

E BLOGSPOT IN THE TEACHING OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

STATHIS TAPINOS

Abstract

E-learning and e-learning applications/tools are available to all educators thanks to the evolution of technology and the internet. Although a great variety of technologies are available it is not always obvious how these can be integrated in traditional teaching to support and enhance the learning experience. The majority of the existing literature proposes the use of blogging as an activity that students should do in order to increase their active participation in learning. This article presents the use of blogspots in the teaching of Strategic Management as a tool used to create greater linkages between theory and practice, discussing the evolution of its utilisation in my modules, the current state of use and a series of reflections on experience gained from its use so far. Overall, I have found that there is limited literature on how blogging could link to teaching activities and its utilisation should be viewed as learning by doing which is evaluated and improved by critical reflection of the user.

The Context - Background

My teaching on Strategic Management ranges in terms of levels: including Undergraduate and Postgraduate and various forms of Executive Education/Development; and contexts, with a variety of class size, from as little as 12 students (Executive Development programmes) to less than 100 (Postgraduate) and to less than 600 (Undergraduate); and a variety of teaching lengths; from 2 full days (Executive Development), to 1 week/5 full days (Postgraduate), to 11 weeks (Undergraduate). In all these circumstances the desired learning outcomes are very similar and they include understanding a series of theories and familiarising students with the use of strategy tools which would help their strategic analysis and decision making skills. A critical parameter for the successful achievement of these learning outcomes is being able to appreciate the practical relevance of strategic management theories and this can only be achieved by providing real life examples.

Most of the textbooks include real life examples for the concepts covered but no matter how regularly they publish new editions (see for example Johnson, Whittington and Scholes, 2011, Exploring Strategy, who have a new edition every 2 years) their examples are not very up to date and are not always relevant for all the different classes I am teaching. Bestseller textbooks have to 'serve' a variety of 'markets' and therefore their examples are not always appropriate and meaningful for my students. Other textbooks (see for example Grant, 2009, Contemporary Strategy Analysis) have more North American orientation in their examples which again is not useful for my teaching. Recently, some textbooks have started uploading examples on their online resources which are more recent, however they either lack the discussion that links them to the concepts taught or they are provided as in-class exercises.

Luckily Strategic Management is one of those disciplines and subjects that there are lots of examples available every day in the press which I am trying to use for my teaching.

Evolution of Blogging for Strategic Management

Pre-Blogging Phase

When I first started teaching at ABS, I used to collect articles from popular sources such as Business Week, Financial Times, BBC Business in the 'Favourites' of my computer and every week I would select those that I would use for my teaching. Although this worked quite well, there were some weaknesses. The advantage of this approach was that I had several examples for each concept. The weaknesses were associated with the decision of whether to include the examples on the slides or not. If I were to include them on the slides I would have to update all examples every year and to find an optimum solution on how to make available examples from previous years. If I would not include them in the slides but would mention them in the class, there was a possibility that some of the students would miss it or not capture it adequately for revision. The greatest weakness of this approach is that every day new examples from the corporate world occur in the news and it is not possible to make them available if the relevant lecture is finished.

Blogging Phase 1: posting articles

To resolve the weaknesses of the previous approach, in August 2008, I started experimenting with Blogspots. Although, Blackboard™ had and still has a blog application, I have selected to use an external source because not all my students have access to the ABS intranet and I wanted a source which would not require yearly transition to another system. My blogspot is available at: <http://stratman.blogspot.com>.

The construction of the blogspot is a straight forward process which requires no technical skills. Most of blogging sites have a great variety of templates and an increasing number of applications to enhance the use of the blogspot (-my advice: keep it simple!). The only weakness of blogspot.com, in 2008, was that it did not provide the statistics of the site's views and some effort was required to link it with google.analytics.com (in our days this is a standard function).

The first version of my blogspot include: i) the title of the article; ii) the first 2 lines from the article; iii) link to original source; iv) the keywords which relate the article to a specific concept/lecture from my module.

Blogging Phase 2: posting articles with tags

A few months after the launch of my blogspot, I started using Tags (I have now edited all phase one postings and included Tags for them, too). Tags is a very useful function of blogspots as they create lists of topics. For example, all articles which concern a Merger & Acquisition have the M&A Tag, which means that by pressing the M&A Tag, the user/student would have a list of all M&A articles only without having to search for them. This makes the blogspot more user-friendly and consecutively it should increase its utilisation.

Progressively the list of Tags has increased and I now have about 70 Tags which link to as many concepts from my modules.

Blogging Phase 3: hyperlinks in the slides

At the end of academic year 2008, I reviewed the use of the blogspot (more details on this in the following section). I deduced that not enough students were using my blogspot. Thus, I searched for an approach to increase its 'visibility'. The best option available was to create hyperlinks in my lectures' Powerpoint slides to the blogspot. Hyperlinks is a very easy to use function in all Microsoft applications where the user copy+pastes the web address as a link on a word or symbol. My approach was to create hyperlinks for each Tag. So, now all Tags from the blogspot are directly linked to the slides; when a student downloads my slides and they see a hyperlink (different colour and underlined) they would press Ctrl and the link to be taken to the Tag with all the relevant articles. For

example, in the lecture of Network Level Strategies, Mergers and Acquisitions have a hyperlink to the M&A Tag and all the articles that include examples of M&As.

In terms of the evolution of my blogspot, I have noticed that my commentary in the beginning of each article has increased, as I am now providing a short discussion on why I consider the example provided relevant and in some cases, multiple sources have been used to provide a more holistic examination of the concept.

Assessing the effectiveness of the blogspot

As mentioned before the beginning of the academic year 2009-10, I reviewed the effectiveness of the blogspot with two methods: i) posted an online survey for all (550) UG Final Year students on Strategic Management, ii) reflected on the statistics of the daily access/view of the website. The survey was answered by very few students (about 20) who provided positive feedback and suggested that they used the blogspot for preparing for the exams. The review on the statistics confirmed the survey; in the academic year there were approximately 20 visits per week during term 1, when I am teaching, about 5 visits per week during term 2 and about 100 visits per day the last three days before the exam. The use of hyperlinks has increased slightly the average viewing per week but not significantly. This can be attributed to the fact that I am not posting articles as regularly as I did in the first two years. Concerning the statistics of visibility, it has to be mentioned that according to the 'traffic access' and 'referring sites', my blogspot is viewed not only by ABS students but from users from around the world. I assume that the profile details that link to ABS and Aston University are also good free PR.

It is worth mentioning that when I launched this blogspot, it was not even on the second page of google search for 'strategic management blogspot', now it is second (even above the Business Week/Bloomerg's Strategic Management blog).

Reflections on this use so far

My blogspot is not 'essential' reading/material for any of my modules; it is an optional supporting tool for students who wish to have quick access to examples related to my teaching. Designing the blogspot is not time consuming, updating it with examples and writing the commentary requires a level of time commitment which depends on how much information one wants the blogspot to provide. Although, my blogspot allows for comments and discussions, and even if, I have encouraged them, in all these years I have not received any. It is within my future plans to develop the blogspot as a discussion forum for analysing current developments of business events. Given that it is available outside ABS intranet, I envision that it could be evolved as a 'keeping in touch' with past students and could potentially create better linkages between ABS and its alumni.

Dr Stathis Tapinos
Economics & Strategy Group
e.tapinos@aston.ac.uk

Example used with Undergraduates/Postgraduates/ Executive Development students on Strategic Management Modules