



Using blogging for higher order learning in large cohort university teaching: A case study

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The small but developing literature on weblogging underscores its potential as an effective learning resource for use in higher education. This paper contributes to these discussions through an initial case study of the authors' experience with the on going development of an educational blogging resource for use in a large cohort, undergraduate liberal arts subject. Detailing the theoretical aims, design, implementation and incipient evaluation of the project, the paper supports the argument for the educational use and value of blogging but also highlights potential limitations and problem areas.

Introduction

Weblogs, or blogs, have rapidly evolved to become a popular and influential form of online micro-publishing and computer mediated communication (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Critical studies of blogging are still in their infancy, but the available literature suggests that "blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). In particular, it is claimed that blogging is a useful practice for the development of higher order learning skills, active, learner centered pedagogy, authentic learning, associative thinking, and interactive learning communities (O'Donnell, 2006; Farmer, 2006).

This paper reports on a case study of the development and use of a blogging resource in a large-cohort first year arts subject at the University of Melbourne. Evaluation is on going, but initial results offer support for the potential of blogging as an enabling learning tool in higher education.

Literature review and theoretical principles

Blogs—a contraction of 'web based logs' or 'weblogs'—are essentially online journals where an author (or authors) publishes a series of chronological, updateable entries or posts on various topics, typically of personal interest to the author(s) and often expressed in a strongly subjective voice, on which readers are invited to comment. Blogs typically make central use of the hypertextual facilities of online communication: linking internally between posts, providing links to other web content, and/or linking to other users' blogs. Collectively, blogs and their multiple links are referred to as the 'blogosphere', a term coined by analogy with the concept of the 'public sphere', a space

for the exercise of public communication and individual free speech (Tremayne, 2006; Barlow, 2007).

From their initial emergence in the mid to late 1990s, blogs have expanded exponentially, seemingly capturing “the public imagination... like no media form since the emergence of the World Wide Web itself” (Bruns & Jacobs, p. 1). As of April 2007, the blog oriented Internet search engine, *Technorati*, reported an indexing total of over 75 million weblogs worldwide (Sifry, 2007). Due to the sheer scale and diversity of blogging, it is difficult to generalise about its forms and functions or the motivations of its users, known as ‘bloggers’. Scholarly research on blogging tends to emphasise its facility as a mode of self publication and its attendant capacity for personal affirmation and empowerment, as well as its interactivity and scope for interpersonal sociability and collective bonding (Kaye, 2006). Within this context, blogging is frequently theorised in relation to two seemingly oppositional, but in practice interrelated, tendencies: the individual and communal, or what Wrede (2003) terms “monologue and dialogue”, with bloggers expressing their own personal ideas and views—and with it their own identities—through online publication, while at the same time and as part of the same process, engaging in social networks of interactive contact and exchange. As such, blogs are widely viewed as transformational communicative technologies (Papacharissi, 2006) that allow users to connect and become part of an active social corpus, while exercising and legitimating their personal expressive spaces.

The dynamic capacity of blogging as a communicative channel for both individual self expression and social connectivity has fuelled increasing interest in blogging as an educational resource (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Burgess, 2006). Proponents of educational blogging proclaim it as an effective tool for user centred, participatory learning, arguing that it contributes vitally “to a reconceptualisation of students as critical, collaborative, and creative participants in the social construction of knowledge” (Burgess, 2006, p. 105). Drawing on the social constructivist educational theories of Vygotski, Ferdig and Trammell (2004) usefully explicate the four central pedagogic benefits of blogging for students:

1. Assisting students to become subject matter experts through a process of regular scouring, filtering and posting.
2. Increasing student interest and ownership in learning.
3. Giving students legitimate chances to participate and enculturating them into a community of practice.
4. Providing opportunities for diverse perspectives.

Common to much of the theoretical support for educational blogging is a belief that it offers a substantial advancement over previous online learning environments (OLEs). Farmer (2006) argues that the personal expressive dynamics of blogging help restore a vital sense of individual empowerment and valorisation, lost in many other OLEs such as discussion boards and wikis where the focus is often on the abstract shared communication space rather than the individual. Blogs, he asserts, foster ‘centered communication’ in which the individual is recognised and valued as part of a more equitable community of empowered learners (pp. 95-96).

Context of case study

In light of the literature’s compelling argument for the pedagogic values of blogging, the authors determined to trial blogging as an integral component of the learning

schedule for a large cohort first year subject they team teach in the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Melbourne. With an average annual enrolment in excess of 200 students and a 'survey style' syllabus that covers a good deal of conceptual content—in this case, a comprehensive introductory overview of the interdisciplinary fields of cultural and media studies—this subject faces many of the potential problems of large, lecture format, lower division university courses: content overload, impersonalisation of material, learner passivity and decreased motivation (Cooper & Robinson, 2000). Research shows that students in lower division higher education, especially first or 'freshmen' year, frequently suffer feelings of isolation and alienation as they struggle to make the transition to a radically different learning system that can easily seem impersonal and overwhelming (Peel, 2000). Such problems are further complicated in the case of subjects, such as that taught by the authors, where there is a substantial number of interstate and international students who must cope with the added transitional issues of acculturation (Bartram, 2007). To counteract these difficulties, the authors had previously incorporated other ICT resources—subject website, multimedia learning modules, and asynchronous learning networks such as bulletin boards—with demonstrably beneficial outcomes. Blogging was, thus, apprehended as a useful extension of and complement to existing ICT learning practices in the subject. In particular, it was hoped that the aforementioned capacities of blogging for self presentation and social interactivity would assist students to forge a stronger sense of personal empowerment and expressive entitlement, on the one hand, and increased connection to a shared learning community, on the other.

The claimed metacognitive benefits of blogging as a practice that encourages deep, continuous learning through a regular process of informational reflection and 'knowledge management' (O'Donnell, 2006) were equally appealing. The authors had previously used other continuous learning exercises in the subject, such as reflective student journals, and found that these had positive outcomes for student learning. Blogs offered an opportunity to expand upon these modes of metacognitive reflection while developing new strategies for continuous learning. In particular, given that the subject in question is focussed on contemporary culture and media, the interactive, hypertextual capacity of blogging was ideal for enabling associative thinking as students linked concepts taught in the subject with current issues and events in the wider social context as represented through the web.

To ensure optimal participation and learning outcomes, it was decided to integrate blogging into the subject as a formative assessment exercise. For 30% of their final assessment grade, students were asked to maintain a blog throughout the twelve weeks of semester. It was strategically decided to keep guidelines on content and style to a minimum in order to maximise students' sense of ownership and self directed investment in the exercise. They were told that the principal pedagogic objective was to reflect upon and discuss course content and/or issues that arose out of their learning experiences but that, otherwise, they were free to use their blogs in whatever way they wished and could write in a style and manner of their own choosing, as long as it was in English and didn't contain grossly offensive and/or inflammatory content. The only other stipulations set for the exercise were that students were told to post regularly—at least once a week on average—and to interact with other students' blogs in the subject through comments and hyperlinks. A set of criteria was explicated for the marking of the exercise. Modelled largely on standard criteria used in other assessment components of the subject, it included frequency and consistency of activity; reference to and demonstrated knowledge of subject content; active and

respectful engagement with the ideas and opinions of others; and, appropriate use of supportive/illustrative material.

Because the blogging exercise was assessable, the decision was made to develop a purpose specific blogging software, which was dubbed 'CultureBlogging', rather than use one of the available public platforms. Doing so would ensure maximum security, full compatibility with the University's OLE, and optimal administrative flexibility. An internal seeding grant from the Faculty of Arts helped finance the development of 'CultureBlogging' through the offices of the University's Information and Education Services. Broadly patterned after existing blog publishing systems, such as *Blogger.com* and *TypePad* and based on *WordPress*, 'CultureBlogging' obtains many of the same features and user interfaces of these popular platforms—WYSIWYG editing, customisable templates, blogrolls, RSS feeds, etc—but with added resources for educational administration such as marking tools, variable cataloguing functions, organisation of users into cohorts, and so on (Figure 1). Access to the blogging system was through the subject website on the University's centralised OLE. In this way, the exercise was fully incorporated as part of the subject's online presence, collocated alongside other online resources used in the subject, as well as the broader resources offered at the macro level by the University's OLE.

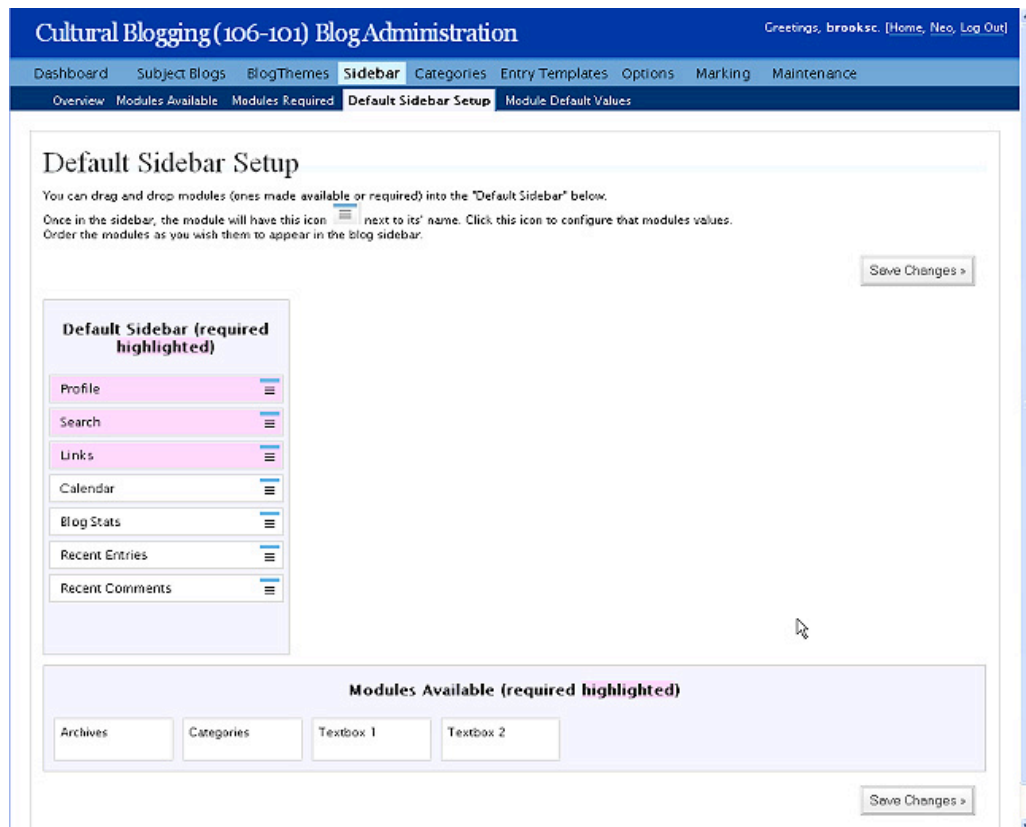


Figure 1: Screen picture showing a blog administration function, *Default Sidebar Setup*

Implementation

'CultureBlogging' was trialed for the first time in semester 1, 2007. It was decided to implement the resource across the whole cohort of enrolled first year students in the subject, totalling 225. Due to last minute technical difficulties, the resource wasn't fully operative and ready for student access till after the commencement of semester. This delay created some unforeseen challenges as teaching staff were unable to familiarise themselves fully with the resource in advance of its release and, as a result, instructional material was produced in haste. A one hour briefing session was conducted with the whole student cohort to preview the software and to outline the overall objectives and expected learner outcomes of the exercise. This was followed by additional information sessions in tutorial classes, as well as the provision of online assistance through the subject website and discussion board.

To offer encouragement and guidance to students, teaching staff maintained their own blog pages and also engaged actively with student blogs through the system's comments function. Periodic feedback sessions were offered in weekly tutorials to canvass any issues or problems that arose for students in their use of the blogging system. By mid-semester, the vast majority of students were blogging proficiently, but it became apparent that a sizeable group, approximately 20-25%, were either still not blogging, or doing so inadequately, so a decision was made to have students present in class a brief 1-2 minute snapshot preview of their blogs as an additional motivating spur. Although use of the system never reached universal cohort penetration, it was used by 93% of the enrolled student cohort, a figure broadly correlative to participation rates in the subject's other assessment exercises. However, only 89.4% of students blogged with sufficient consistency and/or quality to meet the assessment criteria and pass the exercise, which is slightly below the subject's average rate of assessment success of 92.5%.

Evaluation and preliminary results

Evaluation of CultureBlogging has been continuous since implementation in March 2007. Consistent with the multi-levelled, dynamic approach advocated by Taylor et al (2000) and Phillips (2002), a range of evaluation methods have been used to monitor and reflect upon the learning effects and outcomes of the blogging project. Principal data collection methods have included:

- Statistical calculation of frequency and distribution of use as offered by the blogging software.
- Online observation and reflective accounts maintained by teaching staff.
- Content analysis of blogs.
- Content analysis of subject message boards and online discussions.
- Summative paper-based questionnaire at the start of the semester.
- Summative paper-based questionnaire at the end of semester.
- Summative online student questionnaire at the end of semester.

Given that the pilot trial of the system only concluded in July 2007, evaluation is still ongoing with much of the data yet to be processed. Nevertheless, the feedback gathered from preliminary evaluations has been most encouraging. The following provides a critical discussion of our early findings as sourced through the above combination of data collection methods.

Statistical calculation of frequency and distribution of use as offered by the blogging software

- 220 students had access.
- 211 made more than 1 entry.
- The highest student entry was 32, the average number was 11, standard deviation was 5.8.
- 111 students made 11 or more entries.
- Over the 12-week period they were expected to make at least one per week – starting in the second week, so it appears that many of them posted more than the ‘required’ number of entries.
- The average number of comments was 14.4 with the highest number of comments for students 52 comments, and the lowest 0.

Clearly there was a link between number of entries and the number of comments although one student made 5 entries but received no comments at all, most students with 1 or fewer comments had made fewer than 3 entries. Comment counts include tutor and lecturer comments.

Student-student interaction was a goal of the blogging exercise. Commenting on other people’s entries was a requirement for assessment. We excluded the tutors and the lecturers from the view counts and averages. One of the lecturer’s blog (Brett Farmer) was second most viewed and had easily the most comments, twice more than anyone else’s. Other tutors had similarly large numbers of comments. This was because they included some ‘administrative’ type information; however there seems to be a greater readiness to respond to the teacher rather than to each other. Perhaps this will change over time. A more detailed analysis might reveal changing patterns of communication over time as students develop a stronger voice and interact with each other and their teacher in the subject’s blogosphere.

It is unlikely any students sorted on the various fields to the degree the teachers and administrators did. If they had they would have noticed the correlation between high numbers of entries, high numbers of views and high numbers of comments although there were some aberrations in general, the numbers and quality of the blogs supported the theory that learning is a lot about ‘showing up’. If students completed the required number of postings and interacted with other students then it became a circular loop: others noticed their blogs, posted comments and fuelled the conversation. Even if there were some quality differences, overall the bloggers who persisted were rewarded with view counts and comments. The latter were not aspects of the exercise’s assessment schedule—that is to say, students were not formally rewarded for the number of hits or comments their blogs attracted—but they did inform general student satisfaction and pleasure in the exercise. Some students articulated disappointment that their blogs were poorly visited, especially during the earlier part of the semester, with anxious comments such as “Why isn’t anyone reading my blog?” or “Someone please leave me a comment.” In such cases, teaching staff intervened to assuage anxieties and assure students that the best way to succeed was to maintain maximum activity with their own blogs and interaction with those of their peers.

Online observation and reflective accounts maintained by teaching staff

Teaching staff were able to efficiently observe students’ blogs online through the administrative function tools of CultureBlogging. These tools included several features aimed at making it easier both for teachers to search and manage a large cohort and for

students to find and respond to their colleagues. It was set up to only allow logged in users to read and comment, and students could not override this setting. This was partly because of the trial nature of the software, and partly to set boundaries that would encourage interaction in a smaller group. It was also to avoid any potential copyright infringement issues by keeping the blogging tool as a strictly intramural learning resource rather than one for public display.

Statistics available to everyone in the catalogue included:

- Title of the blog, number of entries, number of comments, date last updated and number of views. The catalogues could be sorted by each of these fields. The default setting was most 'recently updated'.
- The 15 blogs with "newest entries" and 15 "most viewed" blogs were displayed on the dashboard.

While these capabilities did enable ease of review and so on for the teachers, the 'force of the default', lack of time and the 'imperative of the visible' meant that most students didn't search much further than the top few blogs. The combined effect of these meant that there was an implicit incentive to update frequently, and over time the 'most viewed' blogs reinforced that position. By the end of the semester it took considered thinking to search and find less frequently viewed or updated blogs. One student produced an extraordinary result of over 94,000 views, more than 30 times the next highest, which was the lecturer's own class blog, and 90 times more than any other student. We understand that it is likely this student had some technical assistance to set up an automatic hit generator. Certainly there is nothing in her blog to warrant the huge amount of views, and her comment rate at 35 was only a mid range number.

The screenshot shows the 'Cultural Blogging (106-101) Blog Administration' interface. The top navigation bar includes 'Dashboard', 'Subject Blogs', 'BlogThemes', 'Sidebar', 'Categories', 'Entry Templates', 'Options', 'Marking', and 'Maintenance'. Below this, there are filter options: 'Overview', 'User Blogs Only', 'Group Blogs Only', 'Subject Blog', 'Filter', 'Recently Updated', 'Most Viewed', 'Most Commented', 'Most Entries' (selected), 'Least Used', and 'Title'. The main content area is titled 'Most Entries' and contains a table of 'User Blogs'.

ID	Owner	Title	Entries	Comments	Last Entry When	Views	Blog Grade			
26	Brett Farmer	Brett Farmer's blog	33	104	29 May '07, 3:39 PM	3178	H2B	View	Manage	Shutdown
120	[Redacted]	[Redacted]'s very exciting blog	32	35	4 Jun '07, 4:48 PM	685	H1	View	Manage	Shutdown
39	Claire Brooks	Claire's Blog	31	15	21 Jun '07, 9:28 AM	759	N/A	View	Manage	Shutdown
152	[Redacted]	Hokyungbenjaminbenlee - That's me!	30	32	21 May '07, 2:35 PM	1791	H2A	View	Manage	Shutdown
1047	[Redacted]	** [Redacted]'s personal blog**	29	34	4 Jun '07, 3:36 PM	463	H1	View	Manage	Shutdown

Figure 2: Screen picture showing a descending sort on *Most Entries*

Content analysis of blogs

Some students were clearly accomplished writers and this showed in the quality of their blog entries where often a particular idea would take off and spread through out the class as a self generating discussion. As a spur to content generation and general cohort productivity, particularly in the early stages of the exercise, staff strategically incorporated the use of 'low threat', 'getting to know you' type of 'blog memes' (such as lists of favourite TV shows, favourite video games, movies, etc.). These memes proved very useful in motivating blog activity and getting less experienced students comfortable with the idea and practice of blogging and, after a while, students themselves started to generate their own versions of blog memes.

Students 'personalised' their blogs to a greater or lesser extent. Some students changed the appearance of the blog considerably with customised backgrounds, personal photographs and detailed, hyperlinked biographical information. Most simply used one of the coloured templates to force some modest change. Although they were asked to keep their real name in their blog title for ease of marking and networking, students were in fact very inventive in their use of titles:

- Hokyungbenjaminbenlee – That's me!
- § James Norman's Stream of Consciousness §
- The Fantastic Mr Fox's Cultural Chopping Board
- Mabel's Morgue

Content analysis of subject message boards and online discussions

On the subject's bulletin board and online discussions, students posted queries about the content of blogging. They wanted to know what to write about. Sometimes, they posted technical questions about the hypermedia instructions for CultureBlogging: how to upload sound, image and embed videos.

Although the lecturers did not want to be prescriptive about the content of the posts, students were given guidelines on what to write about. Because the subject was concerned with contemporary culture and media, students were directed to reflect broadly, both critically and creatively, about their engagement with current media and pop culture. Most students accomplished this with postings on the advertisements they saw, their music, their travels, their weekly television watching and their interaction with other aspects of new media technologies such as video games and mobile phones. Some summarised their weekly readings in relation to the conceptual topics for the week. A diligent few even posted essay draft structures. These were written creatively and critically, with the use of multimedia, traditional prose and the vernacular.

Several students expressed their wish for more detailed descriptive guidelines or even asked for models of typical blog posts. There is a tension here for teaching staff between wanting to support and offer adequate pedagogic scaffolding, while equally encouraging independent learner thought, commentary, and creativity. Although most students were generally media savvy in their uptake of new technologies and some were already familiar with the tools of blogging, most however were not necessarily familiar with the nature and possibilities of blogging as a self reflexive practice. More guidance on the pedagogical aims of blogging would possibly have helped make the exercise more user friendly and critically transformative. More explicit guidelines about what constitutes 'self reflexivity' would have furthered the students'

expectations on how to reflect on their daily activities in a concise and analytical manner. This would have reinforced the students' sense of themselves as articulate and analytical commentators on society by supporting and modelling appropriate blogging techniques. The concept of students as 'prosumers' is an undeveloped field in educational blogging studies. This identity supports students not just learning about subject content and/or the techniques of critical analysis but actively applying such knowledge and integrating it as part of their intellectual growth within their daily lives. At least one student took this capacity of the blogging exercise very seriously indeed and began to see herself with a new identity:

I definitely intend to be interested in new media as a researcher of culture, from a cultural studies/third voice perspective.

On the other hand this is a group of first year students who are learning new skills, meeting new people, developing a new identity. It might have been more helpful to encourage a variety of experimental ways of 'doing contemporary culture and media', perhaps actively trying different writing styles, points of view, alternative media representations and discussing the success or otherwise of these strategies, and giving full recognition for the thoughtful effort of trying different strategies. Several students clearly did this themselves and reflected on their attempts in their blogs, but often this was lost in the numerous blog entries. In tutorials where tutors allocated time to talking about the content and the process of blogging regularly throughout the semester, these sessions provided valuable feedback, and generated peer and self assessment as a part of classroom learning. As reflective of the 'real world', the most potent reinforcement of blogging is the reinforcement of other people commenting on the blog.

Summative paper-based questionnaire at the start of the semester

We distributed the digital natives questionnaire (Kennedy et al, 2006, Kennedy et al, 2008) in the first lecture in the hope of finding out the students' initial awareness and use of new technologies, especially blogs. However, too few students returned the multi-page questionnaire to give statistically worthwhile results. Nevertheless we noted anecdotal comments about the range of experience in the group. Some students indicated they already kept regular blogs, some gave addresses for blogs that were more than 7 years old. However the majority of the students were not regular blog maintainers; they may have had multiple social networking sites such as *MySpace* or *FaceBook*, but blogging was not particularly part of their day to day activities. Several of them made the connection between their intellectual work analysing contemporary culture and media and the possibilities of blogging as a form of social commentary.

Summative online student questionnaire at the end of semester

We asked the students to complete a feedback questionnaire at the end of the CultureBlogging trial. Due to the timing of the questionnaire we only had 56 of the approximately 220 students complete the feedback. However they gave constructive and insightful feedback about the value of the blog tool.

We asked 24 combination Likert scale responses and open ended response questions to assess the participants' view of the level of engagement in using the resource and the intellectual process associated with blogging, in the usability of the tool, how the tool might have helped their learning and reflection skills, the workload associated with the blog, as well as questions about how the blog tool helped support group processes.

We queried their need for and value of technical support. We also asked more generally about the overall experience of CultureBlogging, and specifically the most and least valuable aspects of the exercise.

With such small numbers the results cannot be regarded as conclusive. However on all questions except one the blog tool was rated as positive. For example if strongly agree = 5 and strongly disagree = 1, students scored overall positive experience with the blog tool at 3.82 with a 1.12 standard deviation.

Those who felt the blog tool was a very strongly positive experience added comments such as:

Most valuable aspects of blogging: Voicing my own opinions for others to read and online interaction with other students.

Least valuable aspects of blogging: None.

Most valuable = freedom to take in as much or as little as I wanted.

As a cultural studies student, it was valuable experience because we got to engage in cultural practise (sic).

The most valuable was the manner in which you could interact with others from your course and discuss ideas with them in real life situations you can relate to.

It was an excellent tool for putting theory into practice. Can't think of anything bad about it.

Several students commented on the ways in which blogging regularly helped them to study, for example:

Like I wrote earlier, since I read the readings and then summarised them into my blogging, this enabled me to remember and keep in mind bits that after reading once can be forgotten. And for my final assignment, I could just click onto the reading I needed and all the most relevant information would be there for me. It's probably the most logical thing I've ever done.

I found writing about what I just learned was a great way to encode information and if I was ever unsure of something I could look at other blogs to help my understanding of subject matter

I found I was thinking about what we'd studied more often, especially when watching a film or reading a magazine, because I knew I had to blog about it.

They also added constructive advice about how the use of the blog tool could be improved for them:

Sometimes felt I needed more direction as to what to write, and also how much, how often. It was broad in the beginning, but maybe with a few more guidelines...

The blog would have worked much better if it was incorporated more so into the tutorials, ie if we discussed our posts or something along those lines.

Most valuable: comment system, progressive learning, social aspect. Least valuable: impractical access to lesser viewed blogs.

Most students indicated one of the most valuable aspects of the program was that it enabled them to connect (in various ways) with their peers:

I really thought it helped me get a further grasp on the ideas we were discussing and it allowed me to really feel as though I was part of a group in uni.

Some were least enthusiastic and ambivalent about the benefits of blogging as a learning exercise. For example, a number gave a response that strongly disagreed with

the educational value of blogging, yet still conceded the experience of CultureBlogging was positive.

I disliked the whole program. Its objectives were admirable but I never really felt they were achieved through this medium.

One student responded very negatively to the whole experience saying:

basically I found it quite a useless task. and unfair that we're the first group to have this task with it having such a high weightage (30%). it's difficult to engage in for people who do not blog on a regular basis. i found it mundane and redundant.

Interestingly this student was quite a competent blogger, producing in the mid-range of quantity of posts with a healthy number of responses. His 'views' tally was 142 - again in the mid range. He came into the exercise with profound reservations from the start, stating in his initial blog entry:

this is my first blog entry, ever, so please, don't expect to be blown away by it. haha. I've never been one to keep a diary or blog, or blog-stalk for that matter. I've never really seen the point in keeping a "diary" online for the world to see. Defeats the whole purpose of "keeping a diary", I feel.

Conclusion

Thorough evaluation of the data and, in particular, detailed content analysis of the many student blogs has not yet been completed and our expectation is that further research will strengthen our understanding of the learning outcomes of the CultureBlogging exercise, thus allowing us to make more precise assessments of its variable strengths and limitations. Our initial research, however, generally supports our original hopes for blogging as a valuable asset to the learning schedules of large cohort university teaching, while equally indicating problem areas in need of improvement.

Our research reveals quite striking differences in tone, style and approaches between various learners participating in the exercise. Some students strongly voiced their concern about blogging, saying that they had successfully avoided blogging and other forms of online publishing for years and were not pleased to now be required to undertake it for assessment. Others indicated they already maintained one or more blogs and were generally enthusiastic at the prospect of extending their blogging practice further.

In some ways the term 'blog' itself raised issues. Rather than deconstructing what blogging might offer and how it could be used as a new learning tool, many students unquestioningly assumed the prevailing conceptions and popular norms of blog writing. Their messages indicated they used the blog as a quick, informal, 'non-academic' mode of discourse. This is supported by feedback comments such as:

I felt it was limited in its scope and really targeted at people comfortable with less traditional means of writing.
It didn't turn out to be that educational though... more of a fun way to discuss the subject.

It is interesting to note that for this student at least, 'fun' and 'educational' are clearly incompatible, yet other students were able to see the educational and learning benefits:

the most impressive aspect of cultureblogging for me was that it encouraged cumulative and progressive learning, rather than simply cramming for essays.

As stated, we intend to undertake more comprehensive analysis of the student blogs in the longer term to investigate further the extent to which students are moving towards the realisation of higher order learning and in particular the development of an actively critical, authorial voice through blogging. We would hope that by supporting, guiding and modelling use of modest Web 2.0 tools such as blogs we will be enabling students to take on 'prosumer' identities that are more significant and self aware than the simple phatic discourse of online sociability and the prosaic 'daily diary' experience that many students seem to associate with blogging. In the meantime, below is a modest working set of preliminary recommendations for good practice in the implementation and use of blogging in higher education abstracted from our own experiences and initial evaluations as reported above.

Recommendations for good practice

- Be clear and supportive about the formative assessment aspect of blogs.
- Invite students to set their own goals for blog usage - above and beyond a quantity measurement.
- Encourage and model risk taking.
- Ensure there is adequate technical support available. Although most students did not experience major difficulties, many of them would have appreciated more information about how to tackle potentially complex technical functions such as adding rich media to their blogs.
- Build early feedback in interactivity into the experience. Make at least one tutorial focus early in the semester on the purposes of the blogs and have some mutual feedback opportunities. This will ensure students are given early feedback on how they are progressing. It allows students to establish self assessment as an integral yardstick and for the larger class cohort to give peer support, feedback and undertake further collegial assessment.
- Make some of the transition support activities explicit and easy for students: for example, finding each other in their tute groups, commenting on each others blogs.
- Have a lab session to ensure that everyone can access the tool at least once in a fully scaffolded environment.

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