



## Transforming learning through Scholarship Session Summary

Embedding blogging as a way of fostering greater student engagement, collaboration and ownership of learning

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### Background

This paper starts from a simple, but critical premise: “if you can’t write, you can’t be a student” (Elbow, 2000: 8). As someone that has worked in higher education for over fifteen years, a common, recurring experience has been of students struggling to grasp the nuances and conventions of academic writing. Returning to the work of Peter Elbow, he contends:

Many people have learned to manage or handle adequately “correct English” but in doing so, they muffle or clog their thoughts into language that’s far less clear and interesting than they could have used in the language of their talking. Many other people don’t even feel that writing is an option for them and feel excluded – yet they speak smart, eloquent, interesting things. And finally, even many of those who can write well are often reluctant to write, and they are continually distracted as they write by nagging critical voices (Elbow, 2012: 3).

This is something which resonates, and chimes with my own experiences of working with undergraduate students. Time and again learners are able to clearly articulate and express their ideas and understanding orally (e.g. when delivering presentations, in small group discussions in seminars, or in one-to-one tutorials) but then struggle to capture and translate these thoughts when tasked with submitting an essay or report. It has long been debated how students might take greater ownership of and fully engage both with their learning and with their representation of this learning through their writing. Thus, numerous critics have spoken about the relationship of the self with learning (Baxter-Magolda 2004) and writing (see Clughen and Hardy 2012, xxi) as well as how the ‘orthodoxy’ of writing academically can act as an impediment to self-authorship.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to contend that blogging has the potential to function as an alternative or hybrid genre form of academic writing that promotes engagement with learning in ways in which the production of the ‘traditional’ academic essay frequently does not. Or expressed as a question -to paraphrase Hansen (2016) - to what extent can student blog writing help us to achieve the goals of educating students to communicate effectively and encouraging students to critically engage with information?

### What do we know about blogging as a teaching tool?

At a time when an increasing number of universities are proactively supporting innovative teaching methods, interest in social media – which includes blogs - in higher education is growing (Kerawalla et al. 2008; Menkhoff et al. 2015) with a number of authors championing such tools as a means through which to transform teaching and learning practices as more social, open and collaborative (Manca and Ranieri, 2016). Put

differently, “blogging assists students in understanding audience, negotiating between their academic and personal voice, synthesising and integrating prior knowledge, and peer reviewing each other’s work” (Bryant, 2014:96). Research in this field however, remains relatively new, with only a scant body of literature on the application of blogging in higher education settings, and much of this focused on their self-reflective nature (Sim and Hew, 2010) drawing on the origins of blogging (which date back to the late 1990s) as a form of online log or diary.

### **Students as bloggers**

This paper critically reflects on the design and delivery of a final year undergraduate module, *Contemporary Issues in Sports Practice*, where students were required to submit an individual blog post (600 words) on a sports-related matter of their choosing, as well as engage on-line with peers’ writing as a formative part of the assessment. Alongside this students were introduced to blogging as technology and as a social practice (McGrail and Davis, 2011), as well as understanding the nature and conventions of public writing. On this point, it is worth emphasising that considerable time and energy was invested in providing support and scaffolding to students, many of whom whilst active on multiple social networks, were less familiar with blogs and blogging. Thus, hands-on workshops provided a critical introduction to blogging, reviewing existing sport blogs, establishing criteria for what makes an effective blog, as well as identifying some of the crucial differences between writing an essay, and the practical steps in writing a blog post.

In the paper three themes are identified, which when taken together further develop the argument that blogging has the potential to encourage student engagement with and ownership of learning without compromising academic rigour. These themes are:

- Audience awareness
- Sense of ownership
- Versus essay writing

Taking these in turn, the first is wrapped up in the very essence of what a blog is – namely a form of micro-publishing, which is “an online public collection of one author’s (or several authors’) entries, or posts, displayed in reverse chronological order” (Hansen, 2016:86). Thus, there is an important shift in moving from writing for an audience of one (i.e. the tutor) to an interactive and participatory public audience. Indeed, blog writing relies on eliciting a response from the audience. As Penrod (2005:2) asserts “without a response, there is no communication. If there is no communication happening, then there is no understanding as to whether one’s words make meaning or fall silent”. In this context the audience was predominantly made up of the students’ peers (a requirement of the formative assessment was that they commented on at least three blog posts, as well as attracting at least three comments on their own submission) but the online nature of the blog also meant that the potential audience was considerably broader and larger than that.

The second theme is the notion that blog writing helps to foster a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for one’s own writing. Anecdotally, students talked about becoming ‘bloggers’ and ‘writers’ as well as feeling more conscious of exposing their writing skills to a public audience. Such awareness helps students to be more mindful writers, as they are forced to reconsider their ideas, their voices, their writing approaches, and so forth. One interesting consequence was the care with which the students thought about how to title their blog post, and the role this may have in inviting or enticing readers.

The third and final theme considers the question what is different about composing for an online ‘audience’ compared to writing a traditional essay which may at best be read

by a select handful of people? As stated above, support was embedded within the module in the form of practical workshops, as well as resources accessible on NOW, to help the student cohort understand some of the key differences. For many blog writing entailed negotiating a space between academic and personal writing, as well as merging self-expressive writing with writing for social interaction.

### Concluding remarks

Based on the experiences of the module team, and informed by student feedback, it is proposed that embedding blogging practices as a writing exercise has a number of possible benefits, including the potential to encourage participation, engagement, collaborative learning, and a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for one's own writing. With reference to issues such as audience, representation, co-production of writing and ownership and identity, the paper aimed to demonstrate how writing for a virtual space, though stretching, can change the dynamic of writing. It does this by positioning students in different ways *vis-a-vis* their subject content than does the academic essay, and this encourages a mature, creative criticality that, based on these initial reflections, produced more 'embodied writing' which the students made their own.

*Initially, an additional aim of this paper was to discuss some of the implications for practice, as well as offering some user-friendly advice on how to establish, manage and maintain a classroom blog. Sadly with the constraints of time this wasn't possible, but I am more than happy for colleagues who are interested in embedding blogs within their own teaching to contact me for suggestions or advice.*

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