How Can a University Approach the Construction of a Blog Space For Use as a Recruiting Tool?

A Master’s Thesis Presented to

Information Design and Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Science Degree

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By

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August 2006

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SUNYIT

Department of Information Design and Technology Certificate of Approval

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Information Design and Technology

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Date

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Director, Information Design and Technology

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Subject Matter Expert
This case study examines the social construction of a blog space to recruit prospective students. The blog space initially created by SUNYIT is examined and compared with other existing blog spaces at accredited universities in New York State. The research in this case study is based on web site observations, interviews, questionnaires, review of literature and an information session. The theory of sense-making and organizational culture (participatory culture, specifically) are applied to help understand the case and context.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Russell Kahn, my thesis advisor, for his guidance and support throughout the semester, but also in my life for the past 11 years. He has been a guiding force in my life both as an undergraduate and graduate student, and I will always be indebted to him for his ongoing inspiration and dedication.

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I need to give a special thanks to my husband, Chris Washburn, and my children, Emily and Ryan, for their patience and understanding. I love all of you and I am where I am today in large part because of your consistent support.
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It was a beautiful, sunny day in early spring in Central New York. Kate was ready to begin her college search. Kate had first gone to a college fair that was held by her school, but there was so much information and people that she felt overwhelmed. She couldn’t bear to sit and look through all of those “cheesy” brochures. Kate wanted to learn more about the colleges she was interested in first hand – not just what the colleges wanted her to know. Kate decided to visit some college websites to see what she could find.

Kate went to her computer, determined to get to work. Before she began, however, she had to check her blog that she posts to on livejournal.com. It had become somewhat of a ritual, to check her blog space for comments, maybe post to her blog. She also had to check out her friends’ blogs, since she liked to stay on top of what was going on.

First she checked out Jennifer’s blog, since Jennifer had also started her college search, and sometimes she would blog about her search process. Jennifer had posted that afternoon, and it just so happened to be about her college selection process. Jennifer posted that she had found “a really cool feature” on Colgate University’s web page – a student blog space. Jennifer explained that Colgate University had students blog about their Colgate experience. There were a handful of students to read about, from different majors, and all of them were first-year Colgate students. “This is so cool!” Kate thought. This is exactly the kind of thing she was looking for, reading about the university from the student’s perspective, and it was a bonus that they were blogging about their college experience, since blogging was a way of life for Kate.
Jennifer had provided a link to the Colgate website from her blog post. Kate followed it since Colgate was on her list of colleges she wanted to learn more about. When Colgate University’s blog space displayed, Kate could not believe her eyes. There was a lot of information available through the blog space that she was also very interested in. The front page of the blog space not only had links to the students’ blogs, but also to separate blogger profiles, a link to read about Colgate’s residence halls, and even a special iPix photo link to see even more about the campus. The site was easy to navigate, and it held Kate’s interest. See the site in Figure 1 (Blogs and Journals, colgate.edu).
Figure 1 – Colgate University Blog Space

Section 1: Opening Vignette
Kate was encouraged to look for similar information at the other colleges on her list. She decided to visit Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) next. RPI also had a blog space that was easy to navigate, with links to a lot of information about RPI for prospective students. RPI’s blog space was not as prominent on their site, but the blog space had brief introductions and links to the student’s blogs. The students participating in RPI’s blog space were all juniors and seniors, and they were enrolled in different majors. See RPI’s site in Figure 2 (RPI Student Life and Experience, rpi.edu)
The profile of Rensselaer’s latest class reflects students with that strong desire to learn, who are ready to study hard and move to a higher level of independence and success.

But they also should be ready to enjoy the full Rensselaer student experience and have fun — on campus and off.

**Variety**

The Princeton Review recently ranked Rensselaer #3 on their “More To Do on Campus list.” From first-run movies, to dances, sports, and parties, to 150 clubs, sports, and organizations, students can participate in events and activities for nearly every interest. There are also countless opportunities to just hang out with friends and to make new friends.

**Arts**

Meet Rensselaer’s Student Bloggers:

Read their online journals of life, school, and just about anything else you can imagine.

Elise

Class: Junior

Major: EMAC

“After 2 1/2 years here at RPI I have decided that I want to stay in college forever, if that can’t happen, then at least I can make the most of what I have left.”

Elise’s Blog

Figure 2 – RPI Blog Space
Kate was two for two. She decided to visit SUNYIT’s site next. Since SUNYIT was an “Institute of Technology” she assumed they would also have a blog space for prospective students. Kate clicked on the Prospective Students link from the front page, hoping to find the blog space there. There were a lot of links to items of interest for prospective students, but nothing that would be a link to a blog space. Kate decided to do a search for “blogs” in the search box on the SUNYIT website. The first link that came up in the results was a link to the SUNYIT blog space. “Great! Just what I was hoping for!” but when Kate clicked on the link, it wasn’t exactly what she had expected. There was a list of blogs to read, a group blog list, and a user blog list. Kate didn’t see any biographies, photos, introductions, or anything that she had seen on the other sites she visited that afternoon (see the SUNYIT site in Figure 3 [SUNY Institute of Technology - - weblogs SUNYIT, sunyit.edu). Kate was a little confused about where to go, so she clicked on one of the user blogs. There was one post on that blog, saying that they were testing the new blog space. Kate assumed that this space wasn’t exactly what she was looking for, so she moved on to the next college on her list.
### Figure 3 – SUNYIT Blog Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Blogs</th>
<th>User Blogs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>webdevl</td>
<td>steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cursovs</td>
<td>roberttt1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>its</td>
<td>brownel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>idt</td>
<td>mirobij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff</td>
<td>kenneya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty</td>
<td>abunwam1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td>chiapps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wm</td>
<td>paulinnm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wildcats</td>
<td>hasselg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>telecom</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Kate was looking for student feedback about their home university, and now that she had seen a blog space set up at two of her college choices she was searching for more of the same. What other universities on her list would provide her with a usable, personalized blog space that would also provide admissions information?

Kate’s situation is not a new one. Blogs of all kinds are growing exponentially all over the world. Some colleges have seen the benefit of starting a blog space to recruit prospective students.

Some colleges and universities are now asking the following questions:

- How should a college or university approach the construction of new technology?
- What policies are in place to support a blog space?
- Which students act as student bloggers at the college website? Should blogs be open to anyone in the campus community?

This case study examines the beta SUNYIT blog space and how other colleges and universities have socially constructed a blog space for use as a recruiting tool.
Section 2: Introduction and Overview

This case study focuses on SUNYIT and the prospect of creating a new blog space for the purpose of recruiting prospective students. Since using a blog space to recruit prospective students is a fairly new phenomenon, it was important to examine how other universities approached this task, as SUNYIT is in the process of creating a blog space for the campus community, eventually to be used as a recruiting tool.

Current Assessment

It is important to review existing research regarding the construction of a blog space, as this existing research can provide ideas for understanding blog creation and how other universities construct a similar space for recruiting students.

*The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas* by Henry Farrell, examined how weblogs are being used more and more in academia to share ideas and opinions in the scholarly community. There are some issues, however, surrounding weblogs and the implications of sharing ideas that may be controversial in nature. The immediacy of a weblog has raised questions regarding immediate publishing, both good and bad. The “Blogosphere as Carnival of Ideas” advocates blogging as a way for academia to quickly and easily share ideas and concepts, without having to go through the traditional channels to get ideas out there. The author acknowledges that “academic blogs have provoked some fear and hostility” (Farrell, 3) as blogging is a new way of doing something that already has an established process in the academic field of publishing. The authors conclude that the benefits of academic blogs far outweigh the possible detriments of academic blogs, and should be embraced by academia.
Although this study does not directly focus on the benefits of academic weblogs, the article is interesting in its focus on how academia sees the impact of blogs and the information published in blogs. The authors discuss how those in academia view academic blogging:

Their blogs allow them not only to express personal views but also to debate ideas, swap views about their disciplines, and connect to a wider public. For these academics, blogging isn’t a hobby; it’s an integral part of their scholarly identity. (Farrell, 3)

They also note how blogs compress time:

… a blog post is published immediately after the blogger hits the “publish” button. Responses can be expected in hours, both from those who comment on the blog (if the blog allows them) and from other bloggers, who may take up an idea and respond to it, extend it, or criticize it. (Farrell, 1)

What issues arise when information can be published so quickly? There is no delay as sometimes used in other media such as live television shows to help protect the general public from offensive or slanderous information. What controls, if any, are administrators planning to take to control the immediate information published to the SUNYIT blog? These are issues discussed in this thesis.

The authors of the article seemed to focus on a radical point of view when discussing those opposed to academic blogging, but slanted how the article was presented. For instance, Alex Halavais of the SUNY Buffalo was quoted as saying that academic blogs seem “threatening to those who are established in academia, to financial interests, and to…well, decorum” (Farrell, 3) Using Halavais’s strong words regarding his opposition to academic blogging presents the other radical point of view, but what seems like a radical point of view. Farrell didn’t find any other opinions related to those opposed to academic blogging.
In “Blogomania!,” Eric Oatman found that blogging in academia is growing, and part of the reason for that growth was the way blogging connects people in many ways, including how academic institutions relate to one another online. Educators, students and librarians are increasingly using blogs as learning environments, not only for learning traditional subjects, but also on how to blog. New users are educated on etiquette and the ethics of blogging. The article examines the growth of the use of blogging in education, and the potential for growth in other areas, such as in libraries. The phenomena of blogging and its affect and potential in education are two of the article’s themes.

The article begins with a tag line of “Every day 12,000 new blogs are created. Here’s how you can get in on the action” (Oatman, 36). The tag line is misleading, however, as this is not an article about how to get started in blogging, but rather an analysis of how blogging began and where it is growing in academia. When discussing the components of a blog, the author points out, “But to millions, the best thing about blogs isn’t the ease of use. What counts to them is the opportunity to contribute two cents to the public discourse, even if the discourse is gossip” (Oatman, 37)

The appeal of “contributing to public discourse” could be a draw of SUNYIT students to blogging about SUNYIT’s community to potential students. What the author observed was that the community may not always want to post valid information, or information even related to the SUNYIT experience as administrators hope will generate interest in the college. How will administrators approach a student blog highlighted on the admissions page that does not contain relevant information?

Oatman hits on an interesting point when quoting Peter Grunwald of Bethesda, MD, “More and more are becoming producers of information rather than passive
consumers of it” (Oatman, 37) The issue of who is a producer and who is a consumer is an interesting point. Are the “owners” of the blog the only producers? What about those that comment on a blog entry of the producer? Would that commenter then become a producer as well, bound by the same guidelines as the original producer?

Oatman touches on the issue of opening up academic blogs for comment:

Opening up blogs for comments is a sore point in many school districts. “We’re not comfortable in schools with putting information up there for people to interact with,” Richardson says. “We’re afraid of getting inappropriate comments, flaming, and so forth… (Oatman, 39)

This an interesting point as related to the SUNYIT blog studied in this thesis. Will administrators allow other students to comment on blogs? What if they are not students, but prospective students? What about the common public?
Some librarians in Urbana, IL are teaching students the etiquette and ethics of blogging, to help students to understand “If you’re going to have a blog for a school, you should set up in advance some very clear guidelines for yourself. Remember that a blog is a public publication (Oatman, 39).

Relevant to this thesis: will SUNYIT offer any tutorials regarding the etiquette and ethics of blogging? Will students be expected to know about etiquette and ethics of blogging prior to starting a blog? If so, will those assumptions be shared with the community prior to letting a student start a blog?

In “Students’ Lived Experience of Using Weblogs In a Class: An Exploratory Study” by Ying Xie and Priya Sharma, the authors explore the use of a weblog by nine students and how their experience affected learning. The phenomenological study examined the participant’s view of the benefits and drawbacks of using a weblog over the course of a semester.

The study examined a limited number of students and their experiences with blogging as part of a course requirement. The authors found, “This initial data supports the proposition that Weblogs can be used to support reflection individually; however, data also suggest[s] that a more structured and guided introduction to the usage of this technology would be conducive to inculcating early and appropriate usage.” (Xie and Sharma, 845) The authors also found:

Although it appeared that weblogs could potentially offer a sense of community, the threat of privacy invasion also loomed large for some students. Further exploration is need[ed] to achieve a balance in fostering community, while avoiding situations that students might find threatening or disengaging. (Xie and Sharma, 845)
While this research does not focus on the student learning experience, it is beneficial to examine some of the themes that the researchers encountered in their traditional phenomenological study.

The study begins by explaining the learning process, and what researchers have identified as being integral parts of the learning process. The researchers then tied that background information in to the new technology of academic weblogs in classrooms.

Weblogs allow for personalization and customization by individual Webloggers. Weblogs offer a relatively convenient and easy mechanism for students to journal their learning processes, and if used appropriately this technology has the potential of facilitating reflective learning. (Xie and Sharma, 840)

The researchers pointed out that blogging provides students with an individual outlet to share experiences with other students, much like SUNYIT students would be sharing with prospective and current students on the SUNYIT blog space. The keyword of “individual” is used, which helps to highlight the individual’s contribution to a greater community and audience.

The role of a student’s prior experiences with the technology had an impact on the comfort level of students and blogging.

Students with relatively more experiences with the content were generally more active with Weblogging. However, those who were new to the field found it hard to create a topic or connect to their prior experiences as the more advanced students did. (Xie and Sharma, 844)

Again, the theme of familiarity with the technology has emerged in this article as well. Will providing students with instruction regarding blogs help to increase their comfort level, and therefore their participation? Will SUNYIT provide information to
students regarding blogging and general guidelines? Will such information increase blogging activity by SUNYIT students?

**Key Issues**

The following sections review the current assessment of key issues related to this case study.

**Marketability**

In the “Bloggers Blog” site, the site reports on “Universities Hiring Student Bloggers to Describe Life on Campus,” an article written in the “Chicago Tribune.” According to the Bloggers Blog site, the article examined how “The colleges are using the student bloggers as a marketing tool to help bring in new students.”

The college officials interviewed in the article stated that they do not provide a contract or list of guidelines to the student bloggers that participate in blogging for the university, but they do have a screening process and a meeting with student bloggers about expectations in advance.

**Usability and Personalization**

Jakob Nielson, widely considered a formative expert in all things regarding usability, publishes (among many other things) a bi-weekly column on current issues in usability. In an October 2005 column, Nielson weighed in on blog usability, with the column “Weblog Usability: The Top Ten Design Mistakes.” While some may disagree with the main points of the column, it does serve as a rough guideline to follow. Nielson goes in to detail on the following issues:
• No author biographies
• No author photo
• Nondescript posting titles
• Links don’t say where they go
• Classic hits are buried
• The calendar is the only navigation
• Irregular publishing frequency

In addition to the top ten design mistakes that Nielson describes, the university blog space has to consider the audience of the blog space. If the blog space is designed for recruiting purposes, then the audience would be identified as prospective students, or teenagers, the age group this research is focused on. Nielson also wrote a column in January of 2005 “Usability of Websites for Teenagers.” While the column does not focus on blogs specifically, it does introduce topics to consider when constructing an online space for teenagers. Not only are teenagers the primary audience for a university blog space for recruiting purposes, but the majority are web savvy. According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project, 87% of U.S. teenagers are online (as of July, 2005) (Lenhart, 2). Nielson’s company conducted a study of teens using the web and found outcomes that help to improve internet usability for teens.

In the “Usability of Websites for Teenagers,” Nielson explains some common misconceptions about teenagers and the web. According to the studies, teenagers are
not “superior web geniuses who can use anything a site throws at them.” In fact, the results showed a success rate of only 55% when teens were asked to complete a task on a site, without assistance. The poor performance is attributed to “insufficient reading skills, less sophisticated research strategies, and a dramatically lower patience level.” (Nielson, 3)

The study also found that teenagers were drawn to graphic-driven sites, but not sites with overly-used graphics. Teens are looking for a “relatively modest, clean design.” (Nielson, 3)

According to Nielson the following interactive features were rated highest during the study:

- Online quizzes
- Forms for providing feedback or asking questions
- Online voting
- Games
- Features for sharing pictures or stories
- Message boards
- Forums for offering or giving advice
- Features for creating a website or otherwise adding content

**Problem Questions**

The goal of this case study is to provide an answer to the main research question, while the issue sub-questions will help to provide a more thorough analysis of the main research question.
Main Research Question

How Can a University Approach the Construction of a Blog Space for the Campus Community For Use as a Recruiting Tool?

Issue Sub-questions

- What is the process of introducing new technology at SUNYIT?
- What policies are in place to support a blog space?
- Will the university have a select set of students to act as student bloggers, or will the blog space be open to the entire campus community?
- How can SUNYIT socially construct a blog space to successfully market SUNYIT to prospective students
Section 3: Methods

Data Collection

To support the qualitative case study, a variety of research methods were employed to capture emerging themes. Refer to Table 1 for a detailed account of the methods used to collect data. Interviews, observations, questionnaires, a presentation and a thorough literature review were done.

Table 1 – Data Collection Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Web sites</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Master</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Designer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group/Q&amp;A</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Articles</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A focus of this case study was the development team behind the construction of the SUNYIT blog space. It was important to understand what the process was in constructing a blog space in order to see how that space was eventually constructed. Wesley Dean, SUNYIT web master, was an early primary contact, as he constructed the code for which the blog space would reside. Lynne Browne, Dean’s colleague, is the SUNYIT web coordinator responsible for the design of all SUNYIT official web sites.
The third interview, Daniel Murphy, is the Vice President of Resource Development, provided a perspective from the administration’s point of view regarding the blog space project.

Of the 152 websites observed, 11 of the university websites had a blog space used for recruitment purposes. See Table 2 for the results of the analyzed websites. The data analyzed was:

- How many clicks to reach the blog space?
  Analyzing how many clicks to reach the blog space help to learn how public the blog space was. If the blog space was accessible from the front page of the university’s website it is a high priority than a blog space that takes four clicks to reach.

- How many bloggers participate?
  Analyzing the amount of bloggers participating in the blog space help to learn how active the blog space is at the university. If only one or two students participate it is not considered to be as active as those blog spaces with more students participating.

- Known blogger policy?
  Analyzing whether the university had a policy accessible from the website would help to learn how that university approached the construction of the blog space.

- Study abroad blogs present?
  Analyzing whether there were study abroad blogs were present helped to learn how far the university was willing to get involved with the blog space.
Assumedly, if there were study abroad blogs, the university was interested in using the blog space to “advertise” another facet of the university.

- Can anyone in the campus community start a blog space?

The last item included in Table 2 was critical in the data collection, and helped to define an important theme in the research. None of the universities analyzed hosted a blog space that was open to the entire campus community. This was significant, as it demonstrates a restricted blog space as being present on all of the universities in New York State, except for SUNYIT.

Of the 12 university websites with a blog space, the bloggers were introduced as a special university blogger, to help the prospective student gain a unique “insider” perspective into what student life was like at that university. If the universities did have an open blog space for all of the university community, it was not accessible from the public university website. See Table 2 for details.
Table 2 – New York States Universities with a Blog Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA ANALYZED</th>
<th>SUNY New Paltz</th>
<th>Alfred University</th>
<th>Clarkson University</th>
<th>Colgate University</th>
<th>College of Mount Saint Vincent</th>
<th>The Culinary Institute of America</th>
<th>Hartwick College</th>
<th>Houghton College</th>
<th>Pace University</th>
<th>Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute</th>
<th>SUNY Buffalo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many clicks to reach blog space?</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many bloggers participate?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5†</td>
<td>4**</td>
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<td>Known blogger policy?</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study abroad blogs?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can anyone in the campus community start a blog?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The culinary institute has one blog that select student contributors can post to. There is not a blogger repository to quantify.
† Blogs are photo blogs and podcasts, specifically.
** Two students from the New York City campus; two students from the Pleasantville campus.

The author introduced the SUNYIT blog space and gathered feedback from the campus community on the components of the SUNYIT blog space. Seven members of the faculty and staff and 1 student attended. The presentation provided valuable feedback regarding how the campus community defined a blog space as and what they hoped the blog space could do for them. See Appendix A for the questionnaire that was filled out by attendees.

Presentation attendees voiced an interest in what blogging was as a primary reason for attending the presentation. One student attended, and the rest were either faculty or staff from SUNYIT. Several of the respondents replied that they were hoping to learn how they could use the SUNYIT blog space to help promote their function at
SUNYIT. Most had heard of blogging before, but weren’t clear about what the SUNYIT blog space purpose or future direction was.

All interviews conducted began with a review of the ethics protocol form (Appendix B.) The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and they could choose not to participate at any time. Participants were asked identical questions, which are outlined in the Interview Protocol form, found in Appendix C.

The Case Study

A case study was used as the basis of data collection and research, as the research was based at SUNYIT and the process in which a blog space was constructed. Further, the research focused on this institution for a specific, bounded, period of time when the university launched a blog space for the campus community. Creswell states that a case study “…provides an in-depth study of this “system” [bounded system] based on a diverse array of data collection materials, and the research situates this system or cases within its larger “context” or setting.” (Creswell, 249).

The author completed a case study to better understand how institutions approach the construction of a new technology, in this case, a blog space, for use as a marketing tool. SUNYIT plans to use a blog space to help recruit students. How can universities approach the construction of this technology to aid in recruitment?
According to Creswell in “Qualitative Research Inquiry and Research Design,” a case study often presents “the problem, the context, the issues, and the ‘lessons learned’.” In this case study, the problem, context, issues and lessons learned are all built around observations, interviews and documentation about SUNYIT and the construction of a campus community blog space.
Section 4: Results

Analysis of Data

The type of data collected ranges from interviews to questionnaires to university website observations. The first type of data to be analyzed was university websites. More detailed analyses of the SUNY New Paltz website is offered here, as SUNY New Paltz is the university that SUNYIT plans on using as a model for the SUNYIT recruitment blog space.

University Website Observations

Websites were observed from a comprehensive list of links to accredited colleges and universities that the University of Texas at Austin put together. The list of colleges and universities include regionally-accredited institutions of higher learning in the United States. Website observations included 152 colleges and universities in New York State. Eleven of the 152 websites analyzed had a blog space for prospective students to learn more about that college or university culture. None of those colleges and universities that had a blog space for prospective students also offered an “open” blog space for the entire campus community, unless it was hosted on an intranet site not visible by the general public.

A more detailed analysis of the SUNY New Paltz website is offered in this section. SUNY New Paltz drafted a blog space policy that was approved by SUNY Central (the governing board for all SUNY schools).
Figure 4 (NP Bloggers: The Official SUNY New Paltz current student blog, newpaltz.edu) shows the front page of the SUNY New Paltz blog space. The blog space is accessible from the front page of the SUNY New Paltz website via the “npbloggers” link. The SUNY New Paltz blog space provides a forum for current students to blog about their SUNY New Paltz experience. According to Lynne Browne, the SUNYIT web coordinator, the SUNY New Paltz bloggers were hand picked from a pool of “student ambassadors”; a group of students who provide tours of the campus to prospective students. All participants signed a contract with SUNY New Paltz prior to starting their own blog space on the SUNY New Paltz site. See Figure 5 - 7 (Blogging for the Official SUNY New Paltz Web Site) for portions of the information packet given to SUNY New Paltz students. Lynne Browne obtained the SUNY New Paltz information packet when researching how SUNY New Paltz started the “npbloggers” site.
Figure 4 – SUNY New Paltz Blog Space
The guidelines in the contract the SUNY New Paltz students sign include the following:

- Definitions of blogs and blogging
- Blogging: A Writers Guide
- SUNY New Paltz Blogging Guidelines and Tips (includes contract)
- WordPress User Guide (software used to produce blogs on the SUNY New Paltz site)

**SUNY New Paltz Blogging Guidelines & Tips**

“A cardinal rule of blogging is this: post as though everyone you know will read your web log, because chances are very good that they will.”

-Gothamist.com

There are two types of bloggers:

- **npbloggers**: official student bloggers that are undergraduate students taking classes on the SUNY New Paltz campus
- **abroadbloggers**: Study Abroad program participants selected to blog from abroad

Understand that everything you write will be published to the Web and will be accessible to anyone accessing the site.

Therefore:

---

Figure 5 – SUNY New Paltz Policy Packet, page 1
Blogging 101 (Kari Chisholm)

So, an elected official recently asked me for some advice on starting his own blog. Here’s my tips - and they'd apply to anyone trying to launch a thought leadership blog: organization presidents, CEOs, candidates, etc.

- **Keep the tone and voice personal.** There's nothing worse than an 'official' blog that reads like a stack of press releases - or has been flattened and dried out by the communications office. It should be your voice. Don’t forget to be funny.
- **Write it yourself.** That'll help maintain the tone, and it’ll also help ensure that you're never in that awkward place of not knowing what you 'wrote'. If you want to include other voices, that’s good, but have them write over their own names, too -- either as guest bloggers or regular contributors.
- **Post daily,** or as close to daily as possible. People who are blog readers tend to surf down a list every day. If you're static, they'll stop visiting.
- **Keep your posts short and sweet.** Never write six paragraphs when one pointed sentence will do.
- **Vary the content.** Along with ruminations on policy stuff, post your reflections on things you do outside the building - especially informal stuff, like art walks, street
Requirements for reward:
- Must fulfill required number of posts
- Must comply with above listed guidelines
- Must stay currently enrolled as matriculated full-time undergraduate student

BLOGGER AGREEMENT:

I have read and agree to all of the guidelines set forth above.

I will be an (circle one): abroadblogger npblogger

Reward offered: ____________________________________________

Equipment loaned, if any: ______________________________________

I agree to begin blogging on ________________________________ Date

I agree to end blogging on ________________________________ Date

_________________________________________ Date

Student signature

_________________________________________ Date

Blogger administrator

_________________________________________ Date

Blogger administrator

_________________________________________ Date

Figure 7 – SUNY New Paltz Policy, Student Contract
SUNY New Paltz has 7 participants blogging about their daily New Paltz experience. The blog space also has a Study Abroad blog space in which 3 students participate, and one study abroad recruitment coordinator.

**Additional Analysis**

Among the other colleges and universities analyzed with a blog space, several similarities exist. All of the colleges and universities with a blog space presented to prospective students were authored by a select few students enrolled in that college or university. The rest of this section offers a closer look in to the other 10 colleges and universities analyzed.

**Alfred University**

The Alfred University website offers an area devoted to what they call Freshman Journals. While the journals do offer postings in reverse chronological order, there is no ability to post comments to the blogs. See Figure 8 (Alfred University: Real Life: Freshmen, alfred.edu.)
Real Life: Online Journals of AU Freshmen

Jessica

*Only one week left to go... wow!*
April 30, 2006
Tonight is my last Sunday night here at Alfred for the year. In one week I will be on my way home, already!

Helen

*The Alfies*
April 30, 2006
This past Friday night was the Alfies and they were so much fun! My friends Kathleen, Shane and Josh all preformed in the show and it was so much fun to watch them.

Stephen

*It is almost over*
April 30, 2006
It seems like only a few weeks ago, that I was moving in.

Figure 8 – Alfred University Freshman Journals
Clarkson University

Clarkson University offers a blog space with a brief introduction to the Clarkson student bloggers. Clarkson provides an introduction to the blogs, which is posted on the front page of the blog space:

**Student Blogs**

*Looking for the inside scoop on what life at Clarkson is really like?*

*Read the blogs of the students below and experience day-to-day life on campus from a student point of view. A blog — short for "Web log" — is a page where users keep a chronological journal of their experiences. Check back often, as our student bloggers regularly update their journals and photos.*

*(As of May 5, 2006, many of our bloggers are away for the summer at jobs or internships, so their blog postings will be more sporadic. Watch for many new blogs when fall classes begin August 28, 2006.)*

Clarkson University offers eight student blogs, ranging from freshmen to seniors.

See Figure 9 (Clarkson University – The Clarkson Experience – Student Blogs, clarkson.edu)
Figure 9 – Clarkson University Blog Space
Colgate University

Colgate University’s blog space, like Alfred University is, offers a blog space featuring freshmen students. The front page of Colgate University’s blog space provides a brief introduction, then a repository of all of the recent blog postings from the 4 student bloggers. Colgate’s introduction follows:

*Welcome to 'gatelif e, a blog by first-year students at Colgate University who will be sharing their experiences with you throughout the year.*

Figure 10 shows an example of the Colgate University blog space (Blogs and Journals, colgate.edu.)
Figure 10 – Colgate University Blog Space
The College of Mount Saint Vincent offers two links for prospective students to visit; either an Online Chat or Student Blogs powered by Chat University. When a prospective student clicks on the link to student blogs, another webpage is launched to the College of Mount Saint Vincent chat university website. Readers can click on one of the five student blog pages to read a brief introduction about the blogger, then click on a link to that student’s blog (see Figure 11 [College of Mount Saint Vincent Blog, mount saintvincent.edu]).
Figure 11 – College of Mount Saint Vincent Blog Space
The Culinary Institute of America takes a slightly different approach to their blog space. Students post to a blog repository, once approved. There isn’t a link to post if you are part of the wider campus community. Some of the blog participants have posted multiple times (see Figure12 [Insight from the Inside, ciachef.edu].)
The Rhetorical Cheesecake Factory - Part I

Student Contributor: David Pflum
Associate Degree in Culinary Arts

My Dad loves attention. It can come from someone noticing a handcrafted Adirondack chair in the corner: “Oh, isn’t that chair gorgeous? It took me a solid 100 hours to build.” Or it can be about his 1974 Toyota Landcruiser he’s been reconstructing since July 2002: “Oh, you like cars? I have to show you this project I’ve been working on for the past couple months.” My father’s incessant segues leading to conversations about his pet projects are more predictable than an Emirali Lagasse “Bam!”

When I was younger, however, the hobby that dad most enjoyed discussing was his cooking. We hosted enough dinner parties during my middle school years that our family rivaled the likes of Ina Garten and her obsessive insistence. Dad whipped up mediocre pastas, dried-out grilled chicken, and unseasoned stir-fry as a pathetic attempt to please his guests.

Figure 12 – Culinary Institute of America Blog Space
Hartwick College

Hartwick College, like the College of Mount Saint Vincent, offers a link to the blog space via Chat University. There are three participants, the first one being the assistant director of admissions. The other two are Hartwick College students. See Figure 13 for the Hartwick College blog space on the chat university website (Hartwick College Blog, hartwick.edu.)
What do you like most about Hartwick College?

Cara  Elizabeth  Ryan

BLOG  Definition: to author an online diary or chronology of thoughts
Usage: blogged, blogging; blogger n;

Figure 13 – Hartwick College Blog Space
Houghton College offers a blog space of podcasts and photo blogs, specifically. The Houghton College blog space offers the following introduction to the blog space:

*Life at its best, its worst and its in-between....*

*Life in the dorm, life in the classroom, life on the weekends, life studying abroad.* We've asked 5 students to portray their life at Houghton to you via the mediums of photoblogs and podcasts. Three of our students are on our main campus in Houghton, NY; two are studying abroad on Houghton's programs in London and Australia.

*These are unedited, uncensored accounts of life through the lens and in the words of a few of our students.*

*Take a look around, and come back often to see and hear the latest! Click on a photo below to get started!*

Additionally, the Houghton College blog space provides a definition for Photoblogs and Podcasts:

**Photoblog:** A blog is an online journal; a **photoblog** is an online journal loaded with pictures! Our students will be chronicling their daily life at Houghton on a photoblog for the world to see.

**Podcast:** A **podcast** is an online audio journal. Our podcasts aren't professionally produced radio shows, they are *informal* chats with our students talking about their life at Houghton.

There is also a disclaimer at the bottom of the blog space that reads “The opinions expressed in these blogs and podcasts are those of our students and may not represent the views of the college; these podcasts and blogs are not censored. They are the real deal!” Houghton College appears to be trying to convince the prospective student that by watching or viewing the blogs that they will be getting a *true* prospective of the Houghton College experience. The fact is, however, that the students that participate in the blog space are restricted to those that are “advertised” on the Houghton College blog.
space. If it truly was the “real deal” the entire campus community would be able to participate as well (see Figure 14 for the Houghton College blog space [Life @ Houghton: Podcasts and Photoblogs by Current Students, houghton.edu].)
Figure 14 – Houghton College Blog Space

Photoblog
A blog is an online journal; a photoblog is an online journal loaded with pictures! Our students will be chronicling their daily life at Houghton on a photoblog for the world to see.

Podcast
A podcast is an online audio journal. Our podcasts aren't professionally produced radio shows, they are informal chats with our students talking about their life at Houghton.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in these blogs and podcasts are those of our students and may not represent the views of the college; these podcasts and blogs are not censored. They are the real deal!
Pace University

Pace University has numerous locations, including downtown and midtown Manhattan, Pleasantville, Briarcliff, White Plains, Hudson Valley, and a location in China. The University offers a blog space from two of their locations: New York City (Manhattan) and Pleasantville. The university has the following introduction to the blog space:

Welcome to our blogs, we're glad you stopped by. We decided to create this site for you, the "prospective student"--that's a fancy university term for "interested high school student"--to give you a glimpse of what the college life is like here at Pace.

Sure, the catalogs and program descriptions are great reading material and all, but does "Applied liberal learning is emphasized through an experience-based education encompassing practical application in the classroom, service learning, and internships," give you any idea of what your next four years here are going to be like? Not really. So here we are, four students on two different campuses, sharing our impressions of the Pace life.

Yes, Pace seems to pop up everywhere. There are campuses in downtown and midtown Manhattan, Pleasantville, Briarcliff, White Plains, and the Hudson Valley. Oh yes, and some students get their degree in China. But we undergrads tend to hang out on the downtown New York City or Pleasantville campuses... although China would be pretty cool.

What's the difference between New York City and Pleasantville you ask? Well, you can take a virtual tour on the home page, or you can follow our lives throughout the year and see what we think about it all.

Here's how it works. Click on one of us or a campus. Read our blogs, get to know us, and have a good time.

Oh and one more thing--these blogs are our opinions, not the University's.

Pace University, unlike the others analyzed, has chosen to explicitly state that the blog space is tailor-made for the “…’prospective student’ - - that’s a fancy term for
‘interested high school student’ to give you a glimpse of what the college life is really like here at Pace.”

Pace University has also chosen to offer a disclaimer about the opinions of the postings in the blog space being of the students, not the University. See Figure 15 for the front page of the Pace University blog space (Pace University – Student Blogs, pace.edu.)
Welcome to our blogs, we're glad you stopped by. We decided to create this site for you, the "prospective student"—that's a fancy university term for "interested high school student"—to give you a glimpse of what the college life is like here at Pace.

Figure 15 – Pace University Blog Space
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI)

The RPI blog space is accessible through the Student Life section of the website. Brief introductions to the student bloggers are offered on the right side of the page, and when the prospective student clicks on one of the blogger’s pictures they are sent to the official blog space for that student blogger. From there, the prospective student can navigate through the blog space, with a choice of six bloggers (see Figure 16 [RPI: Student Life and Experience, rpi.edu.] )
The profile of Rensselaer’s latest class reflects students with that strong desire to learn, who are ready to study hard and move to a higher level of independence and success.

But they also should be ready to enjoy the full Rensselaer student experience and have fun — on campus and off.

**Variety**

The Princeton Review recently ranked Rensselaer #3 on their "More To Do on Campus list." From first-run movies, to dances, sports, and parties, to 150 clubs, sports, and organizations, students can participate in events and activities for nearly every interest. There are also countless opportunities to just hang out with friends and to make new friends.

**Arts**

*"Rensselaer is..."*
Thematic Analysis

As the data was analyzed and categorized, these themes emerged as regards to blog spaces and recruiting.

1. Marketability
2. Usability
3. Personalization
4. Restricted Blog Space

A brief overview of these themes follows with a more in-depth review in Section 6: Conclusions.

Marketability

The initial purpose of creating a blog space at SUNYIT was to use the blog space specifically for recruiting purposes. The marketability of such a space was paramount when the possibility of the blog space was first discussed. According to the SUNYIT web coordinator, Lynne Browne, SUNYIT was looking for a fresh idea on how to recruit students by giving them a look at what every day life was like for SUNYIT students. Using the SUNY New Paltz blog space as a guide, Browne, along with her colleagues in the admissions office, felt that a blog space was the right choice to help market SUNYIT to young prospective college students.

Usability

Creating a usable blog space for recruitment purposes is necessary for the blog space to be effective. As cited in the Current Assessment section, Jakob Nielson offers a number of guidelines for creating a usable blog space (Weblog Usability: The Top Ten Design Mistakes). In theory, if a blog space is constructed to be usable it will be more
effective, and in the case of universities using the space as a marketing tool, it will be more successful as well.

**Personalization**

Another theme that emerged during data analysis was the importance of personalization in a college blog space. During the interview process, the SUNYIT web coordinator stated that one of the reasons it occurred to her to have SUNYIT start a blog space was the importance of giving prospective students a look at what the real SUNYIT experience would be like. According to Browne, prospective students wanted to feel like they were getting a piece of real information from real students – not just what the university wanted them to see in a brochure.

**Restricted Blog Space**

Of the eleven blog spaces analyzed none had an open, unrestricted blog space for the campus community. The very perception of a blog space is one of an open forum, one in which those in academia can quickly and easily share ideas and concepts (Farrell, 3). If colleges and universities are restricting their blog space to a select few students to blog, is it *really* a blog space? SUNYIT is the only university in New York State to offer an open blog space to the entire campus community.

**Description of the Case and Its Context**

According to Technorati, a blogosphere tracking company, the blogosphere doubles in size every six months (Burns, 1). The popularity of the blogosphere, particularly with incoming college freshman, has skyrocketed, according to a July, 2005 Pew Internet study, which found that close to 9 out of every 10 teens in the United States were using the Internet (Lenhart, 2). As one of the primary ways to gather information,
the SUNYIT web coordinator recognized that there was a need for SUNYIT to be connected through the blogosphere to prospective students.

SUNYIT underwent a redesign of its website in February, 2005 (Basi-Raab, 47) in part in an effort to appeal to prospective students. Lynne Browne, the SUNYIT Web Coordinator, felt that the site might be even more appealing with a blog space for prospective students.

The first step in creating a blog space at SUNYIT was to see if the idea was a viable option. Browne contacted Wesley Dean, the SUNYIT Webmaster, who would be responsible for constructing the blog space. Dean constructed the blog space, but it presented new issues for SUNYIT, not all of which were covered in current University policy. Those issues include the differences between a blog space and a website, such as immediacy of blog postings and comments, other sites linking to the blog space, and who can post to the SUNYIT blog space, as producers as well as those who can post comments. Dean was tasked with drafting a new policy. See Figure 17 for a process diagram for development of new policies at SUNYIT.
Figure 17 – SUNYIT Policy Creation Process
Once Browne discovered that the blog space was a viable option, she began gathering information from SUNY New Paltz regarding their existing blog policy. Browne wanted to make sure SUNYIT was following the same process that SUNY New Paltz had already established, as Browne wanted to get SUNY Central approval, just as SUNY New Paltz had. While Browne was information gathering, Dean “built” a preliminary or “beta” blog test space and made it available to the campus community, with a call for feedback regarding what features the campus community would like to see in the new SUNYIT blog space.

SUNYIT is in a unique position in the college recruitment process because in 2003 it changed from a two-year, upper division university to a four-year university. As a result, the University had a critical need to reach out to prospective college freshman. SUNYIT is hoping that the blog space can be used as a recruiting tool to help to increase exposure to its prospective student audience.

How can SUNYIT socially construct a blog space for recruiting purposes? Is an open blog space to the campus community an effective way to reach out to prospective students?

The goal of this case study is to examine how a university can socially construct a blog space for the sole purpose of recruiting prospective students. By gathering information and examples from existing university blog spaces, and through the application of theory, the university can socially construct a successful recruiting blog space.
Section 5: Findings

Two theories can be applied to the social construction of a blog space at SUNYIT: sense-making and organizational culture. They can help to understand this case study and the steps needed to socially construct a blog space for recruiting purposes at SUNYIT.

Sense-Making, Blogs and SUNYIT

Brenda Dervin developed the theory of Sense-Making in 1972. The theory of sense-making has four basic concepts:

1. A situation in time and space which defines the context in which information problems arise
2. A gap, identifying the difference between the contextual situation and the desired situation.
3. Bridge: closing the gap between the situation and the outcome
4. Outcome, or consequences

Refer to Figure 18 for what Dervin calls the “Sense-Making Triangle”.

In the case of SUNYIT, the Sense-Making theory can be applied in the need to establish a blog space for recruiting purposes. Refer to Figure 19.
Within SUNYIT, the Sense-Making process can be applied in the need for an increase in enrollment (situation in a time/place). The gap is the absence of a blog space, the bridge is the social construction of a blog space, and the outcome is a blog space for recruiting purposes. To socially construct the blog space this research will also look at their organizational culture, which is discussed next.

**Organizational Culture, Blogs and SUNYIT**

To understand how SUNYIT can socially construct a blog space for recruiting purposes, it is helpful to apply organizational structure to help define how SUNYIT approaches new technologies and applications. At the start of data analysis it appeared that SUNYIT’s organizational culture was that of collegiality. A collegial culture is defined as “All of the organization’s members are equal partners who share full responsibility for the organization” (Kahn, 1). It became apparent, however, after interviewing key members of the organization, that the culture was more of a
Participatory culture, which is defined as where “power is shared, the skill and information of all is relevant” (Kahn, 1). When asked what the policy creation process was at SUNYIT, Dan Murphy, Vice President of Resource Development, walked through the process, but when asked additional questions about the process, it wasn’t as clear. An excerpt of the interview follows. The interview begins with Murphy’s response to a question about giving a draft of a policy to the executive council, and then the likelihood of a policy being accepted and approved by the council:

**Murphy:** Generally speaking, the more buy in you get the safer ground you’re on.

**Interviewer:** But that’s up to the discretion of the person drafting the policy?

**Murphy:** Well, probably…as a very early stage, but I think once it gets on the agenda of the executive council, I think at that point, um, that group may or may not insist that other constituents look at it.

Murphy’s response about whether or not the party responsible for drafting the policy needed to get additional input, and where to get that input was not clear. It started to become apparent that there are not firm guidelines in place for those drafting a new policy at SUNYIT.

**Interviewer:** Okay – but they are the final step?

**Murphy:** Pretty much, yeah

**Interviewer:** They could either approve it or say ‘please go back and get this input’

**Murphy:** I would say so – they would seem to be the gatekeepers. I know that when they were trying to change the uh the email policy, it was first propagated by ITS and I don’t know who wrote a lot of it, I think Scott Miller had a hand in a lot of it, but it went through several revisions, and um, it was at the executive council level where eventually it was approved. And it was forwarded to the president for his signature.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so now would it be typical, for say, this blog policy, Wes is drafting it, he gets input from, say, Lynne, and maybe ITS or something, um would he just go
directly to the executive council from there, or would he clear it with you first and would you bring it to the executive council? Is there a certain level at which someone brings it to the executive council?

**Murphy**

Yeah, again, I don’t think there’s actually you are bringing up good questions we don’t have “policy policies”, that I know of… I would think he would probably give it to me, and I would read it first, and I might share it with some of my directors and the like, because it does involve the political side of the public sphere, and John Swann would have a look at it, and I suppose Lynne would, and then at the point where we felt comfortable with it, probably refer it to the executive committee. and have them take a look at it

Again, Murphy points out that the questions have led him to think more closely about the lack of procedures SUNYIT has in place when creating policies. Murphy’s response to the policy creation process at SUNYIT helps to support the definition of a participatory culture.

**Interviewer:**

But they will look at it if it comes directly from Wes?

**Murphy**

Yes, yeah – and they may even send it back to me and say “oh did you see this yet ..again depending on what the topic is

“but that’s an interesting point you know – I’ll raise that tomorrow – do we have a “policy” on policies

Lynne Browne described how SUNYIT approached the inception of a blog space, without an existing policy or plan in place:

**Interviewer:**

…I was a bit surprised – I asked Wes what sites he had been using as a guide for the blog space, and he didn’t use any as a guide.. he just built the software so that people can use it. So it’s definitely being approached in different ways by different people in the same department. The goals are different.

**Browne:**

The goals are very different because I’m looking at it as a marketing tool, where he has set it up as a “anybody can do this”. So, I’m gonna take a component of the open forum and structure it. See Wes is part of development, and is a technical person, and thinks technically. He will build it, and then other people will figure out how to apply the marketing aspect. And that’s why I asked if we could make this. And he was like “oh – yeah, but I’m going to make it like that…so that anyone can do it” where I am thinking marketing.

So it’s kind of a cool, see how it really happened – and so his part is more developed than my part, and that’s why I’m right now just want the word out
there – but we don’t have the documentation about what the do’s and the don’ts of blogging are, so we need to get that information dealt with. We need to figure that out – what is going to be the rules.

Browne has expressed what Figure 20 exhibits. In SUNYIT’s participatory culture there is development, but in two different directions. The marketing goal is to take what Dean has built and modify it for their goal, while Dean’s technical construction and beta blog space is already being used by the SUNYIT college community.

**Interviewer:**
So there obviously was not as established policy approaching the blog space?

**Browne:**
No. He just wrote it because he could.

**Interviewer:**
Before he wrote it did anybody say “oh we should consider policy issues” or, I mean I know in academia it is approached in sort of a different way – but did anyone bring that up?

**Browne:**
No – I don’t think so, I mean we kind of used the blanket web policy, and computer use policy, and that’s pretty much what we used. So if someone breaks the rules based on that we can kind of fit things in to that.

As stated earlier, in a participatory culture power is shared, and all skills and information is relevant, but there is no one power dictating the direction or process (refer to Figure 20).
In Figure 20 the participatory culture is shown from the SUNYIT prospective, with the technical construction (webmaster) using a pre-defined skill set and knowledge to move in one direction, while the social construction (web coordinator, or the marketing perspective) moves in the opposite direction toward a different set of skills and knowledge. Without a common goal or process, the two have moved in two very different directions based on what each sees as the ultimate goal of the blog space.
Section 6: Conclusions

Marketability

The marketability of a university blog space has been identified as a priority for the SUNYIT Web Coordinator, as SUNYIT, now a four-year university, needs to market the school to younger, more traditional students.

Refer to Figure 21 (NP Bloggers: The Official SUNY New Paltz current student blog, newpaltz.edu) for the SUNY New Paltz blog space, which focuses on marketing SUNY New Paltz as a destination of choice for prospective college students.
Figure 21 – SUNY New Paltz Blog Space - Marketability
In Figure 21 SUNY New Paltz highlights its blog space on the admissions page, with links for undergraduates and graduates to apply online. There are also links along the right side of the page to find out more information about the campus. The admissions page displays a prominent image of the SUNY New Paltz bloggers, with an easy to navigate menu system. According to Jakob Nielson, teens prefer a clean, relatively modest design (Nielson, 1). The SUNY New Paltz blog space not only offers a clean, modest design, but also does not clutter the page with unnecessary graphics.

**Usability**

The usability guidelines outlined by Jakob Nielson provide a design map of what a usable blog and website for teens should contain. Refer to Figure 22 for a portion of the SUNY New Paltz blog space (NP Bloggers: The Official SUNY New Paltz current student blog, newpaltz.edu.)
Figure 22 – SUNY New Paltz Blog page - Usability
The SUNY New Paltz blog space demonstrates many of the guidelines outlined by Nielson. The graphics are prominent, while not being overwhelming. There is an author biography and ample opportunity for navigation through not just this student’s blog space, but others as well.

In contrast, see Figure 23 (SUNY Institute of Technology - - weblogsSUNYIT, sunyit.edu) for a view of what the SUNYIT blog space composed of in May, 2006.
Figure 23 – SUNYIT Blog Space, May, 2006
The SUNYIT blog space was technically constructed prior to the application of social construction. The blog space, updated during the summer, has been changed slightly (see Figure 24 [SUNY Institute of Technology - - weblogsSUNYIT, sunyit.edu] for a view of the SUNYIT blog space in July, 2006.) There is a new graphic, and some different shading, but the SUNYIT blog space still lacks the basic components of a usable blog space. Based on the guidelines set forth by Jakob Nielson, the SUNYIT blog space would not currently appeal to prospective college students. The following design mistakes can be applied to the SUNYIT blog space, from “Weblog Usability: The Top Ten Design Mistakes” (Nielson)

1. No author biographies
2. No author photo
3. Nondescript posting titles
4. Irregular publishing frequency
Section 6: Conclusions

Figure 24 – SUNYIT Blog Space, July, 2006
Other universities examined in this qualitative analysis fit Nielson’s model (see Figure 25 for an example of the Clarkson university blog space [Clarkson University – The Clarkson Experience – Student Blogs, clarkson.edu].) Clarkson University offers a link to the blog space from the university’s front page. The blog space begins with student biographies, with a link to each blog. The page uses a clean, structured design which leads the reader’s eye to the student blog space.
Figure 25 – Clarkson University Blog Space
Colgate University also offers a prominent blog space, highlighting interesting photos and blogger biographies (see Figure 26 [Blogs and Journals, colgate.edu].)
‘gate life

Welcome to ‘gate life, a blog by first-year students at Colgate University who will be sharing their experiences with you throughout the year. Here are some helpful links:

- Colgate University
- Colgate academics
- Admission office
- Profile of Class of 2009
- Residence halls
- Clubs and organizations

Recent Posts

That busy time of year
Work, work, work, and I don’t get paid for all of it.
Continue reading "That busy time of year"

And when the dust settled...
Woo, I didn’t even realize that I had won the Battle. My apologies, especially to Lynda, who commented and I wasn’t aware of it. So, the winner was (suspenseful pause that makes you want to click the link below to read more)...
Continue reading "And when the dust settled...

Take out your laser-shooting guitars because it’s time for Battle of the Bands
Battle of the Bands! Tomorrow! Wow! And I get to work it! And astronomy class was cancelled for the holiday!
Continue reading "Take out your laser-shooting guitars because it’s time for Battle..."

Profiles

Marquita  Miguel

Tim  Helen

LaCrosse blog

- We have a big weekend coming up, heading back.
- 7:45 am Friday morning we will board...
Personalization

A blog space that is personalized appeals to teens that are looking for the current student’s perspective on the university. According to Nielson, teens are more interested in forums that are offering advice (Nielson, 2). The universities with an existing blog space contained blog pages that were highly customizable so that the blogger’s personality came through their space (see Figure 27 for an example of a personalized blog page from SUNY New Paltz [NP Bloggers: The Official SUNY New Paltz current student blog, newpaltz.edu.])
Well, I’m starting to feel better... it’s about time. 😊 I got my pictures from spring break all figured out, so here’s a bit of a narrative. Our first trip into Washington DC we went to the Smithsonian National Zoo. It was a little breezy, but the weather was relatively nice, and most of the animals were outside. 😊

Figure 27 – SUNY New Paltz, Jessica’s Blog Space
Some features of the SUNY New Paltz blog space in Figure 27 that are signs of personalization include a unique font and color, personal photos taken by the author, and an emoticon. The personalization of the student blog space seemed to be a strong trend in the existing university blog spaces.

**Restricted Blog Space**

SUNYIT is the only university in New York State to offer an open, unrestricted blog space for the campus community. Some of the benefits of blogging, as found in the literature review for this study, found that:

- Students that blog in an educational setting are increasingly using blogs as a learning environment (Oatman, 36)
- Weblogs are being used more and more in academia to share ideas and opinions in the scholarly community (Farrell, 2)
- The appeal to blogs is the “opportunity to contribute two cents to the public discourse, even if the discourse is gossip” (Oatman, 37)
- “Weblogs allow for personalization and customization by individual Webloggers. Weblogs offer a relatively convenient and easy mechanism for students to journal their learning processes, and if used appropriately this technology has the potential of facilitating reflective learning” (Xie and Sharma, 840)

Existing research suggests that the benefits for academia to introduce a blog space involve enhancing the learning experience, and making those involved in the blogging process feel more part of the university’s culture.

In addition to restricting the blog space to a select set of students, some blog spaces actually include a tag line about the blog being the “real deal” and have a
disclaimer that the student posts may not necessarily be the opinion of the college or university. By hand-selecting the students bloggers, however, the colleges and universities are in fact filtering information, as not just anyone can participate in the blog space.

Further Study and Recommendations

This qualitative research study helps to answer the question:

How can a university approach the construction of a blog space for use as a recruiting tool?

Following are assertions, arrived to after gathering and analyzing the data in this case study.

Technical vs. Social Construction

Universities that decide to pursue a blog space for the primary purpose of recruiting prospective students need to put careful consideration into the design and presentation of such a space on the web.

A blog space that is technically constructed is not an effective way to approach a tool being used for marketing purposes. Approaching the design of the SUNYIT blog space from a social construction perspective will help meet the goal of using the new blog space for recruiting purposes. The following sections explore areas that should be considered when constructing a blog space for recruiting purposes.

Research Existing Blog Space

SUNYIT should tap into existing blog space created by universities that were constructed to recruit prospective students. Much can be learned from researching other institutions that have the same ultimate goal. While creating a blog space for marketing
purposes is relatively new, it is not so new that there are no other examples of such a phenomenon.

**Blog Space Personalization**

SUNYIT should create a blog space flexible enough to allow students to personalize their entries. Research demonstrates that a personalized space is more appealing, especially to prospective students. In the “Usability of Websites for Teenagers” found, teens are more interested in a website that are forums for offering or giving advice or adding content. If some of the personality of a teen comes through the blog space it is likely to be more appealing. According to Nielson, those reading a blog “want to know who they are dealing with.”(Nielson, 2).

**Blog Space Usability**

Based on usability studies conducted by Jakob Nielson, research demonstrates the importance of careful construction of a space on the web – whether that be a traditional website or a blog space. As with any form of communication, it is crucial to design with the end user, or audience, in mind.

**Restricting Blog Space**

Based on existing research, the university needs to carefully weigh the benefits and detriments of an open blog space vs. a restricted blog space. Is the goal of recruiting students via the admissions page the primary goal of hosting a campus blog space? Perhaps the solution would be to offer a restricted blog space to the Internet and an open blog space to the campus Intranet to facilitate a blog learning environment.
Further Developments

Social construction of a blog space can be continually modified, based on an organization’s culture shifts. It is important to keep in mind the key components of a blog space design in a university setting, always keeping in mind the final target audience: prospective students.

Limitations

This case study was bounded tightly in a specific time frame, therefore further research could have been done if there was more time to research further aspects and the eventual outcome of the SUNYIT blog space. If this case study was not limited in a specific time frame, it would have been helpful to examine the final outcome of the SUNYIT blog space, and the process at which the university used to reach a final blog space.

Further Research

There are several areas in which further research could be conducted, for instance, research could examine how effective a blog space has been for university recruitment. Was there a significant increase in enrollment or interest in the university after the blog space was implemented?

It would be beneficial to widen the study to examine colleges and universities in a larger geographical area, to see if this research can be applied to other areas of the country.
Section 7: Closing Vignette

Kate had spent a month researching the colleges on her list. Out of the 50 colleges in the Northeast she had researched, only 10 had offered a student blog space for prospective students. Kate decided it would be a good time to check back on the SUNYIT website to see if anything had changed with their blog space since the first time she tried looking for information.

This time Kate saw a link to the SUNYIT blog space immediately from the college’s front page. Not only was there a visually appealing blog space with recent activity, there were links to other admission-related information from the same page. Kate was pleased to see that SUNYIT had launched the kind of blog space she was hoping to find when she began her Internet search a month ago. SUNYIT had not yet made it to the “definitely check this school out” column on her research list, but this moved it over to that column.

Kate read through some of the student blog entries on SUNYIT’s site, and was pleased to find plenty of pictures of the campus, the apartment-style dorms, and news about what was going on around campus. Kate could definitely see herself on campus, at the Campus Center, maybe even participating in the many activities held on campus.

Kate decided to post about what she found on SUNYIT’s site. After all, one of the cool things about having a blog is to link all of your readers to the other cool stuff out in the blogosphere.
Appendix A: Glossary

**Blogger** – A blogger is the author of a weblog, or blog. In the context of this case study, bloggers are often referred to as such when discussing the participants in a university blog space, for instance: “the Colgate University bloggers”.

**Blogosphere** – The blogosphere is considered to be the greater space of what a blog is a part of. A web page is to the Internet as the blog is to the Blogosphere.

**Case Study** – Qualitative research study of a single case, bounded by location, situation, and/or time.

**Policy** – A plan of action, usually by an organization, designed to help guide decisions and actions.

**Prospective Student** – a high school student that is actively researching colleges or universities to attend in the near future.

**Social Construction** – A concept within a social system that is constructed by the participants in a particular culture.

**Technical Construction** – Literal technical construction of technology; with very little social concepts considered or implemented.

**Weblog** – A weblog (or blog) is a public website in which postings are published on a regular basis, often giving readers of the blog an opportunity to reply to the posting.
Appendix B: Ethics Protocol Form

Ethics Protocol for Case Study Research
Teresa Washburn

This authorization is being requested in part to fulfill requirements of the State University of NY Institute of Technology's Human Subjects Research Review Board as well as state and federal regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research. The project involves a case study that may be used in my master's research at the SUNYIT Information Design and Technology Master's program. Excerpts or rewritten versions may also be submitted to professional journals for publication. The case study involves the procedures that administration follows to create an academic weblog at SUNYIT. The work involves participant and non-participant observations, one-on-one and group interviews, and scheduled visits.

I can be reached at 315-635-5986 (home) or 315-427-5011 (cell). I would be happy to answer any questions about the project.

I would like to assure you that as a participant in this project you have several rights.

• Your participation in these studies is entirely voluntary.
• You are free to decline to answer any question at any time,
• You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

My notes from meetings, interviews, and observations will be kept strictly confidential. Excerpts from these notes may be made part of the final thesis. Copies of the final publications will be supplied whenever possible and as requested.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that you have read its contents.

________________________________________ signed
________________________________________ printed
________________________________________ dated
Appendix C: Interview Form

INTERVIEW FORM

Interview Form  
Project: How can a university approach the construction of a blog space for use as a recruiting tool?

Time of Interview:  
Date:  
Place:  
Interviewer:  
Interviewee:  
Academic Institution: 
Position of Interviewee:  

Please keep in mind that you are free to decline to answer any question at any time, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Thank you for your participation.

Questions:

1. Why start a blog space for students and faculty at SUNY IT?

2. Once a need for a blog space was determined, what was the procedure to build such a space?

3. Was there an established policy in place prior to starting the blog space?
Appendix C: Interview Form

2. Is SUNYIT following an established academic blog space as a guide for the new blog space?

a. If yes, what sites are being used as a guide?

b. How did SUNYIT decide to follow these sites as a guide?

c. What are some features of the blog spaces on other sites that are appealing to you?

d. What are some features of the blog spaces on other sites that are unappealing to you?

a. If not, were policy issues considered?

b. If a policy was not in place, what is the policy creation process?
3. What issues surrounding creating the blog space for SUNYIT students have come up since the inception of the project?
   
a. How has SUNYIT tried to approach these issues?

4. What features does SUNYIT plan on adding into the SUNYIT blog space?

6. What do you see as the greatest challenge(s) to creating a SUNYIT blog space?

I would like to reassure you that my notes from meetings, interviews, and observations will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you very much for your participation. Your help is greatly appreciated.
Appendix D: Questionnaire

Name: ___________________________

Email Address: ___________________________

SUNYIT Brown Bag Session: Questionnaire

1. What motivated you to attend the blog brown bag session?

2. Were you aware that SUNYIT offered a blog space for students and faculty?
   If yes, how did you first hear about the blog space?

3. Do you plan on starting and maintaining a SUNYIT blog?

4. Are there any additional features you would like to see built in to the SUNYIT blog space? If so, what features?
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