material. They will therefore not use the separate files in Dropbox, Google Drive or One Drive, because these do not provide for collaborative work on documents and because these instruments realize sharing by email or using a link.

If students' electronic mail addresses are used, the teacher must have distributed and then collected the authorization of the use of the email signed by the parents or guardian in the case of minors, or used the school forms, that can be attached to the document PUA (politics of acceptable use of the net). Often these bureaucratic passages can take a long time and not be compatible with the didactic activities planned by the teacher.

If a link is used, this can be inserted on the electronic register and copied by the students with the danger of mistakes.

Instead, if the teacher puts the documents which he or she wants to register in a post of a blog, this could be easily found using a search engine and does not need the teacher to manage the students' email which represents personal data.

2.1 The realization of a blog repository

Let us examine only those elements which are distinctive for the realization of a blog repository.

One needs to choose that his is public and that the search engines can index it so that the students can find it quickly.

When one publishes articles with attachments, the teacher must decide the type of material, in terms of contents (licence CC), format (reusable or not) and weight to facilitate uploading. If the teacher decides that the material is not to be public, he or she will write a post protected by a password which will be communicated to the students.

The post must summarize the contents of the attached documents, and be reported in the title, in order to be clearer, including the class and the subject, so that the students can find everything easily.

One important function for tracing documents is that of categories and of tags. The teacher must create categories corresponding to the subjects and the classes, so that the students can always look up information with ease; it will be useful to insert tags like widget and the cloud tag.

These operations can be effected simply and by those who have little familiarity with technology. With few steps it is possible to see the result immediately. Initially the teacher can maintain the essay by default with which he or she presents the blog and later the teacher can choose another layout or different graphics.
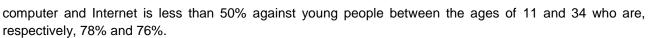
2.2 To assess the activity of the blog repository

For the students too, this instrument has shown its effectiveness through the positive feedback which the teachers have received; furthermore, from the statistics available on the site, from September 2012 to June 2013 the blog repository writer (http://classicamente.wordpress.com/) registered 5311 views with an average of 20 visitors per day. The activity was proposed to five classes for a total of 104 students; the updating of the site was not done daily but twice weekly, therefore it was not necessary for the students to visit the site daily. For this reason one can affirm that this instrument was used and its effectiveness proved at the organizational level in the distribution of material and it has allowed many students to improve their method of study.

3. Getting familiar with technology

Taking into consideration data on teachers [12] [13] which shows 50% are over fifty in secondary school, the distribution of ICT in teaching is obstructed by the lack of education and the habits in the teachers' relations with technology. In fact most teachers manifest sceptism or resistance in the subject. ISTAT data [14] confirms this tendency, recording that after the age of 54 the percentage of individuals who use a personal

computer and Internet is less than 50% against young people between the ages of 11 and 34 who are, respectively, 78% and 76%.

Therefore the problem relative to the familiarization with technology is determined both by the age of the teacher and by the training offered which is lacking, since it does not follow the learning patterns of novices, who need the need the most teaching support and economic incentives in order to dedicate the time necessary to practice with ICT.

From here the usefulness of proposing the blog repository as a valid alternative to the initial training. This instrument is immediate and simple and allows for the insertion of contents in Internet, without necessarily knowing the HTML language.

It is the first step towards the most gradual approach: in fact, in general, the teacher who has little knowledge of ICT, cannot see the value, because he or she does not know it and is not stimulated to try it because he or she thinks it is too difficult and complicated. With the blog even the most inexpert teacher will see realized in a short space of time his or her product and should therefore be even more incentivated to try, after the success obtained. Furthermore, as a repository, the blog does not need to be updated daily, just once a week; commenting is not foreseen, in fact it is not necessary to have the space for the synchronized communication because daily lessons offer moments for direct confrontation. It is not necessary to practise, therefore the moderation and this avoids generating anxiety connected to updating and running of the site.

4. The activities for the students

The teacher can propose to the students to keep a personal blog where they can save not only the material proposed by the teacher but also their notes and utilize the post like private writings, to reflect on their own learning curve.

The blog portfolio [15] must be set as private, so it can be visible only to the author; through archiving, classification and document tags the student organizes the material and systemizes his or her knowledge, facilitating the process of learning.

5. Conclusion

There should be more attention paid to the blog as a simple container that simplifies the work of the teacher and furthermore, could be a stimulus for the ICT approach, for those teachers who must learn to use it.

The tendency is that of considering and describing the instruments in respect of their maximum potentiality. Therefore limiting oneself to a simple aspect of the blog could be considered reductive. The blog, as a repository is implicit in some classifications but because it is implicit, its very important function risks being neglected. Focusing one's attention only on the archive helps to understand the importance for the systematization of the knowledge of the students thanks also to the possibility of maintaining the chronological sequence through the post, recalling the class activity.

The blog repository only wants to propose itself with this function of archiving, classification and categorization. This choice does not have to be limiting but it is puts itself in a certain viewpoint of completely exploiting a potentiality without distracting the user with other functions, for which other instruments exist.

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