

## **The implementation of a blog-based activity with prospect teachers: constraints and difficulties**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The development of the Web 2.0 in recent years has triggered the use of web-based tools like, for instance, blogs that can be used both as language development and assessment tools (García Laborda, 2013). This article addresses the difficulties that teacher trainees have when they create and manage in groups their own blogs in a fourth-year course on Didactics of the English language. A sample of blogs created by 15 students in the fourth year of a teacher training program for primary school teachers at the University of Alcalá (Spain) was analyzed qualitatively. Specifically, the usefulness of blogs, as well as the difficulties and constraints encountered by students when creating and managing a blog and the effort put into the creation of social applications in the classroom, among other items. Finally, a questionnaire was handed out to students to analyze the limitations and benefits of this tool in the classroom. The main conclusion is that the identification of the analysis of difficulty that students present during the implementation and management of a blog will provide suggestions for teachers-to-be and current university teachers in education Degrees.

Keywords: blogs; constraints; difficulties; teacher training.

### **RESUMEN**

El desarrollo de la Web 2.0 en los últimos años ha permitido la evolución y posterior uso de herramientas web como, por ejemplo, los blogs, que pueden ser usados tanto como herramientas de desarrollo como de evaluación (García Laborda, 2013). El artículo que aquí se presenta muestra las dificultades con las que aspirantes a docentes se encuentran al crear y manejar, en grupos, sus propios blogs. Para este estudio se han analizado de manera cualitativa los blogs de 15 estudiantes en el Grado de Educación Primaria de la Universidad de Alcalá y en la asignatura de Didáctica de la Lengua Inglesa. Más concretamente, se ha analizado el uso de los blogs, así como la dificultad que los alumnos y alumnas percibían durante la creación y manejo de estos y el esfuerzo dedicado a la actividad durante la duración de la asignatura, entre otros ítems. Posteriormente, se pidió a los alumnos que respondieran a un breve cuestionario acerca de las dificultades o beneficios de esta herramienta en el aula. La principal conclusión que se puede extraer de este estudio es que el análisis de la dificultad que presentan los alumnos y alumnas durante la creación y desarrollo de un blog proporcionará sugerencias acerca de su uso beneficioso para futuros docentes y actuales profesores universitarios de grados de educación.

Palabras clave: blogs; limitaciones; dificultades; formación de docentes.

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THE DEVELOPMENT of the web 2.0 has triggered the use of web-based tools in recent years, among which we can find wikis, podcasts, social networks, applications, as well as blogs. According to statistics (Gaille, 2013), although it is difficult to give an exact and reliable estimate, due to the staggered growth of the World Wide Web, there are around 152 million blogs in the world, since its appearance in the late 1990s. The academic environment has also benefited from the birth of this 2.0 technology, where blogging has become a significant way for students to communicate with teachers and classmates, as well as with other members of the academic context in which they are emerged. However, the objectives for setting up blogs vary depending on their use, need and intended audience.

When asked to give a definition of the term, a blog is technically a website in which posts, or also called entries, appear normally in chronological order and are usually updated daily or weekly. The structure that these tools present provide users and bloggers with the possibility of commenting and giving their opinion about the blog. “Blogs are easy to manage and enable students to publish their work in a chronological manner. [Besides,] they help students engage in online exchanges and promote learner autonomy” (Ahluwalia & Gupta, 2011, 29). In addition, blogs can be used for self-reflection (Nambiar & Thang, 2016), self-directed learning (van Wyk, 2018), and instructional communication (Fernandez, 2012; Thomas, 2017). Even though most authors highlight the benefits and advantages of this tool, there are others that, as Freidhoff (2008) who points out that it is also necessary to bear in mind the disadvantages or constraints of taking it to the classroom. One of these major difficulties involved is that blogs need to be constantly updated (also Baxter, 2010). They are not a matter of a one-time task but instead require dedication and devotion alike, which may result in students not being inclined to create them on their own. Miyazoe & Anderson (2010) acknowledge that although they promote constructive communication and learning, they are also dependent on the authors’ (here, the students’) cognitive and communicative style. Another disadvantage worth mentioning is the need for language proficiency (Bhavana, 2009), as most of the content will be written.

Blogs in education allow a multimodal means of communication (Colwell, 2016), which includes writing (Álvarez & Bassa, 2013; Huang, 2016; Vurdien, 2013; Wen-Shuenn, 2004), author-reader dialogical interaction (Sun & Chang, 2012) through the creation of cyber communities (Sun, 2010), reflective tools (Weatherall, 2015), collaborative activities (Álvarez & Bassa, 2013) and other modes of communication through various learning objects such as visuals and videos (Colwell, 2016; García Laborda, Giménez López & Litzler, 2018).

The creation of blogs in the classroom has a double function. On the one hand, future teachers who are assigned this type of project can have the experience of designing and implementing Web 2.0 tools and will, thus, be able to convey that experience to their students in the future (García Laborda & Magal-Royo, 2009). On the other, the exercise serves to enable them to acquire skills needed to become technologically competent

professionals so as to seize the potential of digital technologies in the classroom and develop the so-called digital competence (Redecker & Punie, 2017), which will help them acquire new technical and cognitive abilities to solve problems and situations in new digital environments, that is, help them be digitally fluent. The European Commission presented a study “for the development of educators’ digital competence in Europe” (2017, p. 7) in order to help Member States to promote this competence among students, educators and prospect educators, as well as to boost innovation in education. This study proposed 22 elementary competences organized in 6 different areas.

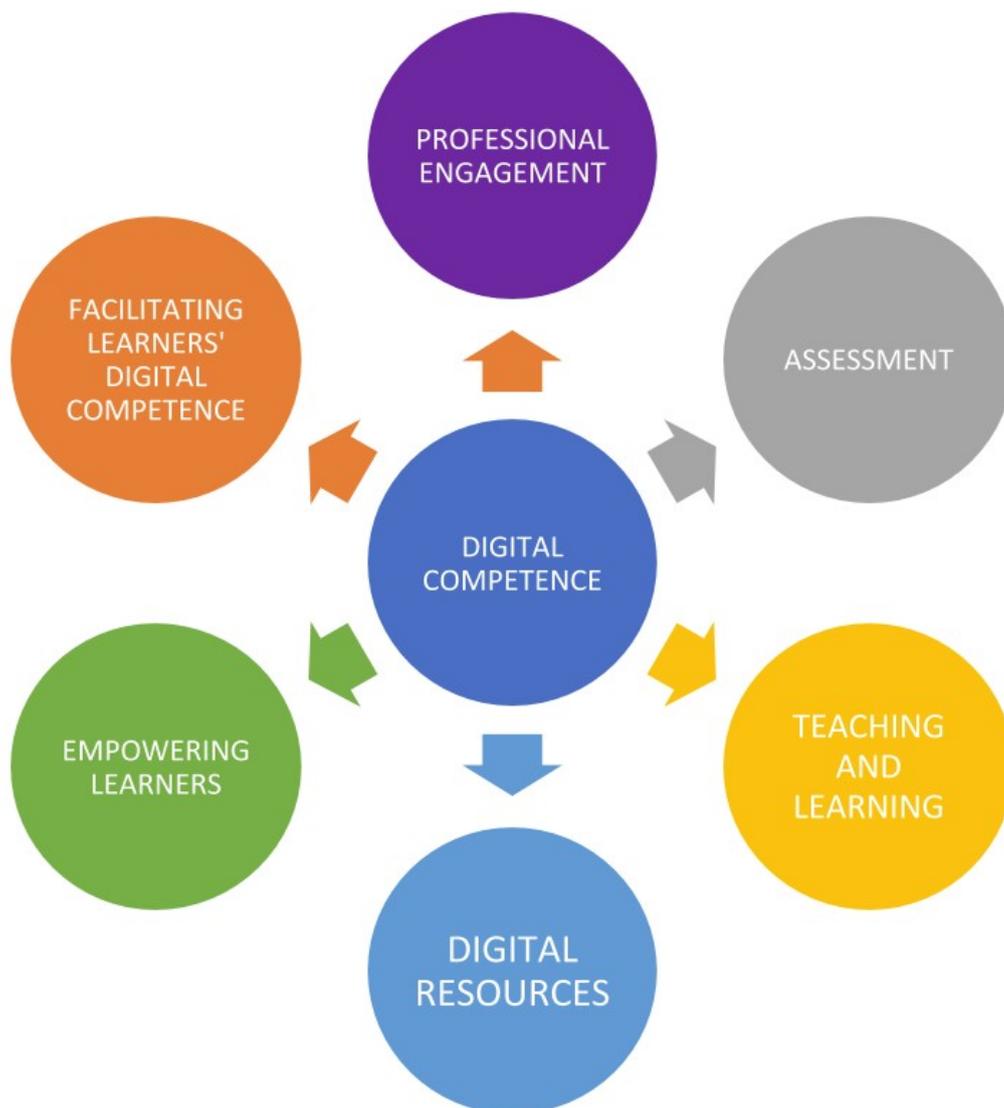
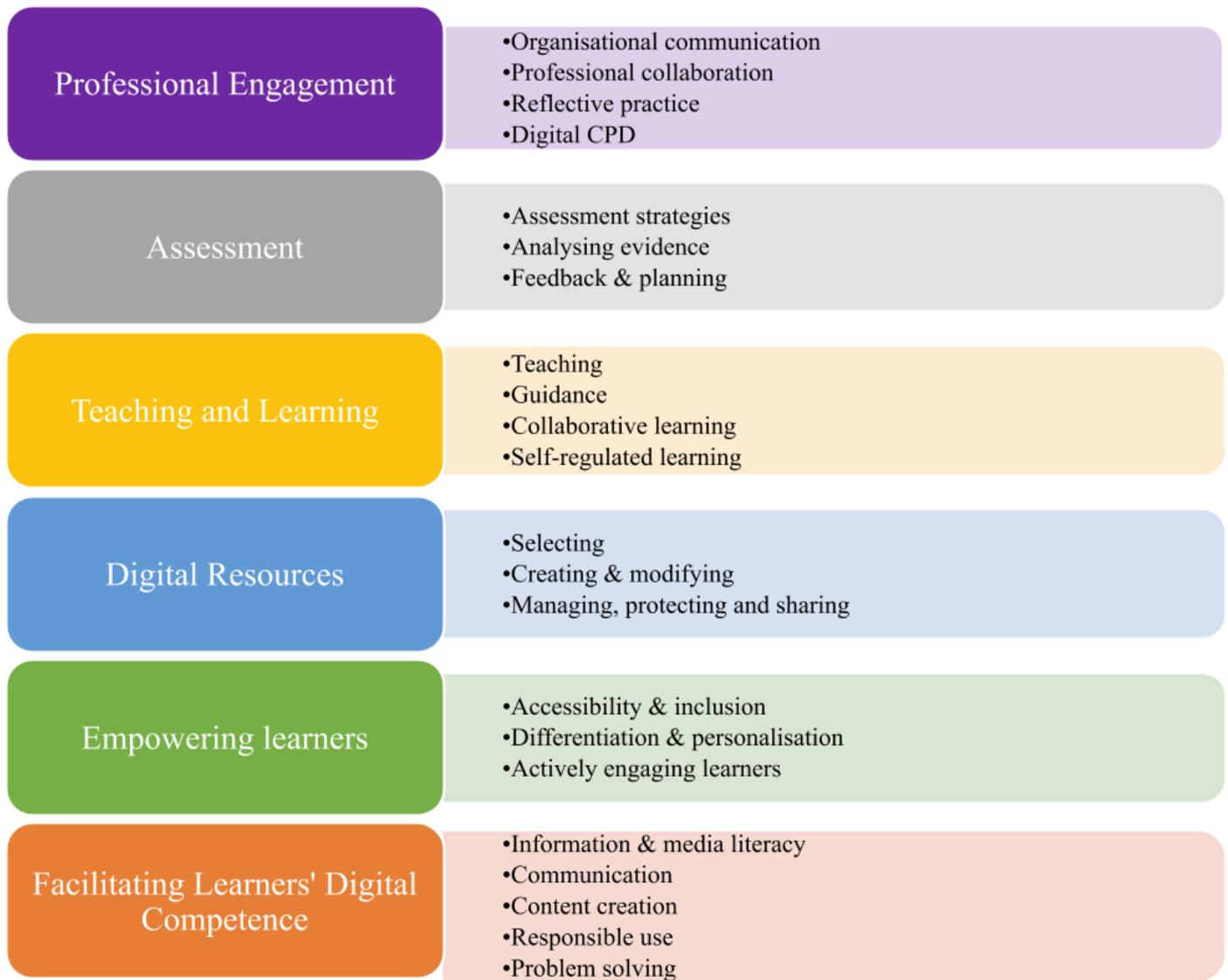


Figure 1: The digital competence and its areas (own elaboration based on Redecker and Punie, 2017)



*Figure 2: Elementary digital competences divided in areas (own elaboration based on Redecker and Punie, 2017)*

These competence stages are linked to the six proficiency levels used by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) and ranges from A1 (awareness) to C2 (innovation). As Figure 2 synthesizes, there is a commitment to present a reference framework directed towards educators at all levels of education and as members of the university academic community we are obliged to provide students with all these digital competences through the inclusion of significant activities in the classroom. The study that we here present aims at developing these six areas, due to the fact that we are (1) actively engaging students (empowering learners) in the (2) creation of content (facilitating learner's digital competence) that they can put into practice in their (3) future jobs as teachers (professional engagement), (4) assessing the activity (assessment) as part of the subject's grade, (5) working in groups (teaching and learning) and (6) selecting the information they want to publish on their blogs (digital resources).

The use of a blog-based activity in a classroom is, ultimately, a powerful tool that can have a direct impact on “students' perceptions of satisfaction and perceived impact on learning” (Ifinedo, 2017, p. 322). Active blogging can facilitate the understanding that student teachers can have of complex processes that might take place both in the classroom and outside (Luehmann & Frink, 2009). It can also facilitate management of learning on the part of primary school children by providing support knowledge (Huang & Yang, 2009) and by developing collaboration (Byington, 2011). These factors can favor the use of blogs but, in order for teacher trainees to benefit from them, they need to experience the difficulties involved in designing and actually creating them first hand.

### **Method**

As already mentioned, this article aims at describing the constraints and difficulties encountered by students when they created a group blog as part of a fourth-year course (Didactics of the English Language) on the Degree of Primary Education. The activity was included in the course syllabus as part of the teaching innovation project "Web 2.0 for teachers of English in training (UAH / EV891)," which consisted in the use of blogs to incorporate teaching content that would serve in their professional development as teachers. Fifteen students were enrolled in the course Didactics of the English Language, and they created 6 blogs in groups of 3-4 students. This activity was firstly explained in the classroom, through a ninety-minute lecture on the setting up of a blog, and was later taken outside the classroom, as students had to from the beginning of the course until its end update the blog weekly with content related to their future job as teachers of Primary Education. Moreover, each group had to access the other group's blog and write comments, suggestions or include additional resources. The main research questions were the following:

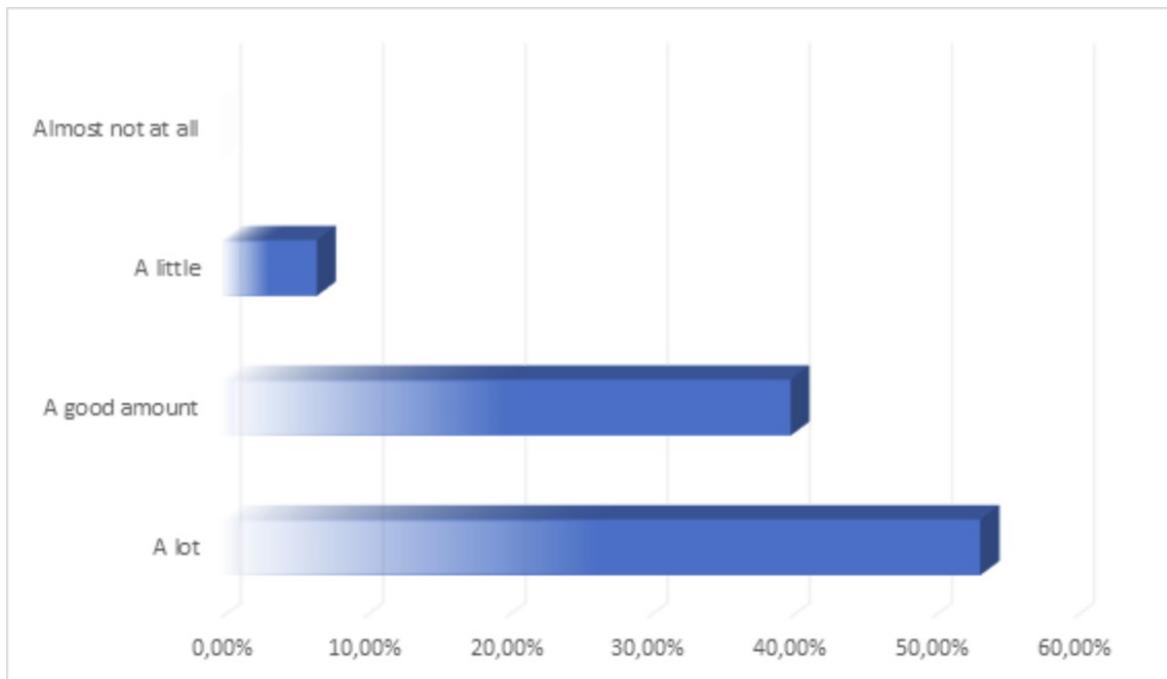
- Which do students think are the constraints when creating blogs for Primary Education?
- Which uses do blogs have according to the students?
- Will students use this type of tool once they complete their degree?
- Which aspects from the creation of blogs has been the most and least complicated?

Students responded to an eight-item questionnaire as a part of the final assessment of this course. This questionnaire was delivered through SurveyMonkey and the participants responded to it online.

### **Results**

In this chapter we will include the opinions and perceptions from fifteen students when asked about the creation of blogs. Each question will be accompanied by a graph that will show a clear overview of students' constraints.

Figure 3 shows the results obtained from “Do you consider blogs useful as part of your formation as a future teacher?”. It is worth noting that here, as in every question posed in the questionnaire, all students recorded an answer, and none skipped.



*Figure 3: Do you consider blogs useful as part of your formation as a future teacher?*

As illustrated on the graph above, categorical answers in the survey included ‘a lot’, ‘a good amount’, ‘a little’, and ‘almost not at all’. The answer with the lowest score for this question was ‘almost not at all’ with zero percent (0 students) indicating this choice. This result was followed by ‘a little’ with 6.67% (1 student), ‘a good amount’ with 40% (6 students), and finally ‘a lot’ with the remaining 53.33% (8 students). These results show that most students viewed using blogs as part of their formation as teachers as useful. In fact, 93.33% of students surveyed looked favorably upon the usage of blogs.

Figure 4 indicates results obtained from “Is it worth the effort to create social applications for your own future practice?”. As aforementioned, all students answered this question. As can be seen on the table below, options for answers here were arranged similarly to question one and included ‘yes, a lot’, ‘yes, a good amount’, ‘no, not very much’, and ‘no, too much effort’.

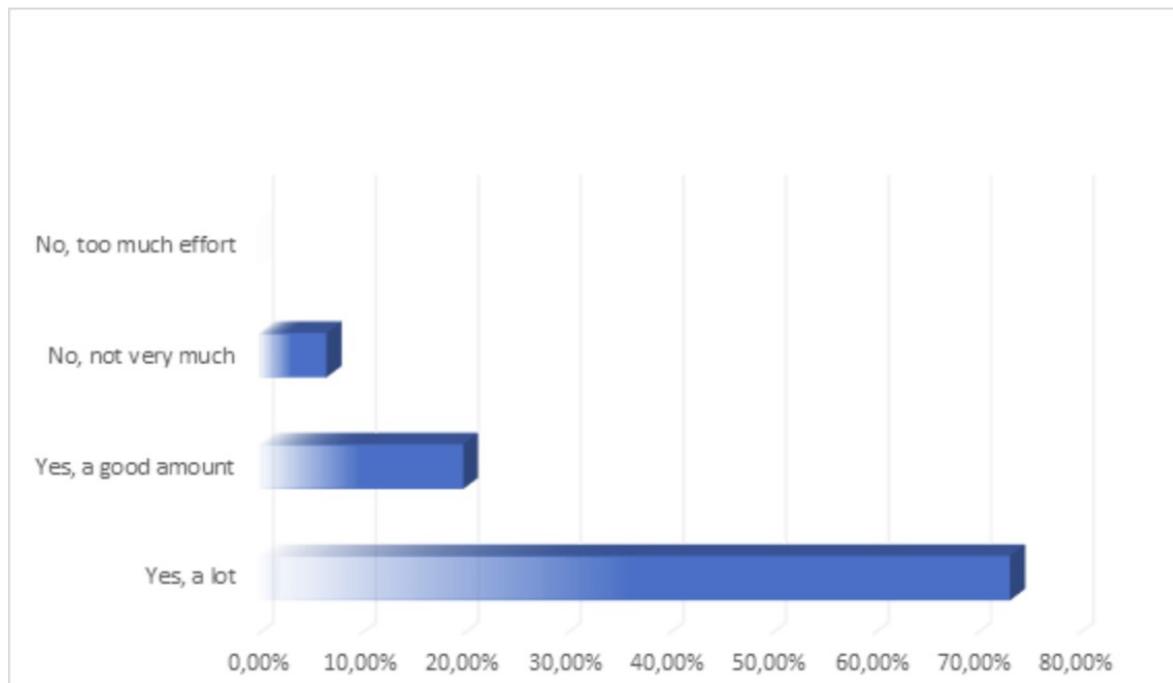
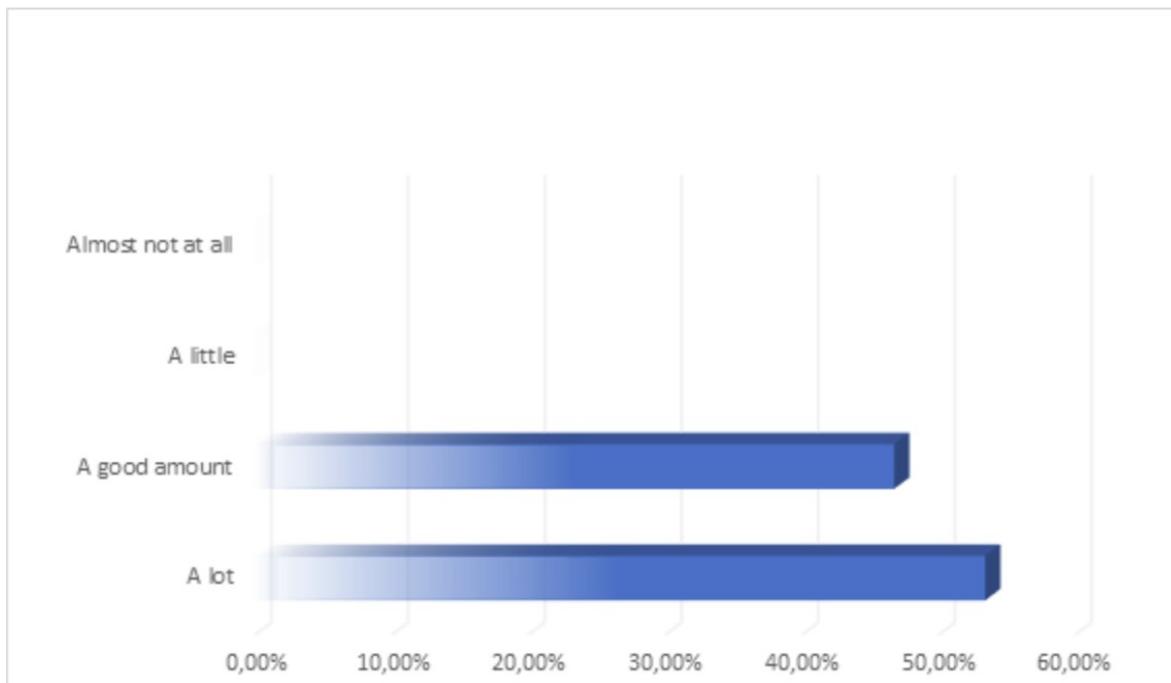


Figure 4: Is it worth the effort to create social applications for your own future practice?

Once again, zero percent (0 students) selected the response ‘no, too much effort’, thus showing that all students found expending effort in creating social applications for future use at least somewhat worth the effort. Following this result, 6.67% (1 student) indicated said effort as ‘no, not very’ useful, while 20% (3 students) indicated the effort as ‘yes, a good amount’ when referring to the usefulness of blogs. Finally, the remaining 73.33% (11 students) recorded ‘yes, a lot’ about blog usefulness. It is interesting to note here that while 73.33% of students said blogs were worth the effort in their future practice as future teachers, 53.33% responded that they were very useful during their training process. This extrapolation illustrates a 20% difference (3 students) between the answers of the two questions, and it would be useful to determine the reasoning behind the discrepancy shown.



*Figure 5: Is it reasonable to ask for this kind of work in a didactics class?*

Figure 5 indicates results obtained from “Is it reasonable to ask for this kind of work in a didactics class?”. Here, just as in Figure 3, answers included ‘a lot’, ‘a good amount’, ‘a little’, and ‘almost not at all’. As reflected in the graph, all students indicated either ‘a lot’ or ‘a good amount’, and no students responded negatively with ‘a little’ or ‘almost not at all’. This shows that all students participating felt that it was perfectly reasonable to ask for blog work in a course. This result corroborates the findings from previous questions, which indicate that most participants (over 50%) find blogs useful and worth the effort.

Figure 6 shows the results obtained from “What should blogs be used for in the formation of teachers? Indicate the three most pertinent responses.” Here, eight response options were entered, including (1) ‘to communicate themes of study in my class,’ (2) ‘to design activities that will serve my future and present primary students,’ (3) ‘to take informative tools and putting them into practice,’ (4) ‘to learn how to use new applications,’ (5) ‘to use tools in academic ways that were formally used other ways,’ (6) ‘to have fun in the classroom,’ (7) ‘to improve my writing in English,’ and (8) ‘to develop ideas on how to improve my teaching skills’.

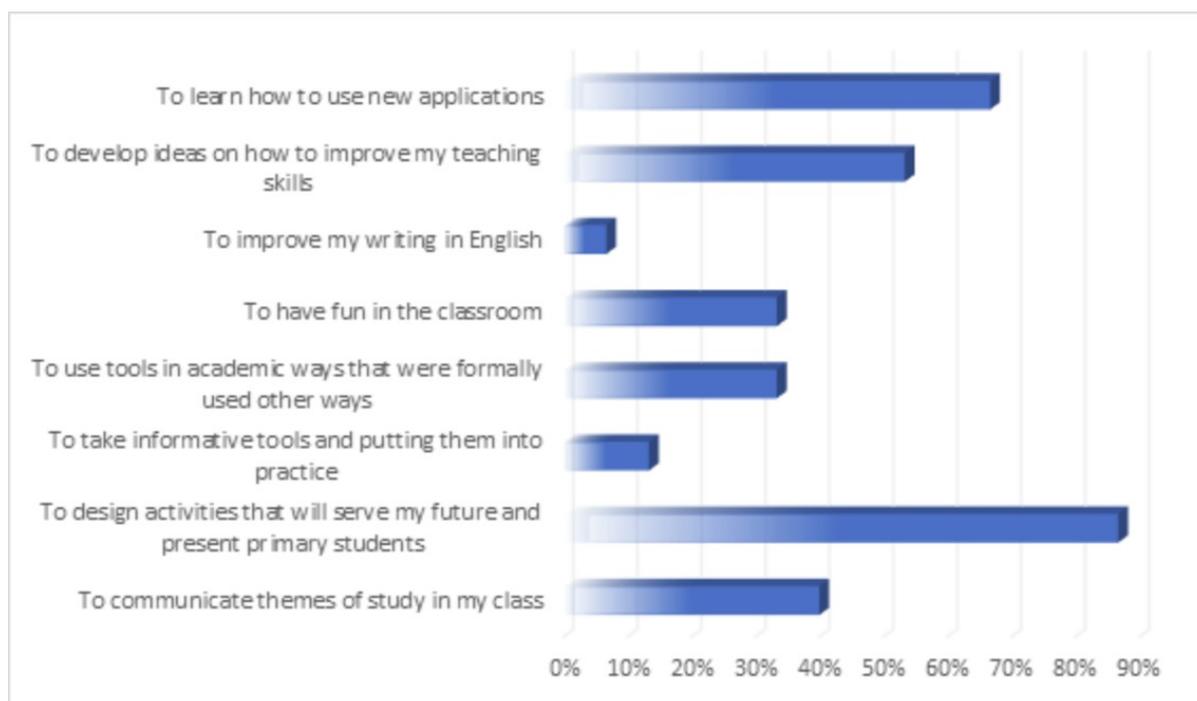


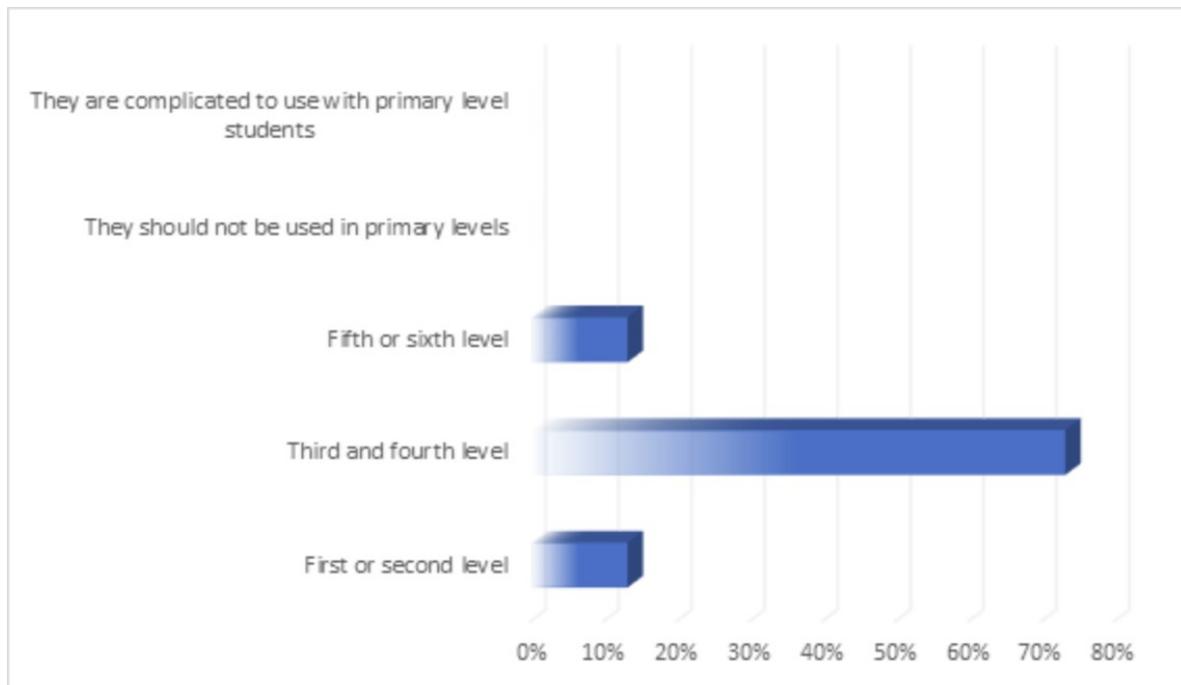
Figure 6: What should blogs be used for in the formation of teachers? Indicate the three most pertinent responses.

As results show, the three most pertinent responses chosen were that blogs should be used for the formation of teachers in order (1) to design activities that will be of use to my future and current primary students (86.67%), (2) to learn how to use new applications (66.67%) and (3) to develop ideas on how to improve my teaching skills (53.33%). This last reason was closely followed by the option of using blogs to communicate themes of study in my class (40%), to use tools in academic ways that were formally used other ways (33.33%) or to have fun in the classroom (33.33%). The two least favorite options were taking informative tools and putting them into practice (13.33%) and to improve my writing in English (6.67%).

13 students found the use of learning about these applications in the classroom and putting them into practice at university level useful for their current jobs as teachers as well as for their future ones. Closely linked is the second most popular answer, as 10 out of 15 students find learning about new applications of vital importance for their lives. It is, therefore, obvious that the third most frequent option would be the need to develop new ideas so as to improve their teaching skills. However, it is worth noting that only 8 students out of 15 found this choice among the three most pertinent. It is clear that students want and need the inclusion of subjects or courses in which applications and new technologies are paid close attention to, as they are in need of guidelines and parameters to take their teaching practice to the best technological level possible. These results show that students are aware of their importance in the education system and of the need of being qualify and up-to-date teachers.

Figure 7 shows the results obtained for “In which primary level should we introduce the use of blogs?”. As can be seen on the graph below, options for answers here were

arranged from ‘first or second level’, ‘third or fourth level’, ‘fifth or sixth level’, ‘they should not be used in primary levels’ and ‘it is complicated to use them with primary level students’.



*Figure 7: In which primary level should we introduce the use of blogs?*

11 students out of 15 (73.33%) think that the best primary levels to introduce the use of blogs in the classroom are levels three and four. Whereas 13.33% of them decided on the first and second level or the fifth and sixth level. None of the students opted for the options in which the use of blogs was not recommended or too complicated for being used with primary students. These results clearly indicate the positive attitude that future primary teachers show towards the inclusion of blog-like activities in their classrooms, as Figures 3 and 4 have already attested. The next question is closely linked to this last one as it delves into the benefits and direct impact that the use of their own blogs could have among primary level students.

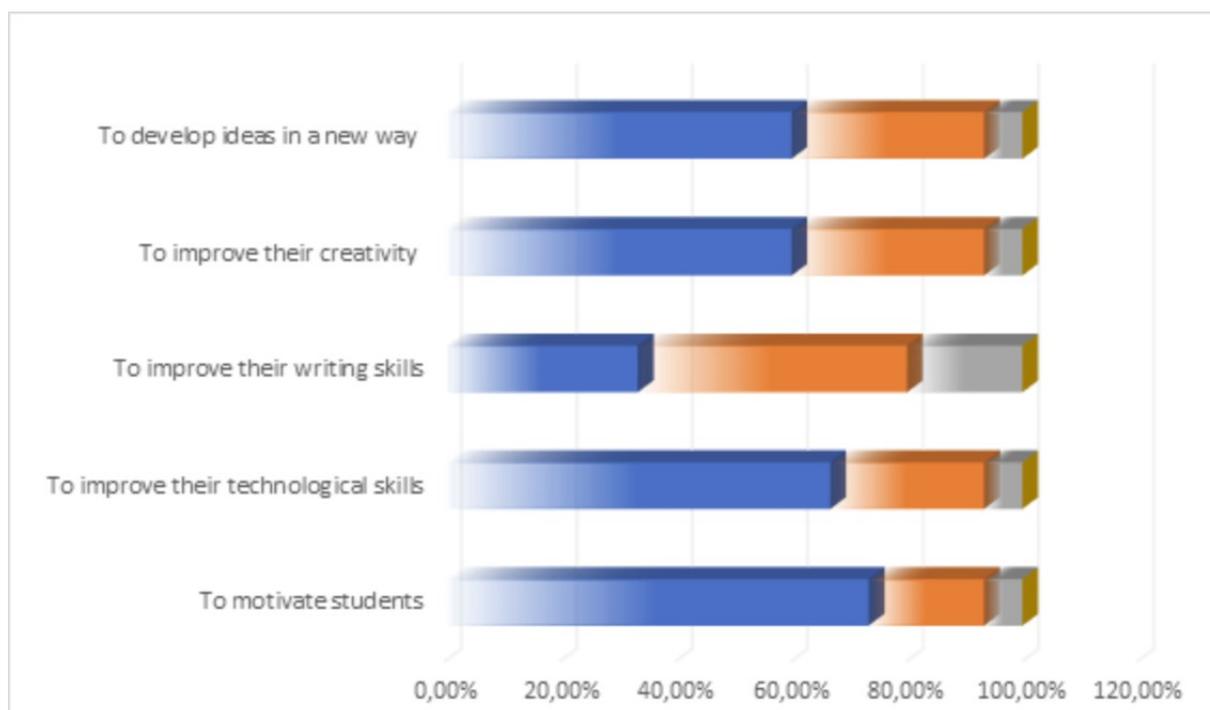


Figure 8: Which could be the most significant benefit for students of using blogs created by them in primary education?

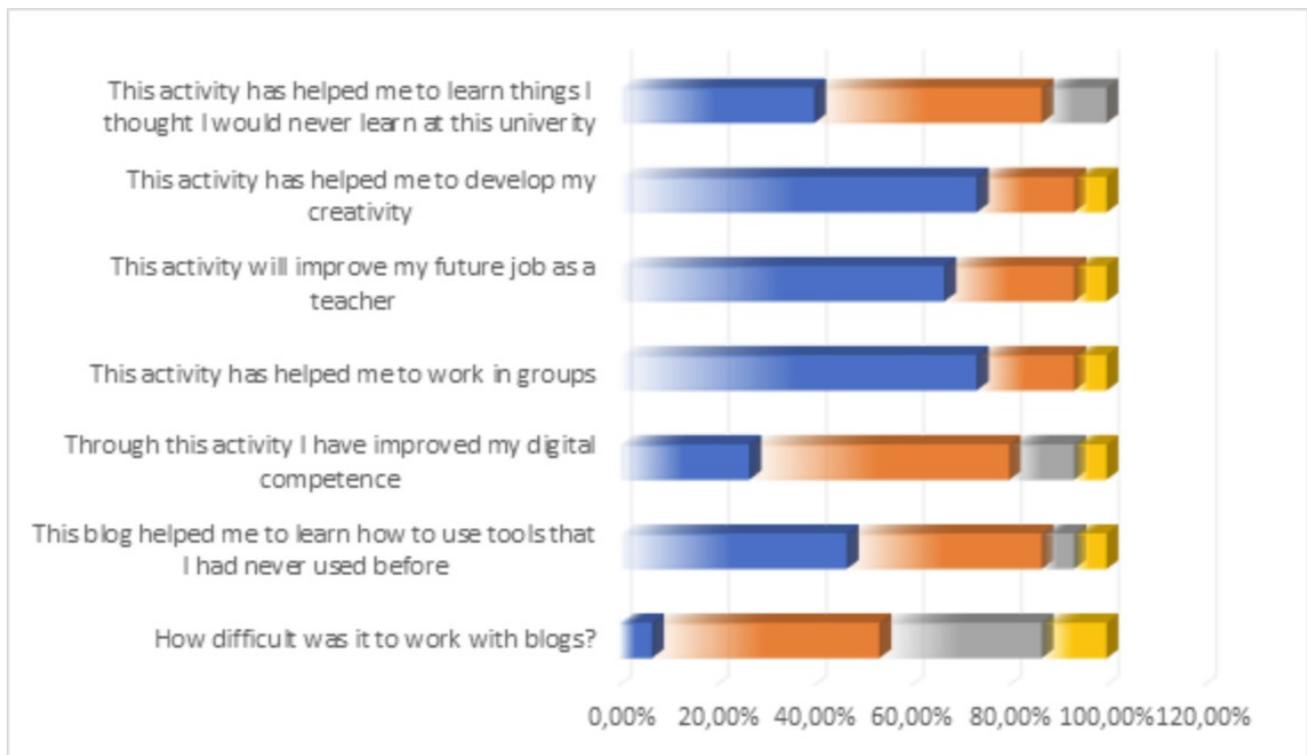
As illustrated on Figure 8, six options were given to students to answer to the question “Which could be the most significant benefit for students of using blogs created by them in primary education”? (1) to motivate students, (2) to improve their technological skills, (3) to improve their writing skills, (4) to improve their creativity and (5) to develop ideas in a new way. Categorical answers in the survey included ‘a lot’, ‘a good amount’, ‘a little’, and ‘almost not at all’.

11 students out of 15 (73.33%) chose ‘a lot’ so as to describe that blogs are beneficial for students to motivate them. As for the second option, 10 students (66.67%) agreed ‘a lot’ on the fact that these help students develop their technological skills. The improvement of writing skills was thought to be quite beneficial for 7 students (46.67%), while for 9 students the improvement of creativity (60%) and the development of new ideas (60%) was also beneficial. These last two options clearly indicate that future teachers see the inclusion and creation of blogs by students as having a direct effect on their inventiveness, imagination and originality.

As Figure 8 shows, none of the students chose the option ‘almost not at all’ to describe the benefits listed, which reinforces the aforementioned idea. It is worth noting, though, that teachers see the use of blogs in primary level students as beneficial for improving students’ writing skills, but they do not see them as useful for their own writing techniques development, as was seen in Figure 6. It would be interesting to find out the reason or reasons behind this discrepancy.

Figure 9 indicates the results obtained from asking several questions and statements related to the level of effort put by prospect teachers into this course activity. The questions are the following:

- How difficult was it to work with blogs?
- This activity has helped me learn about new tools I did not know about.
- This activity has helped me develop and improve my digital competence.
- This activity has helped me work with others.
- This activity will help me in my future job as primary teacher.
- This activity has helped me develop my creativity.
- This activity has helped me learn things I did not expect to learn at university.



*Figure 9: Regarding your personal work in this activity*

As has been done in several questions of the survey, categorical answers included ‘a lot’, ‘a good amount’, ‘a little’, and ‘almost not at all’.

As the above included table shows, the design and work with blogs was not an easy task as 7 out of 15 students (46.67%) stated that it had been quite difficult to work with these. There is even one student that found this activity very complicated, as opposed to 5 who found it a little complicated and 2 who did not find it difficult at all.

As it has been demonstrated throughout this paper, the use of blogs has been beneficial for our students as they have learnt about new applications they were completely unaware of. There is data that supports this affirmation as 7 (46.66%) and 6 students (40%) state that the blog has helped them improve, a lot and quite, respectively, their knowledge on new technologies and software.

Students have to a great extent already developed their digital competence, hence, 4 students (26.67%) affirm that this activity has helped them improve 'a lot' their digital competence, whereas 8 students (53.33%) have developed it 'quite a lot'.

Team-work has benefited 'a lot' from this activity as results show. 73.33% of students (11 out of 15) state the creation and development of blogs has improved the capacity of working in groups.

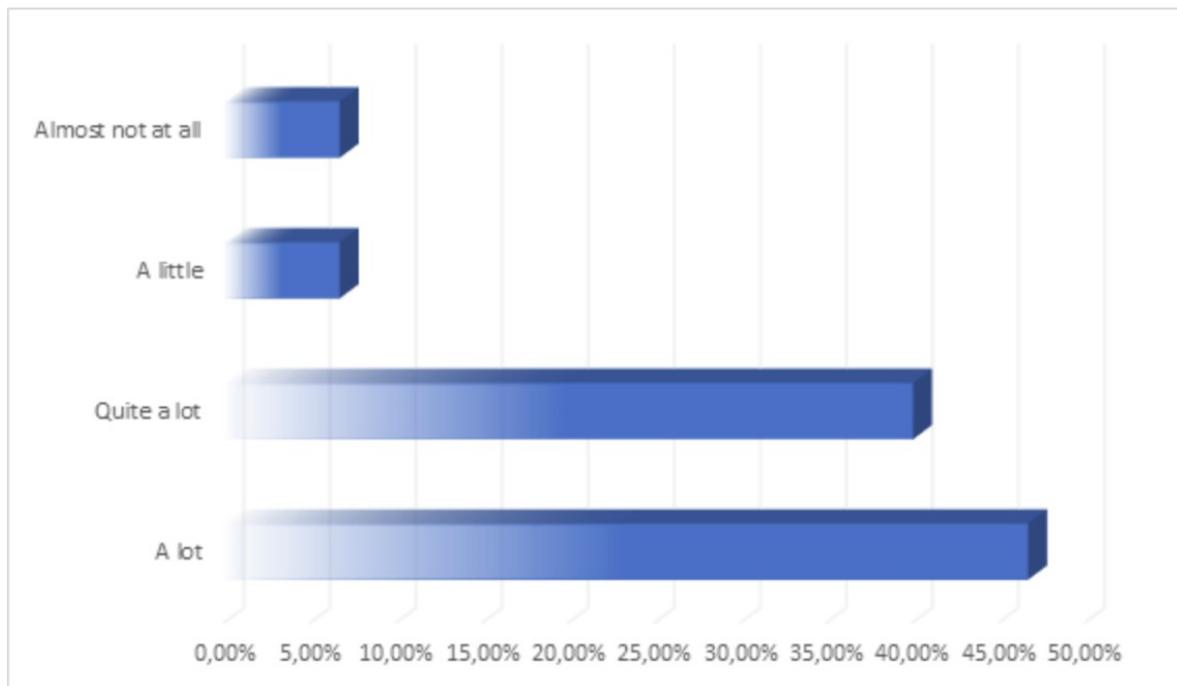
It is clear that the activity will help them in their careers as teachers of primary levels and results confirm this reality. 10 students (66.67%) are very positive and 4 students quite positive (26.67%) about the use they would be able to give of these applications in their future classes.

The development of creativity and imagination has also benefited from this activity as results demonstrate that 73.33% of students (11) have developed it a lot and 20% of students (3) quite a lot.

Finally, students were asked to analyze if the proposed activity has helped them learn things they would not expect to learn at university level, to which 6 students answered that they agree with this statement 'a lot' (40%), 7 students agreed with it 'quite a lot' (46.67%) and 2 students agreed only 'a little' with it (the remaining 13.33%).

There is only one student that answered to all these statements with the option 'not at all'. As this is an anonymous survey, we would need to find out who this person is, if it is indeed the same person, and the reasons behind this situation: was it because of the lack of interest in new technologies? Because he or she found the activity very complicated to carry out? Or just because he or she found it useless?

The last question asked in this survey has to do with the general opinion of the activity in this course: 'Do I consider this activity very positive in this course?'. The options given were again 'a lot', 'quite a lot', 'a little' and 'almost not at all'.



*Figure 10: Do I consider this activity very positive in this course?*

Following the results we have obtained throughout the entire survey, 7 students out of 15 (46.67%) consider this activity very useful in the course and 6 out of 15 (40%) see it as quite positive. The remaining 13.34% (2 students) do not agree with them as they find the activity not so positive. These last results are in accordance with the previous question (Figure 10) as there is somebody in the class that shows general discrepancy towards the use and inclusion of blogs in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Though we are aware that this study represents a first approach to the difficulties and constraints students present when creating a blog for primary students, we believe that the produced results show the very positive attitude students show towards the inclusion of blog-like activities in the classroom. The use of significative activities that will enrich their teaching skills are welcomed, especially if related to the development of their digital competence.

In conclusion, active blogging is seen by students as very positive and useful for both their future careers and the development of their imagination and creativity. They find the inclusion of blogs in their training at university as reasonable and positive, as well as in their teaching practice in primary classes in which they see it as beneficial for students to develop motivation, technological skills, writing skills, and improve creativity and innovation. When asked about the amount of work put into the activity, they affirm that although it has been somewhat complicated, it has allowed them to develop their technological skills and digital competence, improve their team-work and learn things they would not have expected to learn at university level. It is worth noting, though, that there are some discrepancies in the results shown like, for instance, on the importance that prospect teachers give to the

improvement of their own writing skills through blogs and the benefits they see with the use of this tool for the development of this skill on their students. Furthermore, the differences found between Figure 3 and Figure 4 show another discrepancy on this survey, as 73.33% of students state that the use of social applications is worth the effort, while 53.33% of students find the use of blogs very useful as part of the formation of teachers. This extrapolation illustrates a 20% difference (3 students) between the answers of the two questions, and it would be useful to determine the reasoning behind the discrepancy shown.

The teacher trainees and teacher who participated in this teaching innovation project involving the creation of blogs for the teaching of English at the primary school level coincided in their impressions that this type of university assignment requires a substantial amount of time to complete and that a lack of prior experience complicates the situation. From the teacher's point of view, students completing this type of assignment also need assistance in structuring and explaining their ideas in a class presentation, often due to a lack of English-speaking ability or proficiency in the language. Nevertheless, the students found that the task was meaningful and adequate for the course. Teachers who are interested in implementing a similar project in their teacher training courses need to bear in mind the extra burden that students will find as they plan and create their blogs in groups. This is especially the case of those who are only able to create an "average" blog. If time is allotted from other course requirements and scaffolding is provided in terms of presentation structure and language, students will be able to benefit from the advantages of blog creation in the educational setting mentioned at the start to this article.

Future studies on the field could focus on how primary level teachers see the use of blogs in the classroom, if used whatsoever. Because, as pointed by Pinya, Tur & Rosselló (2016), there are still teachers with a very low level of digital and technological competence. Would they find that the creation of blogs also implies constraints and difficulties?

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