

Blogging within Formal and Informal Learning Contexts: Where Are the Opportunities and Constraints?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a small scale exploratory study of blogging within a collaborative project involving the author and a group of seven research student colleagues. Blogs were used for journaling and a joint blog was set up for group discussion. It was found that rates of participation were uneven and in the majority of cases very few entries were posted, however all except one had participated in some way to the joint blog and two students in particular had posted very long entries to their personal journals. Participants valued blogging as it encouraged reflection on ideas; provided feedback from others; and enabled communication to a wider and removed audience. The strongest constraint on blogging was seen as a lack of purpose and audience for personal journaling. It was easier for participants to contribute to the joint blog as there seemed a much more clearly defined audience and purpose. Implications for the study are discussed.

Key words

Blogs, research methods, higher education, community of practice

INTRODUCTION

Blogging has become widespread in recent years and valued as a support for a wide range of activity, including collaborative group work; structured support for students and interest groups; and presentational activity. However, journal writing has probably become the most frequent form of blogging (Herring 2004). Here, typically, the blogger offers brief, regular, personal reflections on aspects of his or her experiences over a period of time and invites feedback on entries. Journal blogs have quickly become established as a forum for personal commentary on current affairs and their use in journalism has been discussed extensively. Blogging is gaining a profile in higher education (HE), for example in activity structured by academics such as producing class artefacts, posting and commenting on work, mentoring and providing filters to learning material (e.g. Ganley 2004; Suzuki 2004; Williams and Jacobs 2004). However, many students write blogs only within unstructured contexts and while these are often commentaries on social activity, some seek to contextualise personal experience within scholarly concerns. Lecturers too may use blogs to offer personal reflections on scholarly activity and make these available to a wider audience.

There is widespread, but not complete, agreement that blogs are associated with certain writing practices even if individuals use blogs for different purposes. In form, blog writing is generally brief, personal and text based (Herring et al. 2005, Williams et al. 2004) and often associated with “originality and attention grabbing” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). Mortenson and Walker (2002) and Nillson (2003), echoing other writers, focus on the hybrid nature of blogs and see them as simultaneously monologue and dialogue, straddling writing for self and for public audience, and exploring personal experiences in a wider context. The level of interactivity that is desirable, and indeed observable, within a blog is in dispute. Herring et al. (2005) argue that the extent to which blogs are interlinked, and oriented towards external events, is exaggerated, while the importance of blogs as individual forms of self-expression is sometimes missed.

Research into blogging is at any early stage (Herring et al. 2005; Mortenson and Walker 2002; Williams, et al. 2004) and studies are largely reported through conferences and contributions to existing blogs and some of the key findings on research to date are summarised below.

Opportunities associated with blogging

Blogs are seen as providing a platform for personal points of view, including perspectives that might not be aired via conventional media. The cost is low and little technical skill is required. They support communities of practice, offering a fluid boundary between peripheral and core participation. The writing within blogs can be subtle, and widely read blogs often offer a personal narrative tailored to a particular audience. Some authors can be seen as playing with identity, signalling an interplay between self-identity and socially constructed identity. Ownership encourages an active attempt to synthesise, or at least comment upon, feedback in ways which are

less apparent within online forums. Initial findings suggest that higher education students enjoy using blogs and can exercise a high degree of creativity and control over content. Blogs provide opportunities for collaboration, ranging from feedback on individual thoughts to creating joint products within shared spaces or 'motherblogs'. Blogs appeal to many students' interest in, and experience of, online technologies.

Constraints associated with blogging

There are however considerable constraints on bloggers. Critics see blogging as exhibitionist, and blogs can offer opportunities for unproductive interaction including that of 'trolls' – ultra critical commentators. Blogs represent a considerable commitment of time, can be superficial, and like web pages left incomplete and 'orphaned'. Although blogs are easy to set up blogging does require some technical ability, and some may find writing physically onerous. Blogs call for considerable fluency in writing and awareness of audience expectations. There are ethical issues of which the blogger may be unaware; for example, the blogger may disclose information which is embarrassing, or worse libellous, about a named individual, and lose sight that their blogs may be freely available documents. Readers may misconstrue the authority or authenticity of the materials within a blog. Without models to work from, blogs may be poorly written and unattractive to other readers; however, rigid adherence to models may stifle creativity. In a wider context, blogging may be dominated by 'A list' sites rather than giving space for alternative perspectives on events.

BLOGGING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A project was set up to explore the potential of blogging within the Institute of Education at Warwick University. The university has promoted the use of blogs by providing server storage space and easy to use authoring tools for staff and students. Blogging has been extensively publicised and has been widely taken up so that, for example, in the week beginning 2 January 2006 there were over 3,856 active blogs at the university containing 53,478 entries and 122,111 comments. A small number of these blogs show considerable activity by students commenting on a mix of study and social topics, but there are also many 'orphaned' blogs which once set up have rarely been used since or, if used, this has been for restricted viewing. Of course there are no figures showing how many students have set up blogs hosted outside of the university – for example through free web space offered by internet providers. However, anecdotal evidence suggests the numbers are very low.

All blogs are listed, by default, in a directory. Within the Institute of Education there were 66 registered blogs on 2 January 2006. Out of these five had been set up by staff and the rest by students. It is not known how blog use in the Institute compares to other departments but again anecdotal evidence suggests that blogs are less well used perhaps because of the more vocational nature of the teacher training courses requiring long placements away from the university.

Blogs have been introduced in small scale innovations within two of the teacher preparation courses offered within the department but this particular paper focus on MPhil / doctorate research students' use of blogs. There are 75 full time and 79 part time research students, 66 of those are overseas students. Twelve research students have created a blog listed in the Warwick directory. The majority of these were created in a small collaborative project by the author working with a group (n =7) of research student colleagues. The participants in this study shared an interest in teaching and learning with ICT, but not in blogs per se, and met at regular intervals to discuss their research. English was an additional language for six members of the group. The aim of the blog project was to share experiences of conducting research and in so doing assess the value of blogging first hand. Only one participant had used a blog before the study started, this had been for social reasons. The project was divided in two strands:

- use of individual blogs. This began on 23 September 2005. Participants set up their own blogs and tried to use them as they saw fit. Guidelines on the use of blogs were discussed and use of the individual blog continued throughout the project
- use of a joint blog. This began 16 October 2005 and was scheduled to last until the end of term, 16 December 2005. Participants set up a discussion on experiences of being a PhD student followed by more structured use of the joint blog activity in which responsibilities for starting discussion topics was taken on by some members of the group.

This was a small scale project which set out to address three questions

- what would the participants perceive as the value of blogs
- what would the participants perceive as the constraints on writing blogs
- how would participants characterise blogging as a genre

Already a distinction can be made between approaches to the research of blogging which focus on: interaction between blogs (e.g. the use of social network analysis by de Moor and Efimova 2004; Merelo and Prieto 2004); learner experience of blogs (e.g. Glogoff 2003; Mortenson and Walker 2002; Williams and Jacobs 2004); content analysis of blogs (e.g. Huffaker and Calvert 2005). The work was carried out within the second of these approaches using open ended interviews and focus group discussions to capture participants' experiences. However some quantitative data is provided in order to describe the level of activity within the study. There was an action research perspective within the project as all participants took part to better understand their practice.

FINDINGS

The rate of blogging activity is given in the below (table 1). This shows very mixed rates of participation with two very active bloggers, at least in terms of message length, though note the total number of words for both is inflated by some copying and pasting of text from other sources. There were five participants who contributed three or fewer entries into their individual blog. However participation in the joint blog was more even so that all members of the group, except one, had contributed a comment to the discussion. All, except two, had made comments on colleagues' individual blogs.

Participant	Entries and (words) entered on individual blog	Entries and (words) entered on the joint blog	Number of comments and (words) received within the individual blog	Number of comments and (words) entered in the joint blog	Number of comments and (words) entered in colleagues' blogs
A	1 (162)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (450)	0 (0)
B	1 (1247)	2 (311)	4 (321)	11 (1019)	6 (771)
C	2 (299)	1 (128)	2 (108)	3 (331)	1 (104)
D	2 (826)	0 (0)	2 (212)	0 (0)	0 (0)
E	3 (444)	0 (0)	6 (346)	6 (771)	4 (408)
F	11 (1314)	4 (969)	4 (1673)	5 (408)	11 (1,019)
G	14 (4535)	1 (167)	16 (838)	5 (554)	2 (450)
H	24 (10,872)	2 (473)	23 (2054)	1 (104)	4 (331)
total	58 (19,699)	10 (2,048)	57 (5,552)	33 (3,637)	28

Table 1. Levels of activity covering the period 23 September to 16 December 2005.

Not included in the table are the following further details:

- there were 14 images posted within the blogs
- two participants made occasional entries to blogs belonging to people outside the group
- there were two further comments within the joint blog which were posted by people outside of the group
- there were nineteen comments within individual blogs which were posted by people outside of the group.

The qualitative findings are organised around the themes of the value of blogs; constraints; genre; and comments on the joint blog.

Value of blogs

All participants valued their blogging activity even when this had not been very extensive. The most frequently cited value of keeping a blog was that it encouraged **reflection** on the ideas that participants had articulated. Echoing others in the group one put it:

It gives you a chance to stand back and look at what you are doing which is helpful. (Participant B)

In some cases it was not even necessary to write the blog in order to reflect on the ideas:

I find myself thinking about blog entries to write though I never get round to doing them but I do think about it, how I would say it and reflect on why I thought it and whether this was something to look at further. (G)

There was further value in getting **feedback** from others, for two of the participants this was essential and there would be no point in writing the blog if no-one was to read it, but for the rest feedback was useful but not necessary, as one said:

I do find the blog useful to reflect on what I have been doing, how I might do the next interview, it is a space to think things through. I don't worry about feedback but if it comes it is useful, but it is an added benefit the main benefit of the blog is for me. It is putting words to what I have been doing. (C)

Interestingly feedback sometimes came through private mail rather than comment within the blog itself:

Some people perhaps more than 10 got in contact with me about my blog but they did that one to one by email, I guess they are maybe shy and prefer to stay private. It feels more comfortable for them, but any feedback is helpful as people can help if they challenge what you are doing. (A)

Participants also valued the use of the blog to **communicate** their ideas to other people and even if they did not 'get into' blogging themselves they were aware of blogs as an important communication tool and source of information. One participant in particular put greater value on blogging as a tool for communicating rather than reflection:

To be honest most of what I put on the blog I have already thought about before and perhaps already mailed to distribution lists or whatever so it is designed to get the attention and opinions of others. (H)

All participants used their blogs to comment directly on the research they were carrying out, this had an important role in developing their confidence and position in their 'field'.

I can let everyone know what I have done and people can see that I have been doing it for some time. I can show that my ideas are original and where they have come from I have seen other people's web spaces and blogs and I hope one day people will go there and see what I have done and may be I can be useful for them and they could see that I have a position on this issue. (G)

Less important to participants was using the blog to develop **proficiency in writing** English, though three participants felt that their language skills had developed by writing the blogs.

Constraints

The most frequently cited constraint on participation was the **lack of purpose and audience** for personal blogs. Without this it was difficult to get started:

I find writing the blog very difficult and I freeze when you get that option to make the entry viewable by self, a group or WWW. If I was not interested in blogs for their own sake I don't know how much I would do and I would begin by making entries viewable for a small group. Blogging surprised me as I have become with practice quite comfortable writing online, but blogging is starting back at square one. Some of it is learning to control what you are saying – it is about revealing things but you need to learn for yourself what you want to reveal. (F)

You need a purpose for writing the blog, the key thing is that has to be a purpose and without it I can't get started (D)

Others realised that they were themselves the audience for their own blogs while they tried to develop their skills:

I just think about writing the kinds of things I want to read myself and go from there, in time you do get some interest in it and some feedback. (F)

It was easier for participants to contribute to the joint blog as there seemed a much more clearly defined audience and ideas for topics had been discussed at greater length at a face to face meeting. Ironically awareness that there was an audience for a blog could raise as many difficulties in its own right:

In my country you are naturally guarded about what you say in public and the thought there are people reading my blog really does limit what I will say and my use of the blog. (G)

I got a spam the other day and so what? But it reminds me that there might be people taking an interest in your blog for the wrong reasons. (E)

All participants were aware that the blog was an expression of their personality and status in their academic field. This was heightened within the University as while blogs can be given anonymous titles all blog owners are clearly identified in the public blog directory.

The next most cited constraint on participants was **lack of time** which impacted on two of the participants in particular both of whom had urgent deadlines for submitting written work. All participants recognised that if they valued the blogs more they would find the time to blog more:

I just have not found the time to do this – I have had to put it on hold as there is too much on at the moment. (A)

In contrast one participant who had been an active blogger in the past felt she had to tone down her involvement

It used to be that I would spend ages keeping in touch with everyone but I realised that I couldn't spend that amount of time on blogs and needed to focus more on academic work. Of course keeping in touch with people is about my academic work too but what I am saying is I need to get down to the details of writing my chapters. (E)

Less frequently cited constraints were occasional technical problems in accessing blogs and the concerns of two participants over copyright issues. One had pasted something from another web site and had been informed by the University administrator that this might be seen as a breach of copyright, while another worried about publishing material on the blog that he might want to paste into the final thesis.

Genre

There was a great deal of consensus over the 'characteristic traits' of a blog. Entries should be short as people had limited time to read them, they should be written in an accessible style, they should cover personal perspectives but not disclose information which could be unduly provocative or damaging. This significantly curtailed some participants writing:

I could do something about smoking in pubs or abortion which could get some debate going or even more be outspoken about Islam or politics in my home country and one reason I don't is obviously about being worried I could make myself a target in some way but equally this is not who I am. I am striving to be a thoughtful person and I want people to be interested in my blog on the basis of the things I am interested in. (G)

Writing could be colloquial but should be accurate in spelling and grammar. Pictures and graphics could make the blog more appealing. It was felt by all participants that the blog should reflect their research interests but should not be 'straight reporting' of their research.

I tend to use the blog for the more quirky stuff maybe books and films which make me think about what I am researching but I am not going to put them into the PhD – though I guess this is also testing the water seeing if it is of any interest to other people. What I am doing is showing people that there is more to me than academic I want to show that I have wider interests. (H)

Comments on the joint blog

There seemed a lower threshold with ownership of the blog shared. The value of this blog was again described as a source of reflection and feedback from others:

I was more interested in the joint blog and glad that people made comments on it. In our discussion it gave you ideas, the main ideas about writing a literature review, what the purpose of the review is and expectations of what others have of it. (D)

Participants made frequent comparisons between the shared blog and the online discussion forums with which they were familiar. On the plus side one participant who kept his web browser open all the time said that he could access the shared blog more easily than a forum as there was no need to logon to a new area. Another liked the archiving by key word and by date within the blog and another participant felt the layout was more attractive within the shared blog. In contrast one participant felt that there was no threading system as such so that comments did not generate further comments and this seemed to inhibit the creating of new discussion topics.

REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

This is a small exploratory study carried out to inform further research, it does however set out some issues which this future research might address:

- Blogs seem to have a potential for supporting learning by allowing reflection on one's own thoughts and ideas. This is not at all surprising if writing is recognised as a tool for thought as much as for communication – perhaps this is to see writing, in a Vygotskyian sense, as a release of short term memory to reflect on the wider rationality of what one is saying or proposing. The exploratory study showed the value of adopting a 'phenomenological' approach, seeking to uncover the experience of the learner, but this could be extended by, for example, explicit use of stimulated recall.
- Blogs clearly enable communication, often between peers who share similar interests. Feedback comments are valuable but further research is needed to understand the blogger's interpretation of this feedback – for example is it assumed to be representative? The extent of feedback is necessarily limited by time and other constraints. These seem to be understood by the blogger and it would be easy to exaggerate the importance of feedback for the blogger. Indeed there is a suggestion in the study that the audience for the bog is an imagined one, not simply one removed by distance. It seems likely, or at least worthy of future investigation, that writing the blog encourages the blogger to shift perspective and see their ideas through the eyes of another irrespective of feedback from a real reader. Again this shows the importance of uncovering the experience of the learner and the limited value of content analysis and social network analysis.
- There seems a wide degree of consensus over the characteristic traits a blog should take and a belief that a blog should be written to appeal to a potential reader. Future research could uncover the variations in practice between blogs but also the different contexts in which blogging takes place. For example, journaling does not have the same function as group discussion and journaling may be focused on scholarly, social or hybrid activity. There are existing frameworks for content analysis which might be valuable here.
- There are significant constraints on writing blogs, the most important one appears to concern audience and purpose. Even at this early stage in research of blogging it appears likely that these constraints have been underestimated. There is a suggestion in this study that more structured activity around joint blogging would assist participation, however it is unlikely that this would be a preparation for journaling.
- There is in the literature, and consistent in this study, a sense of blogging as entry to a community of practice in which it is helpful to see blogging as a form of scholarly engagement. It needs stressing that there is a threshold the blogger needs to cross to engage in a scholarly community, virtual or physical, and that this threshold can be quite daunting. Participation might be, and remain, quite peripheral.

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