TO BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG? A STUDENT DILEMMA FOR INTERACTIVE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MAURITIUS

Ramkissoon Parmeswar
Open University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius
p.ramkissoon@open.ac.mu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0871-561X

Dr. Belle Louis Jinot*
Lecturer, Academic Affairs Division, Open University of Mauritius,
Reduit Mauritius
l.belle@open.ac.mu
ORCID:https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9459-9146
*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT
This article examines the use of blogs by students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Mauritius as a learning tool. Blogging has proved to be a successful medium for reflections and interactions among students in many contexts. This study looks into the extent to which students use blogging for online interactions and the reasons why they tend to blog or not to blog. Online survey questionnaires were administered to 600 students from three public HEIs offering courses in blended mode, namely the University of Mauritius, the Open University of Mauritius and the Centre for Open and Distance Learning of the Mauritius Institute of Education. The response rate was 72.2%. 24 students and 8 lecturers from three HEIs were selected by using purposive convenience sampling for focus group discussions and individual interviews respectively. The survey revealed that only 29.3 % of students use blogs in their learning and that 40 % of them have never used blogs. It was found that students in Mauritius have a cultural inhibition to share their views, feelings, experiences and knowledge among themselves online though they use social networking sites, the curriculum is too structured, they are cognitively overloaded with too much information through e-learning and lecturers are not prepared to adopt blogging as a teaching tool.
Keywords: blog, online interactions, higher education institutions, blogging, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

Blogs is a contracted form of 'web-based logs' or 'weblogs'. They are basically online journals in which a person posts numerous chronological and the most recent entries on a particular topic, which is of particular interest to him/her, and other persons may freely express their comments or views (Farmer, Yue & Brooks, 2008). In the process of blogging, people write, read, comment in and out: this is the rhythm of blogging (Garcia, Moizer, Wilkins & Haddoud, 2019). There is thus a conversational process through feedback that enhances learning. More importantly, blogs may be used as reflective as well as interactive devices (Deng & Yuen, 2009), hence promoting them as a form of learning enabler for learners in higher education, particularly for those in open education. Indeed, blogs are one of the most frequently used forms of social media in higher education (Al-Qallaf & Al-Mutairi, 2016). They are preferred because of the perceived benefits and opportunities they present for improving pedagogical practice and student engagement through interactions (Veletsianos, 2020). Examples of network log services are WordPress, Livejournal, Blogger, Tumblr, Typepad, and SquareSpace (Mikoluk, 2013).

Blogging is an innovative internet technology that is used in many universities, by faculties and learners, for teaching and learning purposes. Like any other technology, blogging allows supporting instruction, particularly in open education in which learning may turn out to be too individual and passive. Blogging facilitates the creation of a community of inquiry in which collaborative learning may facilitate cognitive, social and teaching presence (Pifarré, Guijosa & Argelagos, 2014). Blogging allows the interaction of these three types of essential presences for meaningful learning, through collaborative writing tasks (Garrison & Akyol, 2009).

Open education is not only about making content available to students for free (Cormier, 2013), but learning should be based on behaviourism, cognitivism, socio-constructivism and connectivism, where students are able to think through the processes of inquiry, critical thinking, discussion and problem solving (Gibson, 2001). This is achieved through the use of technology, based on the Maddox (1986) Type II computer applications which consider that technology is used not only for knowledge instruction but also for knowledge construction (Dwyer, 1996).

By using blogs, students have the opportunities to be actively engaged with the resources and content in a creative manner for their own learning, not only through self-directed learning but also through social interactions with other students and the teacher, who is rather an advisor or a guide instead of being "a sage on the stage", in the online environment (Kop, 2011; Gourlay, 2015). Hence, students can co-create and share learning materials and knowledge which is viewed by Gourlay (2015) as *sui genesis*. As such, open education is viewed as an emancipatory force (Lane, 2016), which enables students to map and remap on the acquired knowledge in an attempt to increase their understanding through networks, based on the cartography and decalcomania principles of Deleuze and Guattari (Cormier, 2012). With co-creation of content based on their learning experience in digital texts (White & Le Cornu, 2011), students become part of the content, process and products of learning (DeRosa, 2016; Orr, van der Hijden, Rampelt, Röwert & Suter, 2018).

In Mauritius, higher education is mostly in the conventional environment. There are five public universities, including on open university. Whether it is open education with mixed-mode learning, or resource-based learning or blended learning or it is the traditional on-campus education, Weller (2002) considered it fundamental to examine the degree to which the higher education is didactic/constructivist and makes use of high/low levels of technology. Is technology being considered as only an investment in education or an innovation that lead to prototype, deployment and evaluation (Scanlon *et al.*, 2013)? Or is it viewed from an educational perspective to support learning (Mercer *et al.*, 2011)? Is it considered as the primary driver of an educational activity or supportive of educational practice (Leaning, 2010)? Is there a shift from technology to pedagogy and practice in higher education institutions in the country? An investigation into the ability or frequency of using blogs as an in innovative and interactive tool to learn by learners of the university would give us insights into these lenses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pedagogic blogs are used by the students as an explicit part of the teaching and learning process. They may use them as a journal, or an e-portfolio, showing their thoughts, reflections and discussions on the subject (Weller, Pegler & Mason 2005). An appropriate use would supplement face-to-face tutorials (Baim, 2004). The teacher may request each student to keep a blog, post at least a number of words per week and to respond to the posts of at least a number of other students. This would be used as an e-portfolio tool for gathering evidence of learning. So, blogs become a collaborative tool, which students can use as the medium for sharing learning resources and discussions. In a class blog, the teacher may even deliver news, resources, initiate discussions among students. Besides, blogs may be used for improving writing skills, encouraging reflective writing, peer assessment of student weblogs, recording progress and process of learning, and group work (Lowe, 2006). Also, students improve their digital literacy through blogging; and the embedding of blogging in the curricula has the possibility of shifting learning from the time and space-bound classroom situation to a pervasive and entrenched activity (Ellison & Wu, 2008). This gives students more responsibility for their learning and the publishing process (Wagner, 2003).

As interactive web-based learning environments, blogs are used as an interactive discussion among students who interact with learning contents, artefacts. According to Kanbar and Hameed (2018), blogs are effective in the social constructivist learning and blended learning environment in which there are opportunities for adaptive learning, authentic learning, relational thinking, active and learning centred education, the development of higher learning skills or deep learning, and promotes a high degree of interaction and interactivity among the students (Petersen, Divitini & Chabert, 2008; Wang, Li, Li, & Wang, 2014).

Students' use of blogs in higher education depends on how they perceive it. Their use depends on their digital perceptions. The propensity to use blogs is influenced by their age. Are they of the Net Generation, iGeneration. Generation Next, or are they digital migrants? (Barak, 2018; Hill & Nance, 2016; Lai & Hong, 2015). In the context of open education, the profile of students may vary within these different generations. Besides, the rhythm of blogging influences the degree of their interaction in the blog (Garcia, Moizer, Wilkins & Haddoud, 2019).

According to Deng and Yuen (2011), blogs are platforms that give the opportunities to learners to express their feelings, opinions and thoughts in an e-learning environment. Lang (2005) contended that when blogging, there are no specific required technological skills that allow the user to develop, update and publicise their posts. Blogs allow individual ownership; posting of ownership in reverse chronological order as well as archiving and have some similar features as a web page such as easy creation of the page, the content of presentations can be easily categorised and the author can invite other blog users to interact (Sim & Hew, 2010). Blogs are used as an educational tool due to its technological and functional features that promote reflective thinking, collaboration, interactivity among others (Kilic & Gokdas, 2014).

Hsu and Lin (2008) affirmed that blogs are widely used as Web 2.0 tools in universities and are a major tool for knowledge sharing. Furthermore, Hall and Davison (2007) acknowledged blogs as not merely a tool for providing online information but instead as a tool for learning in education. This use of blogs enhances the perception of the students on ICT usage and developing ICT skills in them (Goktas and Demirel, 2012). Blogging allows the development of social, cognitive and self-directed learning skills for both teachers and learners; this encourages peer learning but learners cannot mentor each other with skills which are of higher-order (Robertson, 2011). According to Jiang and Ting (1999), when learners and teachers interact in an e-learning environment, the learner is perceived to be learning effectively. Halic *et al.* (2010) and So and Bush (2008) reported, accordingly that when this takes place, the level of collaborative learning is perceived to be higher. However, Kang and Imt (2013) found that social intimacy and learner's perceived learning are negatively correlated.

Blogs promote reflective thinking as the learners posts their views and thoughts in a chronological manner and this allows the bloggers to perceive the way their thoughts and views have evolved (Ellison & Wu, 2008; De Mattos, 2014). Kim *et al.* (2011) advocated social constructivism as well as Web 2.0 technology are considered through activities and experiences that are related to blogging. Since blogging is interactive, it gives learners the opportunity to exchange their learning experience by publishing their thoughts, viewing and comments, sharing links and exchanging feedback (Kim, 2008). Besides, Halic *et al.* (2010) pointed out that "*blogging provides a means for students to connect in smaller groups to overcome the anonymity of a large lecture hall, working together to create a community of learning.*" (p. 208). Even teachers are engaged through social networking and meaningful discussion through blogging.

Despite the potentials of blogging appraised by many teachers as a means of increasing student interactivity and collaboration, yet there are few studies conducted on the effectiveness of blog use. Some researchers reported blogging as a useful tool to promote the online engagement of learners in activities (So & Brush, 2008; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2002). In contrast, Kim (2008) conferred blogging as a useful tool does not have a positive impact on learners' involvement in such activities. Hew and Cheung (2013) reviewed six recent studies and concluded that the use of blogging has some limitations in coming up with reliable evidence concerning the prior ability of the learners and whether they are in accordance with their abilities demonstrated after regular blogging (El Tantawi, 2008; Arslan & Sahin-Kizil, 2010). It was also impossible to assert that the skills acquired by learners who blog are directly related to blogging alone (Wong & Hew, 2010; Salam & Hew, 2010).

The emergence of social media has shifted blog users to other media of sharing technologies such as Facebook and Twitter and stolen the limelight from blogs which they once represented (Bernoff & Li, 2010). Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr (2010) further contemplated that the younger generations are more interested to use social networks and show less interest to blog. Some researchers claim that the premise of blogs as a facilitator to information sharing within and across the communities of prosumers was ineffective (Kottke, 2013). Social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have changed the prominence of blog communities and made shared-interest groups less blog-centered (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the research was to analyse the extent to which students in higher education actively use the blog as an interactive technology learning tool. The objectives were:
   (a) To determine the extent to which students use blog for online interactions
   (b) To analyse the factors that influence them to use or not to use a blog in their learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The processes and approaches adopted in the study are discussed in this section. The selection of respondents and the research instruments used for the collection and analysis of data are described. A mixed-method approach was adopted. Survey questionnaires were administered to 600 learners from the Open University of Mauritius (OU) the University of Mauritius (UoM), and the Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of the Mauritius Institute of Education. The OU is a blended university; the UOM is a conventional university; and the CODL is a fully online higher education. 433 students responded to the survey (72.2 %). The research sample was 433 participants, 71.4 % were females and 28.6 % were males.

The SPSS software was used to analyse the data from the survey. In addition, three focus group interviews were conducted with the learners of each institution in an attempt to understand the meaning of the quantitative findings from the survey. Therefore, an explanatory sequential research design was used. Participants were selected through purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is 'a non-probability technique used to establish a sample space for a particular study' (Uprichard, 2011). The selection of respondents was based on their uniqueness in terms of their qualities, namely their use of blended learning, their level of maturity as adult learners and the

fact that they were key informants on the use of social media and Moodle for their learning experiences and opinions about them. The participants for the three focus group discussions were 24 students and those for individual interviews were 8 lecturers from the three HEIs

The demographic characteristics of the lecturers are given in Table 1 below.

Participants	Gender	Age	Highest Qualification	Years of teaching experience in the centre	HEIs
A (Senior Lecturer)	Female	45	PhD	15 years	UoM
B (Senior Lecturer)	Female	42	Master	10 years	UoM
C (Lecturer)	Male	45	Master	5 years	MIE
D (Lecturer)	Male	40	Master	3 years	MIE
E (Senior Lecturer/HoD)	Male	64	PhD	13 years	MIE
F (Lecturer)	Male	50	PhD	5 years	OU
G (Lecturer)	Male	35	PhD	3 years	OU
H (Lecturer)	Male	32	Master	3 years	OU

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample (Lecturers)

The respondents of the survey were mostly aged between 18-25 years, followed by those who were aged between 26-35, those between 35-50 years and those who were above 50 years old respectively as shown in the figure below:
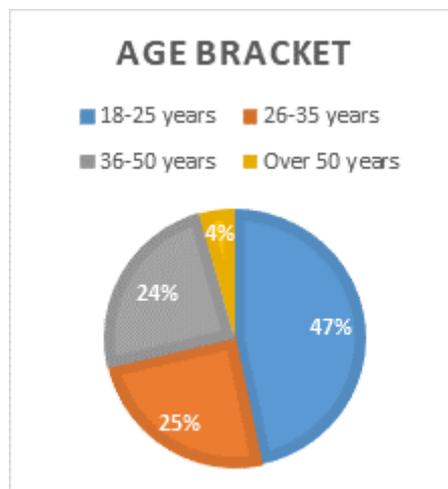

Figure 1: The age distribution of the sample of participants (Learners)

For the purpose of the qualitative data analysis, the information gathered was coded. Content analysis of the transcribed interviews was done to determine the emerging themes. The implications and meanings gathered from the study were explored and synthesised for presentation.

After the analysis of the data from the survey, the 'why' of the findings was explored through focus group discussions with the learners; why do they use blogs to the extent obtained from the survey?

The qualitative data was analysed by following the five-step procedures proposed by Thomas (2007):

   (a) preparation of raw data files
   (b) close reading of the transcribed text
   (c) creation of categories
   (d) overlapping coding and uncoded text
   (e) continuing revision and refinement of the category system.

Member checking was used after the final report on the data. Ethics were considered in accordance with the Mauritius Data Protection Act (2017). It ensured that the rights of the participants, including anonymity and confidentiality, are protected.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Blogging allows the students to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions in the e-learning environment. It is a source of interactivity between and among student, peers and tutors. Therefore, to meet the objective of this research, the researchers had carried out a survey to assess the number of students who were actively using the blog as an interactive online platform for their online engagement. It was found that despite its worldwide popularity, blogging is not common among the students of the three blended HEIs in Mauritius. This situation is shown in the figure below.

The survey revealed that 40 % of respondents did not use online technologies for study purposes. However, 7.4 % of the respondents very often made use of blog; 21.9% reported that they often maintained an online journal while 23.6 % claimed that they rarely use it, and 7.2 % very rarely utilised such an online tool. Figure 2 below shows these percentages.
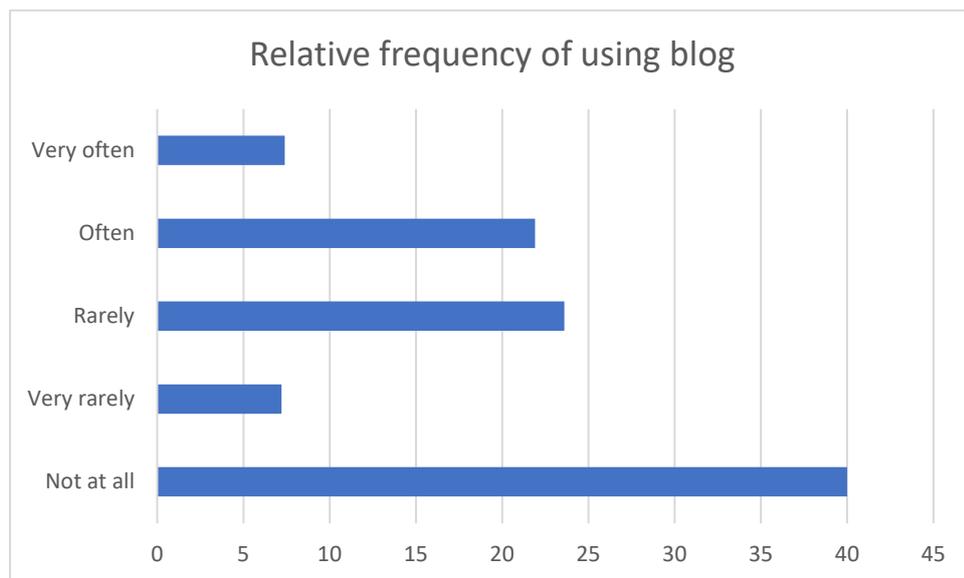

Figure 2. Relative Frequency of using blog among students in percentages (%)

It was obvious that most of the students were not using the blog as an interactive medium in their studies. Although researchers have reported that blogging enhances the ICT usage of students yet, the least usage of blogs might have a negative onset on learner technology interaction of the students. Both students and tutors were interviewed to explore the 'why' of such an observed trend. The following themes were obtained from the interviews: cultural inhibition, too structured curriculum, the preference for social networking, lecturers' unwillingness to adopt it as a useful tool for instruction, and information overload.

Cultural inhibition

From the findings, it is obvious that there has been a cultural shift in the use of technological tools among youth. Blogging was used in the past before the advent of social media tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Even though blogs are widely used as Web 2.0 tools in universities and are a major tool for knowledge sharing (Hsu & Lin, 2008), yet it was found that such was not the case in Mauritius. This is justified by Student 2 in FGD X:

"*We don't really use blogs but instead we use WhatsApp so that our friends may answer, and help us out with our learning difficulties.*"

In the same vein, Student 4 of FGD Z added:

"*Students have to know that the blog exists first, then go to the site, read about your posts and then if they want to respond. But, on WhatsApp, it is different.*"

The lecturers also were of the same opinions. They averred that blogging is a less popular trend of learning among their students. To illustrate this situation, Lecturer C regrettably observed:

"*Very slowly, we have noticed that even blogging has started to become less popular. It is not the thing that youngsters or students really like to do. They will rather use Facebook or twitter where they will get comments and timely feedback*"

This was in line with the findings of Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr (2010) that students have less interest to blog while they are more interested to use social media networks. So, blogging is not part of the culture of learning among university students because of an obvious cultural inhibition to share personal experience and information publicly, in contrast to social media network where they may share privately. Lecturer G commented that:

"*The problem is that Mauritian students are too introvert; they do not want to share their information with others. They are probably afraid of the comments of others on their posts about their views and thoughts.*

This finding is supported by Dahlstrom *et al.* (2013) who acknowledged that students are cautious on their privacy when technology causes greater integration of both their academic and personal lives. However, Hurlburt (2008) advocated this feeling of insecurity is temporary and disappear once the students are comfortable with their peers and tutors. It would have also been the role of the tutors to encourage students to blog by providing them feedback on their progress and learning as well as engaged them in conversation that would challenge and heighten their cognitive thinking (Chen, 2002).

Too structured curriculum

Most of the respondents claimed that the decrease in the frequency of students using blogs was attributed to the lack of willingness of the institutions to promote it. Blogging is not part of the teaching strategy of the lecturers in the higher education institutions of Mauritius. It is neither part of the assessment strategies in online teaching. From this perspective, Lecturer H commented:

"*Unless the tutor asks the learner to create a blog to do an activity that forms part of the teaching and learning process and why not assess through such activity whether the learner has achieved the learning outcomes, learners will never use blogging in their studies.*"

The students of the FGD 2 all concurred that the lecturer as well as the university have the crucial role to encourage them to use blogging as an embedded instructional tool in the curriculum. They shared the view of Lecturer H that:

"*The university should encourage lecturers to discuss its proper educational use.*"

In the blended learning approach, blogging is considered as the intermediate level whereby the student use blog to interact online with their peers and tutors through online activities (Prohorets & Plekhanova, 2015). Robertson (2011) further contended that blogging facilitate the development of social, self-directed learning and cognitive skills for learners and teachers; the commenting features encourage peer learning although it did not coach each other with higher-order skills. However, Goh *et al.* (2010) found that it would also be challenging for the tutors to use blogs as a tool for pedagogical purpose in getting the learners for expression of their opinions and views.

Blogging is not embedded in the curriculum because "*open pedagogy*" is still a new concept in the context of tertiary education in Mauritius. The curriculum is prescribed and imposed in books and hand-outs by the lecturers. The lecturer is considered as "*the sage on the stage*". This technique to teaching does not promote the socio-constructivist approach to learning nor metacognition. The students rarely have the choice and voice in the curriculum. Student-generated content or knowledge through collective intelligence occurred in a community of inquiry that is created through blogging is not considered as credible. This is confirmed by Lecturer C, who stated:

"*At the end of the day, a blog is something written by someone; there is the problem of credibility of the co-creation of knowledge.*"

Wang (2008) consistently found that students would not be interested to venture in creating knowledge and content whereby the credibility is not assured. He further contended that the intellectual property remains a concern in higher education as blogs may consist of content that was previously used without correct attribution.

The preference for social networking sites

The findings revealed that students in higher education institutions have the need to be socially connected, and not to passively wait for their classmates to respond to blogs. It was found that there was a shift in the use of technology whereby students are using social media as a means of 'blogging'. Since they are millennials and are tech-savvy, they are more interested in almost timely response to their search for information to learn. So, they are more likely to use WhatsApp and Facebook as technological learning tools to interact with their peers and lecturers. As per the Statistics Mauritius Report, there were 720,000 Facebook users for a population of 1.4 million people in Mauritius (Statistics Mauritius, 2016). Students and lecturers in this study concurred that students learn as a community on social networking sites, that are accessible even on their mobile phone. Student 4 of the FGD 1 averred:

"*We post our work or assignments to friends on WhatsApp or email and then we comment.*"

Lecturer B added:

"*Instead of such online commitment, students are mostly moving towards social networking where using Facebook, you can write where both platforms are here to express on the log or on the Facebook networking. On WhatsApp and Facebook, the whole community of friends and classmates are here to freely share their views and opinions about everything, including their learning difficulties and what they learn in classes*"

This is inconsistency with the findings of Bernoff and Li (2010) who maintained that the emergence of social media shifted blog users to other media of sharing technologies. Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr (2010) further maintained that the younger generations are more interested to use social networks and show less interest to blog. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) affirmed students could obtain timely information from their peers through social media platforms as compared to blogs where they have to invite people to visit their webpage and there is the uncertainty of getting a feedback from the community of bloggers.

The lecturers' unwillingness to adopt blogging as a teaching tool

All the lecturers unanimously averred that they never used blogging as a teaching tool. Yet, they did recognise that it can be used alongside any other teaching strategies. For instance, a lecturer may start a debate in his blog and allow his/her students to blog. Various reasons were given by them to justify their reluctance to adopt blogging: lack of confidence to use it; using other online platforms like Zoom, Moodle, Google classroom is more interactive and user-friendly; and the reluctance of students to publish their work and views in blogs. For instance, Lecturer D commented:

"*I have never used blogging due to my fear of the unknown as I like my comfort zone with Zoom. I do not trust it nor am I confident to use it as I lack training and support from the university to use it.*"

In the same vein, Lecturer F added:

"*A blog cannot be trusted as viable and valid per se. The source is difficult to verify, especially today with so much intox… It is a community share., not an open-source as such…*"

The participants also found that blog lacks interactivity and other teaching features, compared to Zoom, Moodle. Google classroom, and chat forums. To illustrate this argument, Lecturer B pointed out:

"*Blogs can be used only to post learning materials, but platforms are more adapted for teaching, assignments and grading which are integrated in the systems.*"

Information overload

Most of the students interviewed affirmed that they could not rely on the huge amount of information that is available in blogs. They suffered from information glut (Kazi, 2014), cognitive overload and hence infostress (Bawden & Robinson, 2020). In other words, they found it difficult to obtain usable information and knowledge from reliable sources; so they are stressed in trying to get the required information. Blogs are technological tools used to create and record one's thoughts and ideas, and to construct knowledge. Yet, the students perceived that they were so much overloaded with information on concepts that they study that they could not decide which information to choose and use in their studies. This is the problem of infobesity that results from information overload in blogs. Student 3 of FGD 1 stated with many grievances that:

"*When I browse a concept on Google, I come across many blogging sites with many blogs. I am so much overwhelmed with so many discussion blogs that I found it a headache to read through all of them to look for the most appropriate and relevant information to my studies.*"

This statement is consistent with the views of lecturers who indeed reject the use of information from blogs. For them, they are not reliable. Lecturer B concurred with Lecturer F and Student 3 of FGD 1:

"*It is difficult to check the authenticity of the sources of the information in blogs*".

Students are not prepared to commit themselves to sift, review and synthesise particular information when they have access to too much information (Kazi, 2014; Roetzel, 2019). It is obvious that information overload which is the result of blogging is a threat to academic literacies and production for students in universities. Information overload has become a menace in the academic sector, as information may be manipulated and faked in blogs (Renjith, 2017). This explains the reluctance of students to read blogs of others and to have their own blog (Rieck, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Blogging has proved to be an important technological tool for teaching and learning in higher education institutions. However, in the context of Mauritius, students, as well as lecturers, have an aversion to adopting it to enhance e-learning. The introvert culture of the Mauritian students of higher education who are reluctant to sharing their feelings, opinions and views on an open platform prevents them to experience the benefits of the socio-constructivist approach to e-learning. Moreover, they prefer the friendly social and learning environment of social network sites to which they are more familiar, namely Facebook and WhatsApp, which are more easily accessible on their mobile phones. They are also so much cognitively overloaded with information in blogs that they have developed an academic phobia for blogging. The lecturers, on their part, are still adopting the traditional structured approach to curriculum, whereby they do not value student-generated content or knowledge. The shift from the cognitivist approach to the socio-constructivist approach or democratic approach to learning in the context of open education or e-learning, based on the principles of andragogy has not been adopted yet in Mauritius. Students and lecturers are unwilling to adopt blogging as a teaching and learning technological tool. It is highly recommended that higher education institutions adopt the scholarship and evidence-based effective e-learning practices on personalised learning, as well as collective intelligence, and the community of inquiry that are fundamental pillars of open education and e-learning in the 21st Century, whereby emphasis is made on the acquisition and application of the 21st Century skills for effective learning, especially in this era of technology and digitalised education.

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