

Research Article

Online blogs as a reflective tool - the experience and support needs of a group of international students in Higher Education

David Weatherall¹ (*Sheffield Hallam University*)

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Abstract

This research focuses on the use of online reflective blogging to enhance an undergraduate Level 6 Built Environment Integrated Project (IP) module and analyses the needs and issues of this form of learning for a final year block attendance cohort of 276 international (Malaysian) students at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). To this group English is a third language, with Chinese (Mandarin) and Malay being their familiar languages. There are cultural differences between this cohort and a similar group from the UK - they are less likely to 'open up' for example. This work analyses their support needs and skills in reflective blogging and examines the issues surrounding the use of blogs in providing a reflective mechanism. The research examines student blogs from a quantitative and qualitative perspective to assess whether it is a useful and effective addition to their module learning. The research finds that there are a number of factors which influence the adoption of blogs including assessment, initial and ongoing support. It also finds that feedback is a vital component of the ongoing process of blogging and also identifies the concerns within the cohort of the use of the English language. The report goes on to make recommendations for the continued development of blogging for this cohort of learners.

Keywords: *reflection; blogs; learning; feedback; higher education; international students*

Introduction

Reflection and reflective practice have been key buzzwords in education practice for some time now and is becoming a popular mechanism within Higher Education (HE) to enhance learning by examining experiences with a view to improvement. As a learning tool reflection

¹ Corresponding author email address: d.weatherall@shu.ac.uk

has history over many decades, for example, Dewey (1933, p78) argues that 'We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience'. Dewey defines reflection as 'active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of reasons that support it and the further consequences to which it leads' (ibid. p.9). There are of course other definitions of reflective learning and some focus on the processes of introspection and retrospection. Reflection is derived from humanistic theory where learners need to be empowered and to have control over the learning process. This school is associated with Carl Rogers, Maslow and could also include Kolb (Atherton, 2014). Critical reflection also forms is a major objective of adult education, Mezirow (1990, p5) states:

Perhaps even more central to adult learning than elaborating established meaning schemes is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances. This is a crucial learning process....

According to Moon (2004) the process of reflection allows learners to make more sense of their experiences and develop deeper learning. There is a plethora of pedagogical research on the topic of reflection but this work is associated with the process as combined with web 2.0 technologies, in particular online blogs. Blogs are now a well-established vehicle for personal reflection and social commentary on a wide array of subjects across the web but importantly they can play a very effective role in the delivery of a formal curriculum. They can and are used to raise awareness of new information, views, feelings and perspectives. Blogs can be regarded as personalised web pages which are a 'protected space' (Gumbrecht, 2004) and give a student social presence in which the student leads the conversation with the student being in control (Mak, 2010, pp275-284). But what exactly do these methods mean to international students and how can we develop our capacity for reflection using blogs with this type of student? The purpose of this research is to identify a framework of needs and support for reflection with the use of online blogs resulting in a 'better', deeper and richer learner experience for a cohort of international students. This study focuses on how to help and develop international learners to become more reflective in an *Integrated Project* module at SHU. An attempt will be made to define how reflective blogging is perceived by learners during module study and to outline the main reflective practice skills. The researcher believes that blog reflection supports a deeper learning through diverse and alternative perspectives which, if developed properly, improves the self-analysis skills of the learner. Existing

research suggests that blogs can be very useful for reflective learning generally (Churchill, 2009) and the researcher is an enthusiastic proponent of reflection. In this research, as practitioners the goal was to promote greater learner engagement with eLearning methods and the reflective process in general as it can help an individual and inform them about what might need to be done differently or what worked or what didn't work. It may also adjust the learners' approach and illustrate how they may need to develop their behaviour or practice. As educators we seek interesting and innovative ways in which to convey knowledge and improve the communications skills of students and also communicating with their peers. Throughout this study the focus was on the 'whole' picture from introduction through to final student blog output. Currently there is little research that brings together all the aspects of international students, reflection and the use of online blogs and this study serves to add a contribution to this pool of knowledge.

Key Theories

This research adopts a constructivist viewpoint and maintains that reflective blogging is influenced and constructed by the students themselves. Social 'social constructivism', which emphasises how meanings and understandings grow out of social encounters, was laid down by Vygotsky (1962). Because of this social interaction the researcher believes that the success of the blogging depends on the quality of the interaction between the individual and others (be they student or teacher etc.). Work in the field of experiential learning was carried out by David A. Kolb in 1984 whose work focused on how the learner would learn through discovery and their experience. Kolb used the word 'experiential' which has its origin on work by others such as Lewin, Piaget, Dewey and Freire. Reflective practice has a place in conventional education but has grounding in more practical subjects. Online according to Farmer et al. (2008) blogs draw on the social constructivist educational theories of Vygotsky and Ferdig usefully provide four central pedagogic benefits of blogging for students:

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

Key Technologies

Developments in blogging technology, particularly the widespread availability of web 2.0 technologies, offer many opportunities for the collection of assessment and learning for reflective purposes. This study used a free tool *Google Blogger* which was immediately available through the student logins at SHU. This immediacy is very beneficial and reduces the need for support across different platforms. Blogger allows all the normal functions one would expect and is available immediately online (anonymous or otherwise). There can be a multitude of evidence types such as images, comments, posts, peer reviews, international access, video and links to other resources and so on. This immediacy of the *Blogger* technology, particularly with the emergence of mobile technologies, tablets, smartphones etc is very valuable for this type of in-module reflective learning. The very act of writing a blog entry requires that the learner has to consider what they say, as they say it, how they feel, what they have learnt and also consider their experience. In this way it becomes one of the main pedagogical drivers for the use of reflective blogs. Work by Beale (2007, p4) found that blogs were 'an effective tool for supporting students in reflective practice' and concluded that blogging is 'an effective, engaging approach for supporting other educational practices.'

Research questions and methodologies

This study was around three key questions:

1. What are the key learning issues driving the use of reflective blogs and the barriers to the successful delivery for module assessment for this cohort of international students?
2. What are the critical factors and support needs of this cohort of international students when developing reflective blogs?
3. What recommendations can be formulated as a result of these research questions, for the introduction, preparation and use of reflective blogs for these learners?

This was implemented through collection and analysis of 'real' data from a study of a real blog implementation within a university environment. This empirical research is interested in a number of inter-related issues: how will this type of student react to the use of blogs and whether they will be adopted and what the needs are of this student cohort with regard to implementation and ongoing support, exploring their views, the drivers, barriers and issues on

the use of blogs for this cohort. The primary focus was a single research group: the case study.

Data Collection and analysis

The instruments for research were identified as a case study together with a series of survey questionnaires together with a semi structured focus group interview. The research uses a mixed model approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) with a blend of online questionnaires both multiple choice and some open 'qualitative' questions to allow greater expression using Google Forms. This Google technology has immediacy both in terms of creation and deployment to the sample set. Questionnaires were placed on the module Blackboard website with links notified to learners by email. Google forms proved to be an excellent platform for data collection and presentation. The overall methodology represents an in depth approach with a wide coverage of the blog process.

First stage (quantitative)

Initial Questionnaire

All students (complete collection sampling (Cohen, Manion et al, 2011:158)) were asked to complete a short 'background' Initial questionnaire. Focus of the research was based on a qualitative framework to assess the blogging pedagogical benefits to the learner. Part of this work is quantitative and with a cohort size of 276 and gave a significant insight.

End of Blog Questionnaire

All students were asked to complete this questionnaire. The design was based on and adapted from ideas of Learning as acquisition, reflection, community and collaboration (Fenwick and Tennant, 2004). The response rate was reasonable, as the students moved into high workload and fatigue towards the end of their module block. This questionnaire was more focused on the blog process itself and provided some very interesting data.

Second stage (qualitative)

Focus Group

Any issues raised from questionnaires were further investigated within a focus group of volunteer students. The Focus group comprised convenience sampling of 11 volunteers requested by a blanket email from the cohort to form a focus group to discuss emergent issues from the prior questionnaires.

Qualitative Blog Sampling

This was convenience sampling of a set of 20 student blogs. This was a general ‘overview’ and qualitative assessment of blog 'student effort' and their content. It cannot be statistically generalised. An assessment was made of their quality based on Moon’s framework (Moon, 2004) and was qualitative based to establish the quality of the output.

The data methods are summarized in Table 1 as an evidence grid.

Table 1: Data Collection Evidence Grid

Questions	Student Questionnaire(s)	Focus Group (interview)	Student Blog Analysis
Evaluate the key issues driving the use of reflective blogs and barriers to their successful delivery as reflective tools for international students in assessment at module level.	x		
What are the critical factors and support needs of international students when developing reflective blogs.	x	x	x
What recommendations can be formulated as a result of these research questions, for the introduction, preparation and use of reflective blogs for these learners? ** Aggregated and synthesised from all data sources.	x	x	x

Findings

The following issues were identified:

General Perceptions: This study illustrated a number of issues with blogs as a reflection tool. The cohort was confident and well equipped for IT work but was not familiar with blogging or reflective writing (almost entirely). Blogging was perceived as useful and easily recognised as helping them develop expertise raising new awareness with comments such as:

‘We are able to put down our information on our blog even in lectures this is a good point for blogging’ and ‘It’s kind of interesting that we use blog to learn’ or ‘I think using the blogging is quite useful for me’.

There were some key turnarounds in attitudes, with some very enthusiastic uptake and suggests there is good pedagogical justification for these methods with comments such as *'Help us to reflect how to process information'*, *'Try to find where the key points of learning are'* and *'Helps in my personal development'*. In terms of the cohort, 50% regarded blogging as a 'valuable asset' with only 12% positively disagreeing.

Collaboration: The cohort recognised the benefits of sharing and learning in a collaborative way which was seen as a major positive (71%). Comments include *'Positive - opens up information to everyone'* and *'Other people can see your point of view and you can see other people's point of view on certain issues this creates a pathway where we can exchange information'*. Interestingly there was some concern that sharing might lead to 'theft' of ideas with comments such as:

'About sharing the blog method, some students might not be willing to share their blog because they are afraid that their information might be taken by others or they might feel that they have written some wrong information'.

This was a surprise as this cohort seems to enjoy sharing generally, yet it seems to be limited to knowledge rather than their own ideas. It was borne out however when assessing completed blogs with many students not asking for comments from their peers, as this led to having to share their blogs. This wasn't something many wanted to do. This was not felt to be a serious issue but is mentioned in work by Beale (2007). However other studies by Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008), Dawson et al (2007), Churchill (2009), Luján-Mora and Juana-Espinosa (2007) they did not focus on these issues. There were mixed views on whether blogs should be group or personal.

English Language: This cohort sees the use of reflective blogs as interesting but English remains a worry for the whole group and there were indeed English issues on their completed blogs. But they felt that using blogs would help with writing skills and developing a blog can help with English skills. This seems to be a point of pride as they seemingly admire the UK and to wholeheartedly adopt our ways and lifestyle. However a common theme was that extra support was seen as necessary and indeed this was identified in Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) and Dawson et al (2007) and serves to support the pool of generalisation from these similar studies.

Support and Feedback: For the majority of the group the learning curve was not a problem, with only 25% seeing it as an issue. But the learners were not familiar with blogs and see it as complicated. Ongoing support was highlighted and also the need for feedback on their blog. Feedback was a major issue with the group and they felt it was very important that they get some form of ongoing feedback. This could include peer review or tutor review. Without feedback they felt they were wasting their time because no one was going to look at their blog. Comments included: *'Feedback is important if I don't get any feedback then I will be discouraged'* and *'Feedback is the key thing for me, the communication, to know whether you are doing the right thing, whether you are reflecting'* and *'No participants no feedback you cannot do everything solely with no feedback it's useless really'*. This was a recurrent theme and the importance of feedback, both staff and peer and that without it they would be discouraged from participating. Again this is not a surprise and was identified by Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008), Churchill (2009), Dawson et al (2007) and Oravec (2009) in particular. This would be assisted by more initial tutorials and guidance about creating blogs, peer reviews etc. It was also identified that a 'reflective blog' caused confusion with being more than just a 'diary'. This was a common problem and seen frequently in the assessed blogs.

Reflection: In terms of reflection, 84% of the cohort could see benefits of blogging to help them grow by looking back and this was very encouraging. The blog used in this work was focused on reflection but during the focus group interview this formed only a small part of the conversation but had a positive outcome. Positive comments included: *'Help us to reflect how to process information'* and *'You can grow through the process of blogging as a group but later reflect as an individual'*.

Assessment: The blog formed part of their module assessment and raised some issues. The group commented that the assessment made them focus on blogging because of it - *'Since the blogging is introduced as part of the assessment I will just try my hardest'*. However to the real crunch questions, when asked if they would get involved in blogging if it wasn't assessed, there was a unanimous *'No'*. This may be one of the key findings of this research sadly - *'I might feel that I'm doing it just for the sake of the assignment'*. Questionnaire results suggested that 38% of students felt that the blog should not attract such a high 40% module weighting. However this was explored in the focus group and it suggested that the group

(n=11) were split with no perfect overall spread identified. Assessment was the main driver and sadly they wouldn't get involved without it.

Learning Styles: The cohort liked the idea of combining their IP module studies with IT, but had difficulty with SHU learning styles, one stating they were '*shocked*' when they first arrived:

'...come here it's different some different lecture and at first all of us were shocked' and 'in Kuala Lumpur we can say that our teaching is traditional when we come to SHU and do reflective blogging I would say this is a 360 degree change from what we usually do in Malaysia'.

This was an interesting insight into their familiar learning styles in Malaysia. Reflection is not easy for them as they are not generally willing to challenge their tutors:

'This blogging is a new way for us...at first I ask my friend what is this blog? What are we going to do with it? What is the purpose?'

As a result motivation with some students was indicated by staff as a problem. Some students also mentioned the need to be open minded and come prepared with comments such as '*Students should be interested and open to learning new ways of learning*'. Further factors included 'typical' student issues such as the relaxed style was too relaxed, '*methods are cool but makes us lazy*', '*...in holiday mood [being international students]*' but also cultural differences (not specified).

Negative Issues: With any normal distribution, some candidates are simply not interested and it was evident that the reflective blogs, whilst mainly positive, some were only regarded as 'luke-warm' in their overall commitment. A small number of respondents had past experience of blogs and as a result commented '*[I] stop looking for two years at personal blogs*'. A large part of the concern was about losing interest and this seemed to be tied to the issue of feedback. No feedback, no interest seemed to be the theme. '*People may have spent an expensive time may find it boring*' and '*People just lose interest in blogging*'. In addition a predictable reticence was indicated by unfamiliarity with blogging: '*I've never done it before and I'm not familiar with this technology*'. However in defence of their Malaysian experience,

some counter to this last statement: *'In Malaysia we are quite modern and open minded and blogging is nothing new to us'*. Despite this a common problem was the lack of understanding of what a reflective blog is *'... we cannot focus on reflection because we don't know how to. What is the reflection?'*. This was made worse by the confusion with keeping a diary despite the guidance notes provided on Blackboard - *'It's about my diary rather than education'*.

Output (Blog Assessment): There was a good overall standard of blogs and blog posts from the respective blog owners (learners). The data suggests that the learners are perhaps accepting to fairly enthusiastic about their blogs (measured by number of posts). Some students used images to enhance their blogs but some preferred to keep it simple (and perhaps less appealing). Some blogs have low or no additional resources attached to their reflective blogs. This could either be time related, fatigue or perhaps lack of awareness of alternative evidence or some other factor. This suggests a need for guidance and support. One of the key issues identified by students is the need for feedback. Some completed blogs showed a poor number of posts (in some cases none) from their peers. This data conflicts with other findings but could be as a result of several factors such as lack of engagement, not wishing to share, time, workload etc.

Recommendations

The following aggregated recommendations are made:

Assessment: Set clear and supportive guidance about the formative assessment aspect of blogs. If blogging is to be assessed then it must be compulsory. (It is felt, and found in other studies, that if not assessed, blogging will be less successful).

Content: Awareness needs to be raised about the wide range of (rich) resources that could form evidence for blogs and adequate time should be allowed for students to make posts during their assessed blogging activities. Additional guidance should be given about wider methods and content which could be used to enhance their blogs, for example, references to wider reading, articles or books.

Reflection: Clarity and guidance is required from the outset to make it clear what the process of reflection is designed to achieve. Even paper based introductory tutorials may help. Make sure learners avoid the idea of a diary.

IT Seminars: Workshop or seminars are essential and build early blog feedback into the experience with at least one tutorial on the purposes of the reflective blogs.

Feedback: This is vital. It is paramount to ensure the students have some mutual feedback opportunities throughout their blogging process. This should include reading blogs of others, receiving comments and previewing tasks of others and reading feedback received in relation to these (Churchill, 2009). This must include both peer and staff/tutor feedback. This is the single most important factor which lubricates the blog machine.

Language: For this cohort, English is a third language was found to be an issue. It is recommended that future assignment design takes this into account with a carefully designed assignment weighting (in terms of the requirement for written English) to make it fairer, easier and more relaxing for the learner to use reflective blogs.

Support (Induction): Ensure that there is sufficient tutoring and introduction to blogging technologies on arrival and there is adequate technical support available.

Conclusions

The study was interesting and it would appear that there is a pedagogical benefit in the use of reflective blogs for international students. Throughout the focus was on the 'whole' picture from introduction through to final output. Perhaps this was too wide and a tighter focus would improve future work. This would also suggest a different approach; different methodology based perhaps how the learners gained their knowledge and the epistemology of different approaches.

Future work

Wider research in this study would include:

- Study of the benefits of prior support
- Support for the introduction of blog tools and methods

- Effects of ongoing feedback on blog development
- What benefits and limitations reflection (if any) creates?
- Did the use of reflective blogs improve overall module learning (in a quantifiable way)?
- Were the tutors comfortable with TEL methods – what are their fears and anxieties?

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