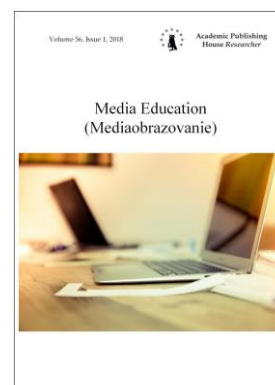




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## The Use of Teacher Blogs in Educating Students – Future Teachers at Universities in Russia and Poland

Elena Asmakovets <sup>a</sup>, Slawomir Koziej <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Dostoevsky Omsk State University, Russian Federation

<sup>b</sup> Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland

### Abstract

The problem of the research was finding the answer to the question about the scale of using teacher blogs by students of universities in Russia and Poland and learning their opinions on the educational opportunities that teacher blogs have. Efforts were also made to discover the expectations of respondents related to the inclusion of teacher blogs in the academic education process. The aim of the research was to formulate directives to better integrate blogs into the process of educating future teachers. Empirical data was collected on the basis of a survey addressed to students educated in teaching faculties. Research results indicate a low level of use of teacher blogs in the process of educating future teachers. Students had little knowledge about the existence of such blogs, about the content they contain, and therefore used them occasionally. They pointed out the lack of information about the possibility of using blogs by academic teachers who carry out educational activities. At the same time, the analysis of research results indicates that the respondents see great educational opportunities that lie in this form of contact between students and practitioner teachers. They also have high expectations of a more intense inclusion of teacher blogs in the academic process of preparing them for school work. The research indicates the need for greater dissemination of the opportunities offered by blogs in the process of academic education. This applies to both academic teachers who should include them in the process of teaching of their educational subjects and students who should use them more often.

**Keywords:** teacher blogs, teacher education, academic education, information and communication technologies in education.

### 1. Introduction

The modern world is replete with information and communication technology tools that cause dynamic changes in many aspects of human life. In the age of digital society, education can be enhanced with the use of innovative and effective solutions, such as e-learning platforms, educational websites and mobile applications that facilitate the learning process. Blogs are increasingly frequently employed as a tool for improving social communication, including in the area of education (Kim, 2008; Top et al., 2010). The use of IT tools enables the development of students' skills related to creating, storing, reorganising, using and transferring information, and assessing its value and utility. This, in turn, allows for the formation of students' creativity, cooperation skills, ability of applying innovation in practice and, most importantly, comprehension of progress-related phenomena.

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [s.koziej@ujk.edu.pl](mailto:s.koziej@ujk.edu.pl) (S. Koziej)

## 2. Materials and methods

The research problem of the study was to find the answer to the question about the scope of use of teacher blogs by students at universities in Russia and Poland and to gather their opinions on the educational opportunities offered by teacher blogs. Another aim was to learn the respondents' expectations related to the inclusion of teacher blogs in the academic education process. Furthermore, the researchers' intention was to present similarities or possible discrepancies between the results obtained in the educational environments of two different countries: Russia and Poland. The aim of the study was to formulate directives to better integrate blogs into the process of educating future teachers.

The study, carried out using the diagnostic survey method, was based on a questionnaire aimed at students pursuing teacher education degrees. The questionnaire consisted of questions regarding:

- the knowledge of blogs and potential use of blogs in education,
- the scope of use of teacher blogs by the respondents in their university education,
- expectations related to integrating blogs into the professional formation process of teachers.

The study was conducted in Russia and Poland with the participation of 94 Russian students from Omsk, Tula and Tver, and 223 Polish students from Kielce and Rzeszów. In both countries, the majority of respondents were female students (Russia – 90.4 %, Poland – 91.5 %). The respondents were mostly undergraduate students (Russia – 85.3 %, Poland – 53.8 %) at the age of 20 (Russia – 35.4 %, Poland – 22.8 %). The vast majority of respondents were full-time students – 98 % in Russia and 68 % in Poland, respectively.

## 3. Discussion

Innovative communication and information solutions are employed by both students and teachers. Blog-aided learning is performed via interaction between the student and the community they belong to (Wenger, 1998). Teachers' and students' relationship within the educational environment functions as a "community of practice", understood as a group of people who share a common concern or passion and who improve their skills in this area by interacting on a regular basis (Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Cuddapah, Clayton, 2011). It is increasingly common for a teacher to create their own blog, i.e. a particular type of website hosted by a blog service. A blog consists of chronologically sorted posts (entries) written by the author, and a comment section for the readers. Written content is usually complemented with images, animations, videos and hyperlinks to other websites. Characteristic features of blog entries include: use of common language, first-person perspective, mix of both opinions and facts, and informal character (Ciesielka, Osmenda, 2017). The teacher can use the blog to create new content, communicate, and engage in discussions via comments (Stover et al., 2014).

The thematic scope of blogs is considerably varied and includes such subjects as fashion, travel, music, sport, video games and cuisine. Many blogs focus on important aspects of everyday life (love, family, work, education), which allows their authors to express their emotional states – happiness, sadness, love or loneliness (Polcyn-Matuszewska, 2014). Internet blogs fulfil a number of functions: informative, entertaining, communicational, opinion-forming, advertising, integrational and educational (Wawrzak-Chodaczek, 2008).

Blogs are interactive, as shown by their capability to allow for maintaining contact with readers, dialogue and exchange of opinions. This type of website is well-equipped to respond to the ever-increasing need for sharing one's life experiences with others. Creating and reading blogs is an appealing and commonly available form of exchange of information on the Internet and a means of emotional expression. The blog has a spatially branched structure which is owed to the use of hyperlinks to other blogs or websites. Another distinguishing feature is the attractiveness of content, which significantly impacts the blog's popularity and has decisive influence on the number of visitors. Blogs can be characterised as heterogenous (as they collect various types of texts), fragmentary (as they contain large amounts of disordered information) and multicoded (as they allow for adding images, sounds and videos) (Witosz, 2005).

There are multiple reasons for teachers to create blogs. Many teachers use them mainly as an aid to the traditional learning process by providing additional educational materials. Some teachers use them mostly to communicate with students and their parents. Other treat blogs as information boards where they can post class schedules, assignments and evaluation criteria. The majority of teachers, however, use blogs for all of the above purposes.

A teacher blog is undoubtedly an appealing learning tool that enables students to visit it at any time and thus deepen, revise and consolidate their knowledge. This serves not only to develop content creation skills, but also to enhance the ability of conscious reception and processing of information. Due to their simplicity and flexibility of form, blogs can be used as a teaching aid at all levels of education (Popiel, 2014).

Writing a blog is an excellent opportunity to build a creative, inspiring and effective learning environment. A teacher who skilfully employs modern technologies, follows new trends and looks outside traditional learning models, is frequently considered by the students to be more interesting and worthy of respect.

The professional formation of teachers at universities is also to a greater or lesser extent carried out with the use of modern technologies. Universities educating future teachers should, therefore, enable their students access to these technologies and encourage their use. Universities must have at their disposal the means that would ensure a didactic base that is well-equipped in latest technological solutions. Teachers in formation should have continuous access to information technology so that they get accustomed to using it on a regular basis. In this way, they can better prepare for their role as guides to the complex modern world, a blended reality of the physical and the digital, where they already live themselves. It is worth mentioning that blogs run by teachers working at schools of different levels may be of particular importance for the professional formation of teachers. The school is the place where teachers present their professional experience, opinions on the educational process and practical proposals of methodological solutions, and lead discussion forums. With the aid of blogs, students pursuing teacher education degrees can broaden their knowledge and skills, and form their attitudes (Caldwell, Heaton, 2016). Studies have shown that teachers in formation use blogs as a platform for critical reflection on learning processes and for the assessment of blogs' impact on their professional development (Killeavy, Moloney, 2010; Leigh, 2018; Luik et al., 2011; Yang, 2009). In this way, students gain the opportunity to contact the people involved in school education. Communication between teachers in formation and teaching practitioners, conducted in digital environment, comfortable and familiar to young people, can be a proper introduction to the reality of the education system. Many positive results can be linked to blogs run by students preparing for teaching careers. Their use of blogs contributes to creating an environment of cooperation, knowledge sharing, shared responsibility and increased socialisation during the professional formation process (Daza, Eizaguirre, 2019). Using blogs to enhance and complement traditional learning methods can bring positive results, however, it should not be regarded as a substitute of direct education (Dandashly et al., 2019).

#### 4. Results

As shown by the survey's results, about one third of the students reported not having been aware of the existence of teacher blogs aimed at people interested in education issues. This comes as a surprise, as the respondents' generation spends the majority of their time online. Although almost every second respondent learned about teacher blogs by browsing the Internet, it is evident that effective use of online resources demands appropriate direction and support, especially from teachers. In the sample group, for every fifth respondent, it was an academic teacher that encouraged them to use teacher blogs as a learning aid.

**Table 1.** Respondents' answers to the question "How did you learn about teacher blogs?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
From the Internet,	45.8	45.3
From a friend,	5.3	6.7
From a university teacher,	19.1	20.6
I did not know they existed.	29.8	34.5

The study has revealed that students pursuing teacher education degrees rarely benefit from the materials published on blogs authored by teachers working in the education system. Both in Russia and Poland, only about 13 % of students visit teacher blogs on a regular basis, i.e. at least once a week. This is, however, where the similarities between Russian and Polish students end, as the Russian students much more frequently pointed out to rare but regular, sporadic and occasional visits. In turn, the Polish students much more frequently (37.2 % compared to 10.6 % of

the Russian students) declared not visiting teacher blogs. Low percentage was observed on the part of the Russian students, non-corresponding to the data presented in Table 1 where 29.8 % of them pointed out to the lack of prior knowledge of the existence of teacher blogs. There is, however, an explanation for this. The Russian students often chose the answer “occasionally” if they happened to visit a website without applying gained knowledge in practice or being aware that the blog was authored by a teacher.

**Table 2.** Respondents' answers to the question “How often do you visit teacher blogs?”

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Frequently on a regular basis (at least once a week),	12.8	13.0
Rarely on a regular basis (at least once in a month),	14.9	9.4
Sporadically (less than once in a month),	29.8	12.6
Occasionally,	31.9	27.8
Never.	10.6	37.2

Low use of teacher blogs by students is confirmed by the data presented in Table 3. Over 37 % of the respondents did not find anything useful for their education among the resources published by teaching practitioners. The remaining respondents especially valued the access to exemplary syllabuses; this concerns almost half of the Russian students (47.9 %) and 45.7 % of the Polish students. Every third Russian student (33 %) and 29.6 % of Polish students reach for advice and read comments on the education process. The knowledge gained helps them adapt to the reality of the education system, become familiar with the challenges faced by teachers, and explore the pros and cons of the teaching profession. It is likely due to the students' prior lack of experience that they rarely benefit from the exchange of views taking place on discussion forums (17 % of the Russian students and 15.2 % of the Polish students).

**Table 3.** Respondents' answers to the question “What elements of teacher blogs did you happen to use?”

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Author's remarks (suggestions) on the education process,	33.0	29.6
Author's remarks on legal provisions,	6.4	7.2
Exemplary syllabuses,	47.9	45.7
Presented (discussed) literature,	35.1	23.8
Discussion forum,	17.0	15.2
Other,	2.1	3.6
None.	37.2	37.7

Low visit rate of teacher blogs is further reflected in low use of acquired information during university classes. It would seem that the knowledge gained from teaching practitioners should find application in the professional formation process of future teachers. This is, however, not the case. Almost half of the respondents (43.6 % of the Russian students and 46.6 % of the Polish students) declared never using the information obtained through teacher blogs during university classes. Among the remaining respondents, the Russian students were more frequent to declare applying gained knowledge in practice (17 % of the Russian students and only 10.8 % of the Polish students). 27.7 % of the Russians and 13 % of the Poles pointed out to using acquired information sporadically. The latter group was more frequent (29.6 %) to report occasional use of blog content as an educational aid.

Such low level of use of blog content in the academic formation process has its basis in the university teachers' attitude. Over half of the respondents declared that their instructors did not encourage them to use teacher blogs as a source of knowledge useful in the educational process. It would seem that academic teachers either do not recognise the educational value of blogs, are not convinced of this form of transferring knowledge by teaching practitioners, or are not familiar with this type of websites.

**Table 4.** Respondents' answers to the question "Did you apply the information obtained through teacher blogs in your university education?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Yes, frequently,	17.0	10.8
Yes, sporadically,	27.7	13.0
Occasionally,	11.7	29.6
No.	43.6	46.6

The study has revealed that it was mostly the Russian academic teachers who suggested the use of teacher blogs as an educational aid. The Russian students were almost four times more likely (8.5 %) to receive frequent and regular encouragement from their teachers than their Polish colleagues (2.2 %), and almost three times more likely (21.3 % in Russia and 8.5 % in Poland) to receive sporadic encouragement. This indicates the Russian teachers' greater openness to innovative, largely unexplored knowledge sources.

**Table 5.** Respondents' answers to the question "Were you informed about teacher blogs by your academic teachers?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Yes, frequently (regularly),	8.5	2.2
Yes, sporadically,	21.3	8.5
Occasionally,	17.0	33.2
No.	53.2	56.1

Teacher blogs provide students with the opportunity to become familiar with the practical side of the teaching profession. Direct contact with teaching practitioners allows them to become acquainted with the realities of the education system before beginning practice in a particular educational institution. Over half of the respondents from Russia (54.3 %) and almost half of the respondents from Poland (48 %) stated that they found teacher blogs beneficial for gaining practical knowledge related to the teaching profession. Over 21 % of both the Russian and Polish respondents viewed this way of acquiring information as significant.

**Table 6.** Respondents' answers to the question "Did using teacher blogs help you gain knowledge on the teaching practice?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Yes, significantly,	21.3	21.1
Yes, somewhat,	33.0	26.9
Rather not,	11.7	13.9
Not at all,	3.2	0.9
I did not use teacher blogs.	30.8	37.2

It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that students hold a favourable opinion on the role of teacher blogs in the academic formation of future teachers. Such an opinion is shared by the vast majority of the respondents (90.4 % in Russia and 97.8 % in Poland), whereas the appreciation for the use of blogs as an educational aid is higher on the part of the Polish students (58.3 %) than their Russian colleagues (41.5 %).

**Table 7.** Respondents' answers to the question "Do you consider teacher blogs significant in the professional formation process of teachers at universities?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Definitely yes,	41.5	58.3
Yes, to a small extent,	48.9	39.5
Rather not,	5.3	1.8
Definitely not.	4.3	0.4

In the students' opinion, all common elements of teacher blogs can be used in the professional formation of teachers at universities. The Russian respondents attached the greatest importance to author's remarks (suggestions) on the education process (64.9 %) and the least importance to discussion forums (29.8 %). The Polish respondents found exemplary syllabuses to be the most useful (81.6 %) and author's remarks on legal provisions to be the least useful (22.9 %).

**Table 8.** Respondents' answers to the question "What elements of teacher blogs could be used in the professional formation of teachers at universities?"

	Russia (%)	Poland (%)
Author's remarks (suggestions) on the education process,	64.9	63.2
Author's remarks on legal provisions,	30.9	22.9
Exemplary syllabuses,	45.7	81.6
Presented (discussed) literature,	43.6	52.0
Discussion forum,	29.8	35.0
Other.	1.1	0.9

## 5. Conclusion

The problem of the research was finding the answer to the question about the scale of using teacher blogs by students of universities in Russia and Poland and learning their opinions on the educational opportunities that teacher blogs have. Efforts were also made to discover the expectations of respondents related to the inclusion of teacher blogs in the academic education process. Furthermore, the researchers' intention was to present similarities or possible discrepancies between the results obtained in the educational environments of two different countries: Russia and Poland.

The study has revealed a low level of use of teacher blogs in the professional formation process of teachers. The respondents showed to have limited knowledge of blogs and their content, and thus only visited them sporadically. About one third of the students reported not having been aware of the existence of teacher blogs aimed at people interested in education issues. They also indicated the lack of encouragement on the part of their teachers. Such low level of use of blog content in academic formation process has its basis in university teachers' attitude toward this type of educational aid. Over half of the respondents declared that their teachers did not encourage them to use blogs as a source of knowledge useful in the educational process. It would seem that academic teachers either do not recognise the educational value of blogs, are not convinced of this form of transferring knowledge by teaching practitioners or are not familiar with this type of websites.

The analysis of the survey's results shows that the respondents recognise educational opportunities offered by this form of communication between teachers in formation and teaching practitioners. Teacher blogs provide students with the opportunity to become familiar with the practical side of the teaching profession. Direct contact with teaching practitioners allows them to become acquainted with the realities of the education system before beginning practice in a particular educational institution. Those of the respondents who happened to use teacher blogs underscored the positive impact of this type of educational aid on their knowledge of their future profession. These students showed to have high expectations related to the integration of teacher blogs into the academic process of preparing them for work. The study has revealed a need for the students' familiarisation with the opportunities offered by blogs in the academic formation process. This concerns both university teachers, who should consider the use of blogs for the purposes of classes, and students, who should visit blogs more frequently.

The use of teacher blogs in the professional formation process of teachers depends also on the blogs' authors themselves. They mostly aim their content at their own students, parents and other teachers, and are not completely aware that their blogs can be of use for students pursuing teaching education degrees. Inclusion of this group and its needs would certainly increase the use of blogs by teachers in formation.

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