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Using Blogs As Communication Tools For The Architecture Design Studio

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Abstract

Architecture teaching in Romania is aligning itself to European trends, partially by starting to use blogs as communication tools. This research focuses on a set of dedicated blogs for the architecture design studio of three different study years, developed at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of Timisoara between 2012/2013, and on their evolution. The activity and educational accomplishments of the blogs are analyzed through theoretical discussions on using blogs in teaching, followed by a comparative study of feedbacks from students and teachers. The conclusions suggest that the number of blogs should be expanded, that different hosting platforms allowing greater dynamic should be used and that a genuine dialogue should be nurtured between teachers and students.

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1. Introduction

The evolution of Web 2.0 had a tremendous role on transforming teaching and its technologies, and its services contributed in a large extent to the development of the current higher education (Grosseck, 2009). Current architecture teaching trends all over Europe use web communication in a high degree in the teaching process, transforming the way in which traditional programs are taught. In this context, educational approaches in architecture in Romania are still in an early phase compared to Western Europe and schools here should strive to bring communication closer to contemporary teaching trends. The main role in implementing the new technologies

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belongs to the teachers involved, who have to assume a new attitude towards teaching, both more opened towards sharing information and more responsible regarding the information offered (Grosseck, 2009).

Architecture disciplines nowadays and the design studio in particular have a high degree of specificity in regard to the teaching process. Contemporary architecture school curricula includes a wide range of working methods and directions, resulting in theoretical and physical products, showing the degree of preparation of young architects (Di Batista, 2014), and implementing web 2.0 technologies in teaching architecture needs to take into account the specific nature of the working methods implied. This research focuses on the way in which blogs are used as a tool for teaching higher education, in relation to the activity of the architecture design studio of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of Timisoara, Romania. The introductory part of the study discusses in a broad sense the concepts and contexts of education and the use of new media in contemporary teaching, while the second part analyzes a set of blogs implemented simultaneously, following their development throughout the course of a whole academic year. By comparing different educational situations, a better understanding of the teacher's roles as well as of the requirements for flexible communication has been attained.

2. A theoretical approach on the use of web based communication in teaching

Traditional academic communication is decisive in the educational processes. It is based on the interpersonal relationship established between teacher and student and aims to transmit not only precise information, but also knowledge exceeding the strict meaning of the sent message. In order to define the specific characteristics of scholarly communication, one must start from the modern concepts of communication. New visions regarding the teaching methodologies derive from new theories of communication that imply various ways of knowing, learning and transmitting information using nonconformist communication.

2.1. Academic communication. Concepts

Modern research determined a set of principles defined as axioms of communication, partially overlapping the specific features of the pedagogic discourse (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). A review of these axioms is useful for the insight on possible nuances of new scholarly communication channels. These axioms state that: communication is inevitable, meaning that in the given institutionalized context, the teacher must be aware of his ability to communicate; every communication has content and a relational aspect, meaning that communication represents both the transfer of information and the relationship between those who communicate; communication is a continuous process in which the partners are involved in a chain exchange of action reaction, stimulus/response; communication takes either a digital (verbal, concrete meanings) or analogical (non-verbal, representative or referential) form; communication is either symmetrical or complementary, based on equality or difference, one of the interlocutors being designated a priori (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Two additional principles could be added, that communication is irreversible, producing an effect on the receptor on which one cannot intervene retroactively, meaning fast and lucid decision taking skills for teachers (Salavastru, 2004) and communication involves processes of adjustment and adaptation, meaning that the message makes sense only in the light of previous life and linguistic experience of each individual (Parvu, 2000). To conclude with, everything from the body language to the relationship between the teacher and his audience defines the act of academic communication.

2.2. Academic communication in the digital age. Context

The digital age offers several interactive tools through which one can develop knowledge and relationships. Most of them are used daily by students and have a great impact upon their lives. In this context, blogs appear as a tool presenting a great potential within the educational process, because students are supposedly accustomed to this way of processing information. This raises a few questions to those who lead the educational process. How do you use the available technology to extend your time and space? How do you communicate with the outside world through cybernetic technology? Are you a generator of information? Are you willing to exchange information with others? What would be the results? Can you successfully generate, store and share information?

Digital technologies of communication have broken the paradigms of the industrial society and brought on other communication channels, affecting our daily lives and becoming more visible in education too. There are visible changes in the way we learn and absorb information, since instant messaging and social networks of the present provide a fragmented communication, while reality is built on a kaleidoscopic model of dynamic, discreet and multiple stimuli of short-term nature. Contemporary technological trends shift communication towards becoming sensory, multidirectional and non-linear (Moran, 2010).

New technology is shaping both human behavior and changing scholarly practice. In this context alternatives to the traditional educational system appear, which can be incorporated into daily educational processes, relying on collaborative learning, connectivity and mobility. M. Weller studied closely the concept of “digital scholarship” (Weller, 2011), and its implications on the scholarly practices. The democratization of online space, as Weller notes “opens up scholarship for a much wider group”, as well as subjects beyond the institutionally established curriculum (Weller, 2011, para. 23). Weller observes how scholarship has changed due to the extreme openness to higher education information carried out by new technologies, the main drives of this process being the use of digitization as a general mean of transposing scholarly work in the form of digital media and the distribution of those digital contents via the global network (Weller, 2011). Weller believes that those precise characteristics of the online learning environment represent “the means by which higher education comes to understand the requirements and changes in society, and thus the route by which it maintains its relevance to society” (Weller, 2009), while blogs are considered to be “the epitome of the type of technology that can lead to rapid innovation” (2011, para. 26).

3. A comparative research on the use of blogs of the design studio

Beginning with the academic year 2012/2013, three parallel blogs were created in order to ease communication with students involved in the design studio. They were implemented simultaneously in order to overcome deficiencies in communication perceived in the previous activity (1st year blog, 2013), (2nd year blog, 2013), (5th year blog, 2013). The primary need came from the specific character of the design studio curriculum, consisting in studio-based design education. During design studio classes, students individually develop their projects through fundamental methods such as drawing and model making, guided by teachers mostly in a one to one relationship. The blogs were intended to fill in gaps in direct communication during studio classes, as a supplementary communication and information source. They were used to display design tasks, documentation sources and theoretical supports and to communicate informative notices on the studio schedule such as approaching deadlines, workshop materials needed or specific events.

3.1. The situation before using blogs

The previous communication channels used in the design studio were direct communication, mainly verbal, addressing all students in the class, supplemented by indirect electronic communication in the form of e-mail messages sent to a small group of the student representatives, whose mission was to transmit the information further to their classmates via class group mails. With the number of students of each study year ranging between 65 and 110, the former communication had clear disadvantages and limitations (Table 1), constituting the main reason for implementing blogs. Direct communication was used to transmit general announcements to all students of each year that had to be gathered together in one single space, followed by the division of students into workgroups, where the basic information was further interpreted. Electronic communication could only be used as a supplement to direct communication and hasn't been used often, since the reception of the message by students was cumbersome.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of the direct and electronic communication methods before using blogs.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Direct communication	<p>Direct teacher-student interaction that allows swift verification of hypotheses.</p> <p>Allows the transmission of an idea, with input from the entire teaching group.</p>	<p>Involves a large number of students; not everyone can listen from a correct ergonomic position.</p> <p>The class spaces are not right for this type of interaction, being designed to hold a smaller number of students.</p>

Electronic communication	Allows high-speed transmission of general information to all students. Supplements information.	Use of intermediaries in transmission: the message reaches the larger group through some representatives. It is difficult to transmit differentiated messages for a particular group (individual workgroup). The message has little visibility due to the amalgamated character of information in each student's mailing list.
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3.2. Using blogs

The concurrently implemented blogs had similar graphic and content organization schemes, but later developed personalized representations. Although visually appealing and important in the distinction between blogs, the graphical schemes are less important in relation to their actual content. The major differences in the way blogs are used are based on the content they carry and on the way in which information is communicated. The differences in managing content and in the way of communicating information (Table 2) derive from the type of communication that each teaching team follows as well as from the previous experience of the ones responsible for blog postings in communicating via internet channels.

Table 2. Differences in the content of blogs of the 1st, 2nd and 5th year of study.

Year and work structure	Content particularities
<i>1st year</i> : 108 students / 9 teachers / 4 workgroups	The only blog that contains a theoretical support for the design studio, based on the fact that the dean of the 1st year is also teaching the theory course of architecture theory. The only year that runs a separate Facebook page for its activities, where more dynamic and informal information is shown, so that the blog may hold only formal information. A sharp organization of the blog, carrying out general communication with all students.
<i>2nd year</i> : 93 students / 9 teachers / 4 workgroups	A blog that holds both general communication on the central newsfeed page, concerning all students, and also separate categories for each workgroup, targeting a differentiated working approach within groups.
<i>5th year</i> : 65 students / 5 teachers / 2 workgroups	A blog pursuing a newspaper-like communication, information on the main page with an amalgamated character, containing main and secondary information organized exclusively by time-line ordering.

4. Results

4.1. Student feedback

The student feedback can be discussed either by statistics of accessing the blog, that fail to show how many of the people accessing the blog are students of that year, or through organized inquiries. Only the 2nd year teaching staff requested a questionnaire survey on the whole activity of the 2012/2013 academic year. It showed that the blog was perceived positively, receiving 9.1 points out of 10 for efficient communication, while teachers received 8.1 points for communicating in the blog's group pages. 95% of the respondents considered that they have been exhaustively informed by the blog, while 79% considered the published references as useful. Still, the student's general response about blogs was weak, as demonstrated by direct comments or by informal feedback provided during the classes. Only a very small number were expressing their opinions or did interact actively in relation to the current content of the blogs.

4.2. Teacher feedback

The teacher's feedback (Table 3) reflects each year's specific needs of communicating content. The 1st year includes academic courses as support, while the other two use the blogs mainly to inform students on the scholarly process, to indicate further study references or to deliver notices. A critical aspect in understanding how they work is the fact that they weren't designed as freestanding education sources, but closely linked to the design studio activities of each year.

Table 3. A comparison of the use of blogs at the 1st, 2nd and 5th year from the teacher's point of view.

Year and work structure	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>1st year:</i> 108 students / 9 teachers / 4 workgroups	Communicating through the blog has shortened the path of information from teachers to students.	The architecture theory course presented on the blog tends to be overlooked.
	Communication and dissemination of information in digital format is essential, providing also storage for information where you can always return to.	Teachers presume that all students read everything written on the blog, but in reality this is not the case.
	It is a convenient information process.	Some students don't benefit of internet access.
<i>2nd year:</i> 93 students / 9 teachers / 4 workgroups	Allows the pursuit of information by everybody involved in the teaching process and the return.	Only some students are interested to access information within the sub-menus.
	Fast communication, lacking redundancies.	Students don't interact with the blog's content.
	Differentiated announcements for each workgroup.	
<i>5th year:</i> 65 students / 5 teachers / 2 workgroups	Providing a dynamic platform for discussions (obtaining feedback on the project theme through links posted by students on the blog).	The discussions (on the content) took place only during the workshop, but this is understandable since there are two weekly workshops that facilitate direct encounter.
	Greater interest and better focus on the project theme and on the guidance offered by teachers.	The blog failed to become a discussion platform, providing only mutual information.
	The traceability of the activity of the semester.	

4.3. Discussions

By comparing the distinct blogs, the primary find is that each teaching group uses its own blog according to its specific communication needs. Also, there are several distinctions in the way in which teachers transmit content via the blogs. Comparing the opinions of each different teaching group, positivism stands out in relation to the noticeable improvement of communication towards the students, while at the same time a weak response of the students is commonly distinguished in relation to a dynamic electronic media, to which they are supposedly acquainted. A common result, although initially un-assumed but revealed by teacher's feedback, is the fact that higher levels of group identity and social cohesion have been achieved, compared to previous years. Apparently this happened through the publication of images on the teaching process and the increased involvement of everybody in the group. Since the issue of a weak student interaction remains, we propose several hypotheses. On one hand, the institutionalization of educational communication gives the professor a special status in the relationship with students, possibly causing inhibitions in a symmetrical communication. Also, the decreased number of comments may demonstrate the fact that the students assume responsibility of qualitative and relevant comments, which can inhibit much of the possible interactions. Participating through comments to the content of blogs occurs more frequently with the 5th year students, partially due to the fact that professional opinion gets build over time, and the students in the inferior study years don't have sufficient professional knowledge to be able to validate their views. The latter assimilate information in a more intuitive level and this aspect is taken into account in the communication strategy of the blogs of the 1st and 2nd year. The only blog that changed in the following academic year as a direct result of last year's experience is the blog of the 2nd year (2nd year blog 2013/2014, 2014), while the teachers of the 4th year also created a blog for the design studio. The 2nd year blog currently uses a hosting platform that supports class blogging, forums and individual student blogs. The individual blogs should be used by students to present individual work during the semester. Apparently, students only tend to upload work when requested and fail to recognize their blog as a personal tool of representation. Although too early to discuss the implications of the new blog platform, it is clear that a general inhibition of students in using blogs does exist, even if those students did experience blog communication in the previous year too, during the 1st year. We think that this inhibition cannot be broken only by the use of new media, but through active involvement of teachers in the entire scholarly process.

5. Conclusions

The conducted research proves that the use of blogs did improve general scholarly communication, attesting blogs as successful instruments in supplementing information. Improved communication has been confirmed by both teachers and students, when compared to prior teaching and learning experiences. Still, the current phase of their implementation only represents an incipient form of embracing new media in the educational process. It is clear that in relation to the studio character of the design education as it is currently carried out, blogs can only be used as complementary channels to direct teaching and therefore play a limited role.

In order to achieve a greater academic impact through the blogs content, future recommendations are to widen the current functions of blogs and to adapt the character of communication to the specific needs of each year's students, according to their age and interests. The key factors to achieve these recommendations are to trigger a greater involvement of both students and teachers into the blogging process. Teachers should integrate the blogging process in their wider scholarly activity, since blogging and teaching have grown to be functions of the same scholarly practice.

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