WCES 2014

Using Blogs As A Communication Tool For Teaching Students In The Architecture Design Studio

Maja Bâldea [a] *, Alexandra Maier [a], Oana Simionescu [a]

[a] Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Polytechnic University Timişoara, str. Traian Lalescu nr. 2, Timişoara 300223, Romania

Abstract

The research focuses on the way in which specific and dedicated blogs can be used as a tool for teaching and a channel of didactic dialogue with students, in relation to the activity of the Architecture Design Studio at the Faculty of Architecture of the Polytechnic University of Timisoara. Three different blogs for three different years of study have been developed at the beginning of the study year of 2012/2013, as a necessary addition to traditional communication of an essentially applicative subject, at the initiative of the teachers involved in the design studio. The paper follows the activity and educational accomplishments of the blogs from their debut until present, comparing them at the same time, while also discussing different concepts on the use of blogs in the teaching process. The teaching experience offered by the blogs is discussed through the feedback requested at the end of the study year from both teachers and students that have been using and experiencing it. This feedback was also used as a basis of shifting to a new blogging platform for one of them, that can offer an improved educational experience for both students and teachers, integrating individual student blogs into the main blog of the "class". Thus, the research depicts the positive and negative aspects of using blogs as communication tools in teaching students of the faculty of architecture, studying its direct implications in the didactic process.

Keywords: Use of blogs, teaching tool, architecture education, design studio;

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the way in which a blog is used as a tool for teaching and a channel of didactic dialogue with the students, in relation to the activity of the Architecture Design Studio at the Faculty of Architecture and

* Maja Bâldea. Tel.: +0-726-311-007
  E-mail address: maja.baldea@arh.upt.ro

Urbanism of Timisoara. It discusses a general view upon blogs implemented simultaneously at the same faculty while discussing in a broad sense the concepts and context of teaching methodology and use of new media.

1.1. Didactic communication. Concepts

Didactic communication is one of the determining aspects of the educational process. It is based on the interpersonal relationship established between teacher and student and aims to transmit not only a set of precise information, but also knowledge exceeding the strict meaning of the sent message. In order to define the specific characteristics of didactic communication, one must start from the modern sense of the concept of communication. New visions regarding the teaching methodologies are due to the new theories of communication that imply various ways of knowing, learning and transmitting information using nonconformist communication.

In fact, modern research (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) managed to determine a set of principles defined as axioms of communication, partially overlapping the specific features of the pedagogic discourse. A review of these axioms is useful for the insight on possible nuances of the new didactic communication channels, as follows: 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 relationship 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; all communication is either symmetrical or complementary, based on equality or difference ("mirrored" behaviour - equal, or complementary behaviour, one of the interlocutors is designated *a priori*). Two additional principles can be added: communication is irreversible, producing an effect on the receptor on which one cannot intervene retroactively, which means fast and lucid decision taking skills for teachers; communication involves processes of adjustment and adaptation (the message makes sense only in the light of previous life and linguistic experience of each individual) (Pârvu, 2000). To conclude with, everything from the body language to the relationship between the teacher and his audience defines the act of communicating.

1.2. Didactic 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 accustomed to this way of information processing. This raises a few questions to those who lead the educational process. How do you use the technology available 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. According to Moran. (Moran, 2010), "communication becomes sensory, multidirectional and non-linear". 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 the model of a kaleidoscope of dynamic, discreet and multiple stimuli of short-term nature. 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. The entire scholarship concept has changed due to the extreme openness to higher education information carried out by the new technologies, triggering the concept of digital scholarship (Weller, 2011).

1.3. Using the blog as a teaching tool in architecture teaching

Blogs as tools for teaching are used by different universities of architecture in the world, as an attempt to counteract the discrepancy between the practice of an educational activity inherited from an industrial society and

the adoption of new communication practices based on new technologies. The current challenge consists in finding ways to transform the teaching-learning relationship, so these new ways of interaction with the world can positively contribute to the architecture education.

2. A comparative research on the use of blogs of the Design Studio

Beginning with study year 2012/2013, three parallel blogs were generated in order to facilitate easy communication with students involved in the Design Studio. They were implemented simultaneously at the 1st (http://arhitectura1tm.wordpress.com), 2nd (http://arhitectura2tm.wordpress.com) and 5th (http://arhitectura5tm.wordpress.com) year, in order to overcome deficiencies in communication perceived in previous activity of the teaching staff. The primary need came from the specific character of the Design Studio, consisting in workshops where students individually develop their projects, guided by teachers. The blogs were intended to fill in gaps in direct communication during studio hours, as completing communication by displaying design tasks, documentation sources or theoretical support. They also serve to communicate informative notices on the teaching process such as approaching deadlines, workshop materials needed or specific events.

2.1. *Comparison of the previous teaching activity, without blog, with the current one which uses the blog*

The previous systems that were used for communicating with the students in the Design Studio implied either *direct communication*, mainly verbal with all the students in the class, or by *electronic communication* with only some students whose mission was to transmit the information to their classmates. The former use of these methods is discussed in what follows (Table 1), their disadvantages being the main trigger that started the use of blogs to improve teacher-student communication. Direct communication consisted mainly in direct verbal communication, used to transmit general announcements to all students gathered together, followed by the division of students into workgroups, where the basic information was further interpreted. Electronic communication supplemented direct communication and involved transmission of e-mails to the student's representatives. It has not 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

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Direct communication method	Direct interaction teachers-students that allows swift verification of hypotheses.	A large number of students, not all of them can listen to the announcement from a correct ergonomic position.
	The transmission of an idea, with input from the entire teaching group.	The class spaces are not right for this type of interaction, being designed to hold a smaller number of students.
Electronic communication method	Supplements information.	Use of intermediaries in transmission: the message reaches the larger group through some representatives.
	High-speed transmission of general information to all students.	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 the mailing group.

2.2. *Content*

The concurrently implemented blogs had similar graphic and content organization schemes, but later developed personalized representations. Important differences appear from the point of view of the content, of the materials and of the way in which information is communicated. The differences in managing content and in the way teachers communicate the information (table 2) derive on the one hand from the type of communication that each teacher's team chooses to follow, and on the other hand from the previous experience of communicating information on blogs or generally via internet of the ones responsible for blog postings.

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

Year of study	Content particularities
1st year: *4 workgroups*	The only blog that contains a theoretical support for the design studio workshop derived from the fact that the dean of the 1st year is also teaching the theory class of Architecture theory.
	The only year that has 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.
2nd year: *4 workgroups*	A blog that combines general communication on the central newsfeed page, containing information of general character which concerns all students, and also separate categories for each workgroup, targeting a differentiated working approach within the workshop's evolution.
5th year: *2 workgroups*	A blog pursuing a newspaper-like communication, information on the main page having an amalgamated character, containing main and secondary information organized exclusively by time-line ordering.

3. Results

The study discussed the results after one academic year, based on teacher's and student's feedback. The teacher's opinions that were using the blogs (table 3) are discussing the perceived advantages and disadvantages, intended to show the characteristic points of the approach of the different years.

Table 3. A comparison of advantages and disadvantages in the use of blogs at the 1st, 2nd and 5th year

Work structure	Advantages	Disadvantages
1st year: 108 students / 9 teachers (1 dean, 2 teaching assistants, 3 PhD students, 2 externs) / 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 storage for information where you can always return to.	Teachers presume that all students read everything that is 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.
2nd year: 93 students / 9 teachers (1 associate professor, 1 dean, 3 teaching assistants, 3 PhD students, 1 extern) / 4 workgroups	Allows the pursuit of information by everybody involved in the teaching process and the return.	Not all students know how to access information within the sub-menus.
	Quick communication, lacking redundancies.	
	Differentiated announcements for each workgroup.	
5th year: 65 students / 5 teachers (1 associate professor, 2 teaching assistants, 1 PhD students, 1 extern) / 2 workgroups	Providing a dynamic platform for discussions (obtaining feedback on the project theme through links posted by students on the blog).	The discussions still took place only during the workshop, understandable since there are two weekly workshops that facilitate direct encounter.
	A 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.	

The student's feedback can be discussed either by statistics of accessing the blog, that don't manage to truly show how many of the people accessing the blog were students, or through organized inquiries, but only the teachers of the 2nd year requested a questionnaire survey on the activity. The respondents were positive on the use of the blog, 95% of them considering that they have been exhaustively informed by it, while 79% stated that they have read and

considered the bibliographical references useful. Still, the student's generic response about blogs, demonstrated by direct comments or by informal feedback provided during the classes was weak, and only a very small number were expressing their opinions or did interact actively in relation to the current content of the blog.

By comparing the blogs the primary find is that each teaching group uses its own blog according to its specific communicating needs. Comparing the opinions of each different teaching group, positivism stands out in relation to the visible improvement of the communication to the students, while at the same time a week response of the students is distinguished in relation to the communication via a dynamic electronic media. 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 created than in previous years, apparently strengthened by the publication of images on the teaching process and the involvement of everybody in the group. Still, the issue of reduced student's blog interaction remains, so 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 blog's content 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.

4. Discussions, conclusions, recommendations

The only blog that changed in the current academic year as a result of last years' experience is the blog of the 2nd year, by turning to the *edublogs.org* hosting platform that allows a more dynamic interaction, containing a forum and also supporting individual student blogs administrated by each student that should be used to present individual work during the semester, that can be embedded in the main page of the class blog. The results are yet unclear, but students only upload work upon teacher's request and don't yet identify their blog as a personal tool of representation and also fail to interact with each other's work via individual blogs. The conducted research proves that the implemented blogs did improve teaching communication, proving to be successful instruments in supplementing and sustaining it. The implementation of blogs represented an incipient form of embracing new media that only shows the potential of using blogs. A general positive impact has been achieved in the communication of teachers and students, but the main future development task of the current blogs would be to achieve a greater involvement of students in the process and converting the existing platforms in instruments with a more dynamic character. We consider that a key issue in the adequate functioning of blogs is the connection between the character of communication and the specific needs of each year's students, given by their age and interests.

References

Moran, T., P. (2010). Introduction to the History of Communication. Evolutions and Revolutions. New York: Peter Lang.
Pârvu, I., (2000). Filosofia comunicării. București: Ed.Comunicare.ro.
Sălăvăstru, D. (2004). Psihologia educației. Iași: Ed. Polirom, pp. 178-180.
Watzlawick, P., & Beavin, J.,H., & Jackson, D., D., (1967). Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes. New York, W.W. Norton &Company.
Weller, M. (2011). The Digital Scholar: How Technology Is Transforming Scholarly Practice. Basingstoke: Bloomsbury Academic.