

Social Media for Learning in Higher Education

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Case Study

Impact of a course blog on HE practice and development of learning communities

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Abstract

A blog was introduced as an element of the PGCert Teaching and Learning in HE course at UCLan. The blog was intended to support the development of and assess reflection on practice and individual development. However, the intentional creation of a learning community became an equally defined aim. The blog postings from three cohorts have been analysed to determine the extent to which these aims were achieved. Blogging encouraged deeper and more varied reflection than occurs in single pieces of written reflection. There was also evidence of a direct influence on practice, with staff introducing blogging as a tool with their own students. Whilst an active learning community was established, this was transient, and has not been sustained after staff completed the course. Nevertheless, the experience has led to the emergence of learning communities in other locations.

Introduction

I first encountered the notion of blogging in an educational setting in June 2009 when a psychology colleague suggested it as a way of encouraging reflection, adding that 'writing something makes you feel better'. Churchill cites Selingo (2004) as highlighting the popularity of blogs amongst teachers because they 'require little effort to create and maintain, and enables them to give fast feedback' (Churchill 2011, 150). Several studies have found blogs to be a positive impact on learning, e.g. Tsai (2010) with trainee science teachers, Hramiak (2010) with UK trainee secondary teachers. Churchill himself found that 83%

of students in a post-graduate class 'agreed that blogging facilitated and contributed to their learning' (Churchill 2011, 152).

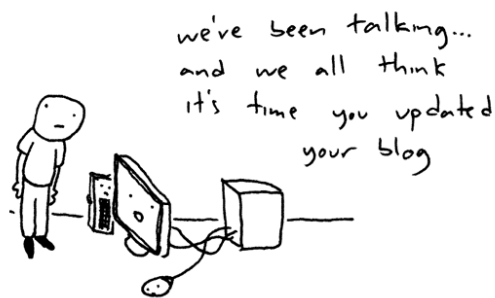
There seemed therefore good educational reasons for a blog being part of the curriculum of a professional development course, in this case the PGCert Learning and Teaching in HE (hereafter referred to as the PGCert) at UCLan. A blog was duly introduced to the PGCert in 2011, the initial intended purposes being to encourage participants to reflect on their practice. Over time there grew a desire to more purposefully create a learning community, and the blog was seen to be a vehicle to achieving that. In this case study I show how it was formalised into the curriculum, I explore the learning benefit to the participants, using quotes from postings, and I reflect on my own experience as facilitator.

Blog as assessment tool

As with all programmes, the learning outcomes of the PGCert have been reviewed over time, but have essentially retained the same principles. The relevant ones for this case study are:

- *Carry out critical reflection on your own professional progress and plan for future professional development over the long, medium and short term.*
- *Actively contribute to a community of practice*
- *Demonstrate engagement with professional ethics and values espoused by the University and Professional Bodies, regarding inter-alia inclusivity, quality assurance and enhancement*

Until 2011, the focus of the teaching team was on the first of these, personal self-reflection and identifying ongoing areas for development. We had, perhaps subconsciously, been trying to increase the emphasis on the cohort as a learning community, and to this end we introduced action learning sets into the timetabled workshops, and introduced an option of a blog for a 'reflective' assignment. The first blog tool we used in 11/12 was a customised platform from the University's learning technology group, with the option to share the blog with other participants. In 12/13 we moved to using the blackboard blogging tool, and the blog became a shared space, although there was again no stipulated requirement to respond to blog postings from other participants. In 2013/14 the blog, still on blackboard, was extended to cover both the final 20 credit modules, with a requirement that for each module there be 5 postings and 5 responses to the postings of others. In this year and the next a group from the UCLan Cyprus campus were part of the PGCert cohort. A blog cartoon was also added to the module information pack!



Finally, in 2014/15 we introduced the use of Google+ as the platform for the second module, with the same requirement for a minimum of 5 postings and 5 responses.

Educational practice

Other studies have analysed complete blogs e.g. Yang (2009) looked for evidence of critical reflection amongst trainee EFL teachers, who posted comments after each classroom session. With these in mind, I have interrogated the blogs from recent cohorts (from 2012/13 onwards), and found three main themes from participants' postings:

- a. Reflection on development. Staff have recognised and reported how the process of blogging has helped with their learning, and in some cases with personal development;
- b. Development of practice. In several instances staff had, or were planning to introduce blogs with their own students;
- c. Development of community. Many staff referred explicitly to how a community had been formed through the blogging process.

These cohere with other reports, and align with the learning outcomes of the course. In Yang's analysis of the content of EFL student teachers' blogs, four categories were found which were similar to those identified by Ho and Richards' earlier analysis of teacher journals (1993): theories of teaching; instructional approaches and methods; evaluations of teaching; self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses. The first theme from the PGCert blogs (reflection on development) aligns with the fourth category of Yang, while the second theme (development of practice) aligns with the first two of Yang. The third theme fits with the concept of communities of practice originally espoused by Wenger (1988). These are now explored in turn.

Reflection

It was apparent that use of the blog as a writing 'tool' did encourage a deeper level of reflection than had been evident through the previous formal piece of reflective writing. In 12/13 one colleague wrote *I have found writing a blog does help one to focus on what it is we have learned, and ask questions like: what did*

we know before we started the PGCert? and what have we learned along the way? if we hadn't been writing the blog then how could we discover first hand that this is learning in action? This is a nice instance of where the more informal nature of writing a blog encourages a deeper level of reflection.

Other instances of thoughtful reflection were found in the 13/14 cohort. One wrote: *I also want to reflect on a response D (tutor) wrote about in the blog- my 'perfectionism problem'. This has since helped me prioritise my workload and break tasks down into what is the most productive use of my time.* Another participant (13/14) reflected on his own procrastination, and then wrote *For me, I guess the importance of this reflection is that it has helped me to appreciate that my students may require more guidance about time-management.* This was further echoed by one of the participants from Cyprus who concluded *the main advantage has been the development of a culture of reflection, one where we as educators do not take things for granted but instead accept the dynamic nature of learning in higher education.*

In contrast to the previous requirement of a single written piece of reflection, the multiple entries of a blog allow for reflection at different points through the course, and on different incidents in the daily teaching role. Although much of the research in this area, of on-line platforms encouraging reflection, has been with trainee or 'pre-service' teachers, the findings do reflect the experience of the PGCert blog. Investigating the web logs of trainee teachers, Bolton and Hramaik (2012) used the term 'e-flection' to describe reflections that are both evolutionary and on-line. Several authors conclude that involving the perspectives of others enables the person practicing the reflection to become more critical about their reflection. This was definitely seen with the PGCert, where the exchange with the tutor(s) 'posting questions and asking for further reflection' (Yang, 2009, p.17) clearly prompted further (and deeper, more 'critical') reflection. This is also in line with the conclusion of Rocco (2010) that 'Making reflection public seems to have had a positive impact on the quality and style of reflection and interactions'. Feedback from the tutor was important here to identify to the participant that critical reflection was occurring. Since the blog was on-going though, this feedback was formative in nature, allowed for further development of critical reflection in subsequent blogs, and thus constituted a powerful instance of assessment *for learning*, as advocated in 'A marked improvement' (HEA, 2012).

Practice

Many of the blog postings were about staff's own experiences of teaching, assessing, giving feedback, and providing support to students. These exchanges were rich, very often accompanied by references, and provided the platform from which to reflect on practice. I suspect that this is a unique aspect of the PGCert blog; whereas undergraduates, or pre-service teachers, may not have sufficient experience to usefully share with peers, and 'expert' blogs tend to be a one-way flow of 'advice', the blog postings of these participants were an extension of discussions which took place in class. They were genuinely about

'shared experiences', rather than being prescribed for assessment, or contrived to pass on words of wisdom. In many instances they provided expert guidance on an aspect of teaching that went beyond the expertise of the tutor(s), thereby constituting a broad canvas of peer learning (Williams and Jacobs, 2004). Only this week (as I write) a previous participant commented on how useful, and encouraging, she found it to read about the experience of others.

One unexpected development was that several participants translated their experience of contributing to the blog to then setting up of a blog for their own students, a good example of the 'now what' stage of the reflective model of Driscoll (1994), in turn adapted from that of Boud *et al.* (1985). One wrote *The blogging process has been enjoyable and liberating. The blogging assignment is one that I have currently set up for a module that I have taken over for this academic year.* Another participant wrote *The main barrier of this process for me was time. Having never completed a blog before it has been a completely new process for me. I have LOVED it, it's been very therapeutic! I'm hoping I can use them on my modules, especially the e-modules.* In the following year another wrote *After reflection, I am now discussing with students the use of a blog, although we have yet to come to a conclusion regarding what will be the most suitable social media platform.*

I found this hugely encouraging, and it provided another instance of where modelling practice on the PGCert gave participants additional tools for their own practice. The value of using a blog as a tool for this was further confirmed for me at the SocMed in HE conference (Sheffield, 2015) where Caroline Thwaite reported results from a survey into the most useful social media for teaching. Responses revealed a blog as the highest rated tool, just above Twitter, and more than twice the number for discussion forums. The biggest 'usage' was in the area of sharing – among students and by the instructor – precisely how the PGCert blog operated. This reinforces Churchill's report that participants 'learnt from accessing and reading blogs which other students and teachers had posted' (Churchill, 2011); and agrees with Richardson that the blog merges the 'best of solitary reflection and social interaction' (Richardson, 2006, 20).

Community

To what extent though did blogging as an activity encourage or result in the creation of a learning community? From 12/13 there was already powerful affirmation as to the value of sharing on line. One posting read *I think that the major strength of an assignment developed as a blog, lies with the fact that the thoughts developed are shared within a small community rather than with just one person, the latter traditionally being the subject tutor.*

It was in June 2013 that I focussed explicitly on building a learning community, as my first posting of that year shows: *Am very interested to see how this will develop as ...It's my first real attempt at building a learning community through an on-line process. Several postings indicated that this was successful. One wrote I must admit, I am shy about sharing my understanding of teaching and learning because I have so little experience compared to the group. However, (the blog) forced me out of my comfort zone which is probably a good thing. All in all, I think I will be more confident in future blogging, which I intend to do.*

The participant who had posted about procrastination got several supportive responses and suggestions of approaches to take e.g. *Hiya, just read your post, good timing I've just posted a video that will hopefully motivate you and help stop procrastination. Also, the time management key concept sheet sounds great, can you post it??* This sort of interaction between participants was regular, and up to 9 comments connected to an initial posting have been observed. Interestingly I noticed that more comments were posted in response to personal revelations than to issues of practice.

In their exploration of online learning communities (OLC) Tang and Lam (2014) concluded that such ongoing growth and new inquiry require active participation and high quality interaction, which in turn require collaborative/interactive course elements together with commitment and support from OLC members. This is precisely what a blog as described here provides, and is an example of aligning teaching and learning to meet course objectives (Biggs, 2014).

By the end of 2014 the concept of community was stronger, in that participants were more overtly using the term community, as opposed to my supposing the existence of one. One participant commented *Which takes us on to this blog – what is it doing for us? I'll admit we all probably have the assessment criteria in mind when we're posting, but I've really started to think about posting stuff which is just... interesting to me. Do we need our own community of practice outside the constraints of our assignment? How can we make that happen post-PGCert?* That posting elicited the following response: *Hi, I am not alone in agreeing with you, the Blog could or should continue, in as you say a less Learning Outcome focussed mode. Let's make it happen.* A further comment from a colleague at the Cyprus campus echoed these sentiments *I am assuming that when the module is done, the blog will "end". For some who can see the value of blogging for personal reflection as well as a medium for sharing experiences, it may be helpful to have a different medium where similar interactions can continue.*

This idea was in my thinking when for the 14/15 cohort I introduced Google+ as a platform for the blog, since this could continue independently of blackboard and the course. The desire to continue the community came through again, as evidenced by this posting *I am not sure what happens once the course has ended – are there opportunities to continue to be involved? To continue to blog? Ironically once the*

emphasis upon blogging as a condition has been removed I am sure that I would like to continue to participate, as and when possible. Another posted I do get a sense of community and really value learning from each other. It also gives the opportunity to encourage each other which, in the pressured environment in which we work, is a real benefit.

Sustaining a learning community?

Despite these good intentions though, the 'PGCert community' does seem to have been temporary, with few if any postings to the Google+ group after participants had graduated. Several staff have pointed out that a key element of a community is a shared purpose (Wenger, 1988), together with a link to assessment. Following the completion of the PGCert, these two drivers were no longer present. One participant articulated the situation well in a final posting *I think what has happened naturally is we have made our own learning communities based on people we have ended up sitting next to or working in groups with or peer observing. I worked with R and know that I have someone to go to for advice or a conversation about my teaching. Keeping the blog could be a way to try to maintain a group, but without assessment attached to it, I don't know how attended it would be.*

However, it is also apparent that the experience of being in an active, dynamic community through the blog has had an impact on staff's practice, and that new communities have been developed. One example is of a community formed on a course: *I have utilised the blog on blackboard - this worked very well - students posted their creative ideas around the stimulus they were working around, which served as documentation of them taking place. On reflection, I think the reason it worked so well was the sense of community it created - students are used to sharing work via forums like Facebook, but this set up a similar community feel in a more formalised/structured way.*

Another PGCert graduate reported on a community with other colleagues: *An important aspect of the PGCert was a sense of community of learners all supporting each other. This is something I have taken forward by developing a peer support group, for new lecturers, with a colleague also from the PGCert. Social media was a key thread through the PGCert and this is something I have been keen to develop, after seeing the all the possibilities of using it. I am now the social media lead for my College, pushing social media forward.*

Thus although *this* (the PGCert) community has not survived in a formal way, there has been a wider *impact* of the participants' experience, informing and developing communities more widely across the University.

Thoughts from facilitator; recommendations for others

My own practice and expertise developed considerably since the first foray into blogging, when I (inadvisably) allowed staff to choose their own platform. Moving to a single platform made the process much easier to manage, and I found that I was actively looking forward to reading the postings, which helped to develop the habit of checking, and responding, first thing in the morning. Responding quickly to postings was important in order to maintain the enthusiasm and momentum of the participants. Not only was there an element of this being 'fun', as remarked upon by participants (e.g. *blogging is fun! Fun can be a key element in both the assessment and other areas of teaching and learning – when something is fun, learning and retention is made much easier*), but I was also able to share some of the ideas and references with staff in this group and more widely through other networks.

The blog as a tool also helped me to support staff in a more directive way. On occasions this manifested by prompting individuals to reflect on how their practice aligned with the UK PSF (one of the module learning outcomes), which in turn led to creative and in-depth replies. Many staff in fact commented on how they now understood and indeed valued the PSF as an aid to their professional development. On other occasions I made blog postings on my own experience as a way of prompting discussion.

Each cohort fell roughly into three groupings: a) early and enthusiastic adopters, b) slower but engaged adopters, c) stragglers who were struggling with the course for a variety of reasons. There was strong mutual support within the sub-groups, and with the latter group in particular, I consciously gave more overt encouragement, both through responses to postings, and through individually directed emails. All did eventually complete the postings necessary for the assignment. This though leads me to suggest that when planning to use a blog, it might be wise to anticipate variation in the speed of adoption, and to create smaller sub-groups. A group of over 30 (the PGCert cohort) was at times too large for effective interaction between all participants; sub-groups of around 10 would probably be more effective. Indeed, this was suggested by several of the participants in their feedback, feedback which otherwise was extremely positive about the experience.

In conclusion, using a blog has been successful at engendering deeper and more critical reflection and in developing a sharing in a community of practice; this is a good example of what Dewey (1933) referred to, that if we want to make our experience educative, it is essential to support ongoing growth in a process of continuing new inquiry.

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