Implementing blog writing as a tool for promoting student engagement and literacy development

David Hindley, david.hindley@ntu.ac.uk Nottingham Trent University

Lisa Clughen, lisa.clughen@ntu.ac.uk Nottingham Trent University

Bethany Rawden, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Abstract

This paper discusses the implementation of blog writing within a final year undergraduate module as a way of providing a type of inclusive writing. A mixed-methods approach is employed, with the aim of exploring whether blogging affords students with a means to engage with and take ownership of their writing and learning. Drawing on both tutor and students' experiences and perceptions, we propose that blogging has the potential for fostering greater student engagement.

Summary

This case study focuses on the implementation of blog writing as an alternative writing genre in Higher Education. Blogging is a form of communicative practice, which provides a platform where the style of writing sits somewhere between the formal and informal (Morris 2018).

For the last three years blogging has been integrated within a final year undergraduate module, *Contemporary Issues in Sports Practice*, on an Education Joint Honours course at Nottingham Trent University. The introduction of blog writing was in part in response to student concerns that conventional forms of academic writing can be both exclusionary and alienating (see Mann 2001). In addition, drawing on the literature on the pedagogical benefits of blogging, it was felt that blog writing has the potential to encourage collaboration (Blackstone and Harwood 2011), promote reflective learning (Sun 2010), and facilitate literacy development (McGrail and McGrail 2014).

Since its introduction, student feedback on the experience of writing their own blog posts on a contemporary sports-related issue, as well as commenting on peers' blogs has been overwhelmingly positive. Feedback was captured through an online survey of participants (N=33), a focus group (N=5), and students' written reflections (N=82). Combined, this provided us with a rich data set to analyse.

Funding was obtained from The Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) at Nottingham Trent University to undertake the focus group, transcribe the interview and analyse the results. These results will be considered in this case study.

Description of project

Academic writing is a staple university practice required across disciplines to determine student success. Despite its ubiquity, literacy scholars have repeatedly claimed that academic writing is exclusionary, and rather than allow students to

succeed, can actually prevent from flourishing. Two authors in particular have informed the ameliorative, more inclusive approach sought here. The first is Elbow (2012) who invites us to reconsider the alienating language of academic writing. He champions students to use their 'Vernacular Eloquence' – their own, familiar language in their writing. The second is English (2011) who argues for the incorporation of a wider range of genres into our learning and teaching repertoire. Such an approach, which English terms 'Regenring', opens possibilities for students to author their scripts, rather than remain alienated from them.

Blogging is one such form of Regenring, offering the potential as an alternative or hybrid genre of academic writing. As a conversational medium, blog writing is able to harness "language that comes most easily to mind and mouth" (Elbow 2012:6). Furthermore, there is a growing awareness that blogging may provide students with an alternative place to create academic identities that are more attainable and less elusive than traditional ones (Hindley and Clughen 2018).

There is growing awareness of blogging as an inclusive writing genre within the Academy (Morris 2018). Through knowledge-sharing and discussion, blogging has the potential to support knowledge generation and critical thinking (Sun 2010; Harwood 2010). Gregg (2006:154) identifies a number of positive aspects of blogging that may enhance student learning, which include the promotion of 'the participatory nature of writing, response and counter-argument' as well as facilitating 'ongoing debate, critical refinement and thinking-in-process'.

In order to try to promote the type of inclusive writing or 'Regenring' discussed, we trialled the use of a blog in a final year undergraduate module. The students on the module were required to submit an individual blog post on a sports-related issue of their choosing. In keeping with the blogging genre, contributions had to be short (maximum of 600 words) and could incorporate web links, video, copyright free images, and hashtags. In addition, students were asked to comment on peers' blog posts, as well as attracting readers to their own blog. This combined to make up the formative part of the module assessment, which fed directly into the summative assignment: a 3,000 word sociological analysis of their chosen issue and, for a third of the essay, a reflection on the process of blog writing and its contribution to the final analysis.

The practicalities of how to blog were covered in a series of interactive workshops facilitated by a module tutor who is himself an experienced blogger. The tutor also took on the role of editor and gatekeeper, responsible for publishing the students' work online using *Tumblr*, a microblogging site. Details of each blog post were promoted via the course Twitter feed, with students encouraged to share updates as part of their social networking strategy to attract readers.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

A mixed-methods approach was employed to explore students' experiences of researching and composing a blog post as well as drawing on their reflections on the process of blogging and how this compared to more traditional forms of academic assessment. A total of 82 students undertaking the module provided consent that we could access, read, analyse and use anonymised quotations from their written

reflections. The module cohort were also asked to complete an online survey following the assessment deadline. A total of 33 (40.2%) students responded. The sample consisted of nineteen males (57.6%) and fourteen females (42.4%), with 60.6% aged 18-21, 30.3% aged 22-25 and 9.1% aged 26-30. From the survey, a volunteer sample was employed to organise a focus group (four females, one male) to invite students to provide richer insights into their experiences of blogging and how this compared with other forms of academic writing. The focus group was recorded electronically and later transcribed verbatim, removing any personal information to preserve anonymity.

Thematic analysis of the focus group, open-ended survey data, and students' written reflections was undertaken to code the qualitative data to identify patterns and themes. Taking our lead from Braun et al. (2016), a six-phase model was followed in the analysis process, which ultimately was concerned with identifying illustrative extracts from the data, alongside an analytical narrative. All data sources were combined to explore how undergraduate students engage with blogs and the impact of blogging on their learning, engagement and their literacy development.

A snapshot of the survey data (see Table 1) provides an illustration of how the module cohort reflected positively on the process and experience of blog writing.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) from the online survey (N=33)

Statements (all ranked 0-10 where higher values indicate more agreement)	M	SD
The blog was a more engaging form of assessment than an academic essay	7.66	2.67
I felt I could express myself more freely in the blog than in my academic essays	7.69	2.48
I felt I could be more creative in my blog than in an essay	8.03	2.14
I enjoyed writing my blog more than writing an academic essay	7.84	2.46

participants scored significantly higher than the scale mid-point (5) for all these items, indicating high levels of agreement with the statements

The following themes were identified from the qualitative data: a) impact on the emotional domain of learning; b) development of higher order skills; c) effects of audience on learning and writing; d) language of blogging enabling authorship; and e) new to blogging.

Impact on the emotional domain of learning

The perceived informality of composing a blog, in comparison with writing an essay, was a recurring theme, with 'relaxing' and 'enjoyable' being the most common descriptions of the experience. In this sense, blogging serves as a bridge between writing that students perceive as pleasurable and fun, that allows for the free flow of voice, and writing they consider to be work.

> Writing a blog of my own was inspirational, and a highly enjoyable practice (student reflection).

In addition, the participatory nature of blogging was identified as a key aspect in helping to develop students' social and cultural capital.

> The first comment I received on my blog was very complimentary, filling me with pride and happiness. They praised my use of literature, which provided them with a greater understanding of my blog topic (student reflection).

Through attracting peers' comments, some students remarked upon the impact this interaction had on their confidence, self-identity, and sense of belonging to their academic community. This echoes the work of Blackstone and Harwood (2011) who highlight the potential blogging has to provide learners with opportunities for meaningful interaction.

> Blogging provided me with the opportunity to connect […] I have now formed a support network, whilst the comments received on my blog included useful papers and resources … I found it empowering to receive positive comments from people who I respect (student reflection).

Development of higher order skills

From the student's perspective, working with different genres both empowers and challenges students to think about their disciplinary knowledge in different ways.

> It felt refreshing to be introduced to blog writing and to explore and develop a new skill […] the assessment gave me the opportunity to articulate my thoughts and develop my critical appreciation of relevant theories through a conversational style of writing (student reflection).

Others commented on how blogging encouraged reflective learning through the sharing of and generating knowledge.

> The comments […] allowed me to gain multiple viewpoints on the topic which beforehand I had not recognised (student reflection).

> Collectively reviewing and generating a discussion on the blogs of my peers has demonstrated that all these issues are correlated in one way or another (student reflection).

Effects of audience on learning and writing

Drawing on the qualitative data, students reflected on their experiences of blogging as a medium which afforded them greater autonomy.

> The blog fuelled my passion for the subject […] it gave you an opportunity to write as yourself (student reflection).

This comment speaks to what both Elbow and English appear to be advocating. For some students, blogging enabled them to perceive of themselves as writers. We found respondents repeatedly spoke about their experiences in terms of identity, with some referring to themselves as becoming 'bloggers' and 'writers'. The interactive and participatory nature of the blog helped them appreciate they were academics in their own right.

> The most rewarding part of the experience was seeing a debate form on my social media account. I felt like an expert who was actively educating and encouraging people to talk about grassroots disability sport and the wider issues of disability (student reflection).

From the data, it is evident that the students were cognisant of the shift from tailoring their writing to the (often subjective) demands of a particular university tutor, to writing for a wider, public audience. This appeared to have a positive impact on student engagement, as well as the level of thought and care required to produce successful writing.

Language of blogging enabling authorship

The notion of creativity was also commented on, often interwoven with the idea that blogging provides a greater degree of freedom than a conventional academic assignment.

> In comparison to writing an essay, I found the blog a lot easier, and a greater sense of freedom. I felt as though I could shape the blog with my own thoughts, with my opinions being informed by academic references (student reflection).

As previously, this student's account captures some of the tensions identified by literary scholars who contend that traditional forms of academic writing and assessment can be prohibitive. Some students for example, mentioned the more informal and conversational language of the blog as contributing to this sense of freedom.

> I liked […] that we were able to be a bit more relaxed in the language that we used and adapt it to suit the target audience (student reflection).

New to blogging

Whilst there is an assumption that 'digital native' students are well equipped to undertake coursework involving social media because they employ these for personal communication outside of class (Purdy, 2010) one of the recurring themes to emerge from the data, however, was the overwhelming majority had little or no prior knowledge of blogs or blogging. Amongst some learners this understandably created some apprehension.

> I had no idea how to write a blog. I panicked at first, thinking how am I going to do this? (student reflection).

> I was […] a little worried because I thought it's [the blog] going to be really opinionated, and I was a bit concerned about putting my opinion out there. What if somebody doesn't agree with it, or if nobody agrees? (student reflection).

These initial anxieties diminished as the module progressed. As such, the time devoted in class to support and encourage students to become acclimatised to this unfamiliar writing situation proved essential, helping to allay some of the unease about blogging for an academic purpose.

Reflections on the project

The findings from this case study highlights the potential blogging affords as a form of writing that sits 'somewhere in between' (Morris 2018). We contend that, by allowing students to experiment with an alternative writing form that uses 'the language that comes most easily to mind and mouth' (Elbow 2012:6) blogging has the potential to loosen the constricting 'straitjacket of genre' (Hamilton and Pitt 2009).

> I felt I was able to offer my own personal views and be myself, which I don't often feel comes across when participating in academic writing (student reflection).

So what are implications of this case study? Is there a home for blogging in Higher Education, and if so, how would it be received by lecturers and students alike? From our own experiences we believe that blogging has the potential as an unconventional genre to aid students with their writing, as well as develop a sense of audience. This echoes the work of Bryant (2014), who found that blogging enabled her students to gain a greater awareness from exposing their writing, which lead to a greater appreciation of audience, their peers, and their writerly selves.

The data speaks to students' experiences of blogging as offering them a very different kind of experience than that of the academic essay. The latter was perceived by some respondents as being alienating, whereas blog writing can provide them with a voice.

It is important to add that in the development of the case study we have experienced a degree of scepticism from academic colleagues, harbouring doubts regarding the academic rigour of blog writing (citing for example, the use of conversational language) as well as raising concerns about staff workloads and the public nature of blogging so that anyone is able to read and comment on students' work (Hindley and Clughen 2018). Encouragingly what we have found in our own practice is that blogging has the potential to empower students, giving them agency in their own learning, and enabling them to find pride and ownership in what they have done (McGuire 2017). As signalled above, however, introducing blogging into the classroom is not without its challenges. As such, we would stress the importance of creating a supportive learning environment which recognises that many students are likely to be unfamiliar with blogging.

Follow up and future plans

As has been shown already, the module highlighted in this case study has undergone development and modification since its inception in 2015/16. However, there is still much to follow up and develop, informed by the qualitative research that has been conducted, as well as ongoing student feedback.

For example, additional workshops have been included, designed to assist students with their reflections on the affordances of the blogging genre. It is also clear that greater support is needed to help some students promote their blogs beyond the confines of the classroom, and to not rely solely on their immediate peer group to read and comment.

More broadly, colleagues at NTU as well as academics at other institutions have expressed an interest in implementing blogging within their modules. Thus we shall continue to look at ways we can disseminate and share our research, as well as providing practical guidance and support where possible.

In terms of future studies, it is hoped that a literature review and associated data study can be undertaken to explore more deeply what it is about blogging that promotes student engagement with learning in ways in which the production of a conventional academic assignment frequently doesn't?

As has been highlighted by this paper, blogging offers a potentially more inclusive writing genre for Higher Education than traditional forms of academic scholarship. The findings from this case study reveal how blog writing has rich potential for writing development, as well as having positive impacts on student motivation and engagement.

Related publications and resources

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