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# Discombobulations and transitions

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Discombobulations and Transitions:

Using blogs to make meaning of and from within liminal experiences.

Jessica MacLaren, PhD (Corresponding Author)

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Nursing Studies

School of Health in Social Science

The University of Edinburgh

Old Medical Quad

Teviot Place

Edinburgh

EH8 9AG

0131 650 3889

Jessica MacLaren holds a PhD in Nursing Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include narrative methodologies, sociology of emotions, and personal and professional development for nurses.

Lorena Georgiadou, PhD, Lecturer, School of Health in Social Science, The University of Edinburgh

Lorena Georgiadou holds an MSc and PhD in Counselling Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently Lecturer in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Science at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include multiculturalism in Higher Education, counselling practice and research practice; student support and development; and qualitative methodologies.

Jan Bradford, MSc, PhD Student, School of Health in Social Science, The University of Edinburgh

Jan Bradford holds an MSc in Counselling Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently a doctoral researcher focused on Family Secrets within the School of Health at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include writing as inquiry, collaborative writing and performative methodologies. Recently, she has become interested in how technologies such as blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram will impact and influence qualitative research methodologies.

Liz Taylor, PhD, Research Fellow, School of Health in Social Science, The University of Edinburgh

Liz Taylor is a research fellow in ECRED, Edinburgh Centre for Research on the Experience of Dementia at the University of Edinburgh. Liz The overall focus of her research interest is the experience of people living with dementia and in engaging people with dementia in research and the co-production of knowledge.

Abstract

We live in a digitalised world, where social media have become an integral part of scholarly life. Digital tools like blogs can facilitate various research-related activities, from recruitment, to data collection, to communication of research findings. In this paper we analyse our experience of blogging to suggest that they provide a useful resource for qualitative researchers working with reflexive accounts of personal experience. Through our personal story of engaging with blogging while travelling abroad to participate in a conference, we explore how we used the blog in different ways to concretise transitional processes, to engage in public storytelling, and to form a network of relationships (self, others and blog). We argue that the technology of blogging is particularly suited to creating sense-making narratives from liminal or discombobulating experiences; and highlight the usefulness of understanding the production of data through blogging as culturally located within networks of relationships and normative discourses.

*Keywords*: blogging, narrative, reflexive methods, digital tools.

**Introduction**

*All our bags are packed, we are ready to go. A group of UK-based early career researchers are getting organised for the 10th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Our panels on the subject of 'Neither Here Nor There' were accepted months ago, and now, two weeks before the conference, we find ourselves finalising our papers, ironing our summer clothes and thinking about liminality.*

Liminality is the thread linking our individual papers together, which broadly speaking, tackle issues of in-betweeness in relation to clinical and research practice. Although the concept originated in anthropology in the work of van Gennep (1960), it was Turner who developed the theory of liminality, so that usage expanded widely. Turner (1979) describes liminality as a rite of passage, a period of transition, where individuals are in-between their start and end points, or 'neither here nor there'.

*As early career researchers, attending an international conference for the first time is one such rite of passage. Travelling to a new continent is another.*

Liminality is widely used in many areas of scholarship, risking its dilution, but useful aspects of liminality for this paper are the sense of ambiguity and disorder and the confusion of usual categories (Turner, 1979). Qualitative research often entails similar aspects: it can be messy, ambiguous, disruptive, and discombobulating (Finlay, 2002; Law, 2004). Qualitative researchers typically engage in subjectivist forms of inquiry, an approach that entails absorption in the subject matter, and a willingness to go with the flow of research. This can be a liminal-like experience, taking us into unknown places, but also ones that are exciting and full of possibility.

A rather neglected aspect of liminality is as a time/space of opportunity, enabling camaraderie with others in the same situation.  Pre-existing social roles lose importance, and a lack of rules  can invite enjoyment, creativity and playfulness (Turner, 1979). Again, we compare this to the playful and creative aspects of qualitative research, especially (although not exclusively) in non-traditional approaches such as art-based and performative methodologies.

*"A blog? Really? What's that about"? As we approach the conference, an academic blog is set up by the panels' organiser.  The idea is to create a platform to share experiences, provide food for thought, and create a space for liminality-related discussions.*

Our blog began as a way to document ideas, and experiment with knowledge exchange and community engagement, but it developed into a rich and challenging activity. Several months later, therefore, we decided to conduct a small study, exploring this process further.  Taking the blog as a form of self-generated, reflexive data, we investigated how we each engaged with blogging, and how meanings became inscribed in the blog. We aimed to explore our experiences of blogging and how such activities may inform research practice. So we set out to understand how blogging influenced and became part of the discombobulations of international travel and attending an academic conference, and subsequently our memories and understandings of these experiences.

In this paper we argue that our experiment highlights some of the possibilities and pitfalls of using blogging in qualitative research. Our, perhaps narrow, focus on blogging is guided by the distinctive wholeness that blogs provide in relation to other social media platforms. Blogs entail agency and purpose, as they are created by individuals for specific reasons. They also invite reflexive, longer posts that usually speak to a particular experience

and which have a different quality to posts on communal platforms like Twitter or Facebook. We suggest that qualities of blogs (immediate, public, largely permanent, group or individual), can offer new resources and freedoms for reflexive meaning-making, while also shaping how meaning is made. To support our argument theoretically, we draw upon narrative theory and conceptualise blogs as ways of public storytelling. In the next section, we explore blogs as a digital tool for qualitative researchers, and in particular for people who work reflexively with self-generated data (e.g. autoethnography, writing as inquiry). Our blog was an academic one, situated in the professional academic sphere, and so we discuss a selection of the relevant literature. Finally, we suggest a perspective on blogs as public storytelling.

## Blogs as a Digital Tool for Qualitative Researchers

A contraction of the words 'Web' and 'log', blogs began with the birth of the World Wide Web in 1990 (Rettberg, 2008). Originally stable, log-style entries detailing a complete presentation of the users' interests, blogs have evolved over time, into a regularly updated and essayistic format. Rettberg (2008) argues that whilst it is almost impossible to form a watertight definition of 'blog' most people distinguish easily whether a website is a blog or not, suggesting that "a set of conventions" (p. 22) have been established for this genre of blog writing.

Blogging provides a fast-moving field for study, responding to rapidly changing uses of digital technologies, and in recent years, qualitative researchers have increasingly paid attention to the value of blogs as a research tool as well as a subject for study. Wilson et al. (2015) argue that blogs have much to offer qualitative researchers, offering a solution to many of the longstanding concerns of qualitative methodologies, by providing a platform for documenting reflective descriptions of personal experiences. However, while Wilson et al.

(2015) identify numerous examples of blogs being used in health-related qualitative research, most of these studies use pre-existing ('found') blogs, rather than blogs created specifically for research. Similarly, a general search of SocINDEX for terms relating to 'blogs', 'reflexivity', 'autoethnography', or 'writing as a method of inquiry', shows that most studies use found blogs. We could find only a small number of articles in which reflexive data were generated through blogs. It seems, therefore, that blogs and blogging constitute an underused resource for reflexive researchers working with self-generated data.

In reflexive qualitative research methods using self-generated data, the act of writing is in itself a formative part of the research process, and this has been extensively explored elsewhere, most seminally by Richardson and St Pierre (2005). Qualitative researchers using these approaches do not seek to replicate experience, instead they enter conversation and make people 'feel' (Bochner, 2014). It is not a question of "writing up" research, but of really "getting it down" (Goodall, 2000). These are not straightforward intellectual endeavours; rather writing as inquiry is a risky and slippery practice (Speedy, 2008). The technologies and genres of writing are therefore part of the creative analytic process through which researchers evolve their exploration of a phenomenon, and communicate with others (cf. Speedy 2015).

The technology of blogs means that they can provide a convenient platform for gathering together a range of materials (e.g. text, music, photographs) thus providing a resource for researchers (Chang, 2013). Blogs and other digital tools also allow people who are physically separated to make connections, and so may facilitate collaborative forms of research involving conversations between researchers (cf. Dutta & Basu, 2013; Speedy, 2015). For researchers who wish to connect with others beyond the academy, blogs may allow them to locate themselves in a particular community (Shoemaker, 2013), something

which may be of particular interest to autoethnographers reflecting on the inter-relationship of 'auto' and 'ethno'. For example, Olive (2012) (who studied women and surfing), describes how blogging as a dialogical process became a way of embedding herself within a particular community, allowing her "to connect, to access people and opinions that I would not have been able access, and to illustrate where and how my research ideas have relevance beyond women who surf in my home town" (, p. 74).

As Olive (2012) illustrates, a feature of blogging is the possibility of connection to other blogs.  The construction of the online 'blogosphere' creates communities which researchers can join, and pathways along which they can travel (cf. Bortree, 2007). Blogging, therefore is not only a way of sourcing or producing data; it is also a way of participating in an important digital dimension of our social and cultural worlds (Hookway, 2008).

Arguably, the technology of blogs is particularly well-suited to making meaning either of, or from within ephemeral, inaccessible, or disruptive processes.  Researchers variously argue that blogs are a good way of capturing 'in the moment' experiences, and accessing groups who may be hard to reach through non-digital means (Eysenbach et al., 2015).  Furthermore, Wilson et al. (2015) argue that blogs provide a new kind of naturalistic closeness to the authorial voices of others, while Hookway (2008) suggests that the potential anonymity of blogs allows authors to write in a relatively unselfconscious way.

The assumption that blogs are in some way a less censored form of communication is one that we problematize below, but blog technology clearly offers qualitative researchers some new opportunities in the production of publically accessible texts, and the development of conversational communities.  These opportunities have been enthusiastically embraced in

the realm of academia, and academic blogging has developed as a means of educating others, of expressing oneself and as a research tool (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013).

**Blogging in Academia**

Academic blogs (of which ours was one), are situated within the context of an affiliated academic institution (Dennen, 2009), and this has implications for how the blogs are used. In the early years of blogging this constituted a relaxed and informal space within the institutional context, with authors controlling their own output (Maitzen, 2012). More recently, however, institutions have realised the possible reputational risks associated with blogging (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013). Universities are paying more attention to the activities of blogging academics, for example, supporting suitable blogs as a public relations exercise (Kirkup, 2010).

The literature on academic blogging suggests that as a form of communication and self-expression, blogging is a way of developing and performing private and professional identities, and may offer an opportunity to experiment with new or alternative identities (Dennen, 2009; Kirkup, 2010). For example, the chatty and informal tone commonly used in academic blogging is an alternative to the more traditional academic style, and is seen as a desirable method for communicating with a wide audience (Goodfellow & Graham, 2007; Rettberg, 2008).

The informality and apparent freedom of blogs can lead to the assumption that they present a more 'authentic' author than scholarly publications (cf. Hookway, 2008). However, the apparent artlessness or spontaneity of blogs often conceals the effort and expertise involved in their construction (Dennen, 2009). The assumption that blogs are not as 'polished' as a book or article may be misleading, with blogs being as self-conscious as any

other form of public communication (Ewins, 2005).  Furthermore, Mewburn and Thomson (2013) suggest that academics are generally writing towards an academic community, and view their blogs as an iteration of academic and publishing identity.

Kirkup (2010) argued that far from being an emancipatory activity, blogging can be understood as a Foucauldian technology of self, in that inner or hidden aspects of what is perceived to be an authentic self are revealed through self-reflection via the blog, thus making them subject to regulation according to normative discourses (Foucault, 1978). Blogs are produced in the public domain, and, despite the vaunted quality of anonymity, academic blogs are generally connected to a real-world identity.  This self-disclosure in the public domain makes relationship with the audience a key concern.

As discussed above, one of the advantages of blogs for qualitative researchers is the potential for collaboration and communication, but this ideal is problematized by some.  For example, Mewburn and Thomson (2013) argued that the idea of blogging as inherently dialogical is not borne out in practice, and Kirkup (2010) argued that for many academic bloggers, the "idea of an audience" and of '"practising a blogging identity" may be more important that an "actual audience" (p. 83).  In a similar vein, Dean (2010, p. 38) suggests that, far from being an inter-relating community, it is more accurate to think of blogs as self-contained islands of an archipelago – 'blogipelago' – in which it is difficult "to move from one island or network to another".

These critiques contrast with picture of blogs as collaborative and dialogical that is put forwards by writers/researchers like Speedy (2015), Dutta and Basu (2013), or Shoemaker (2013).  This suggests that while the technology of blogs may allow or facilitate connection with others it does not inevitably do so.  It is possible for blogs to exist as isolated

entities. Nevertheless, blogs do have a fundamentally communicative quality, and Kirkup's (2010) observations suggest that the relationship with audience is an important part of blogging. Even where the audience is imagined, the blogger is still writing towards them, and so while blogs may not necessarily be dialogical, they are relational.

**Storytelling in Blogs**

As Rettberg (2008) observes, blogging has developed as a widely recognisable genre, and the style of writing which has become common in blogs is one of storytelling about personal experience (Rogers, 2015). Narrative and storytelling are widely understood as means of not only communicating experience, but also making meaning of/from experience (Ricoeur 1983/1984). Storytelling through blogging may be partial or fragmented, in that it is not a fully developed beginning, middle and end story, with characters and a plot (Polkinghorne, 1988). Nevertheless this is still part of the mimetic process of narrative structuration through which already interpreted experiences are emploted and communicated to others, who interpret them anew (Ricoeur, 1983/1984). Blogging as public storytelling may therefore offer a way of making sense of discombobulating or liminal experiences.

Liminal experiences are arguably times when well thought out, structured stories fail, or when we are between stories. And yet, as Ricoeur (1991) argues, the possibility of storying is always present in our already interpreted experiences: "life [is] a story in search of a narrator" (p. 425), and narrative structuration is the main way in which we make meaning of our experiences, and communicate these meanings to others. Personal essaying, or journaling, are common techniques for making sense of personal experiences, but unlike blogs they are not located in a private sphere (Alleyne, 2015). As discussed above, while blogs can be anonymised, they are often connected to an embodied identity. The relationship between

blogger and audience, and the accompanying situatedness in a meaning-making community, influences the kind of story that can or cannot be told through a blog (Plummer, 1995).

Plummer's (1995) work on the emergence of shared stories suggests that it is difficult for individuals to communicate experiences where there is no story template.  Furthermore, even if an individual is able to shape a story, the relational nature of narrative meaning depends upon a receptive audience (Plummer, 1995).  However, Plummer (1995) observes that despite these impediments, new stories do develop within communities.  In this process blogs may offer certain advantages, in that they are wide-reaching and egalitarian, and so may enhance the possibility of connecting with others who share the blogger's experiences, allowing the formation of a meaning-making community (Rogers, 2015).

There has been little investigation of the potential for blogs to aid in the telling of stories from within or about liminal experiences, but the writing style used, and accessibility of blogging, as well as the potential connection with different communities, suggest that it could offer new opportunities for the creation of these kinds of amorphous, transitional narratives. Our work aims to showcase this possibility through one blogging-related case study.

**Methods**

Methodologically our work is located within a horizontal, peer 'collaborative scholarship' framework (Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2010), with a focus on reflexivity and self-other relations (Siltanen, Willis, & Scobie, 2008). Team-based approaches to qualitative research have attracted little attention in the literature and tend to focus on methodological processes, techniques or challenges (Wasser & Bresler, 1996). While acknowledging the demands of such processes, we adopted a different standpoint. We "tuned in" to the

collective reflexive processes and conceptualised the group as a "critical methodological tool, one that deserves active consideration rather than simply passive acknowledgment" (Wasser & Bresler, 1996, p. 7). As a result, we paid particular attention to our 'interpretative zone', that is, the "intellectual realm… in which researchers bring together their different kinds of knowledge, experience, and beliefs to forge new meanings through the process of joint inquiry" (Wasser & Bresler, 1996, p. 13) to reach a better understanding of how collective reflexivity led to new understandings.

The starting point of our inquiry was the creation of the blog. Our aim was to understand how we had created our entries, and how this process had influenced our concurrent experiences of attending an international conference, and then our later memories and interpretations of these experiences.  Blogging began as a way of recording, describing and reflecting on our experiences of travel and participation in a conference. Some months later, authors 1, 2, and 3 (a sub-group of the initial blogging group), engaged in a reflective discussion of the blog posts and of our experiences of producing those. We recorded and transcribed our reflections, initially intending to produce a concrete text to which we could return during our analysis. However, at the end of our discussion we were surprised by the richness of the material produced, and the degree to which this conversation had engaged us in a further iteration of sense-making.  We therefore decided to treat the transcript, rather than the blog posts, as our object of analysis. In other words, we decided to focus on the reflexive analysis of our 'interpretative zone', rather than the initial generated 'data'.

We considered it essential to continue the process of collaborative sense making when analysing our data.  We therefore began our analysis by sitting together in a room, each reading through the transcript, making notes and slowly generating themes.  We then shared our notes, comparing and contrasting our individual themes, and working together to

aggregate our understandings. In this way we engaged in what Ricoeur (1983/1984) calls the mimetic spiral of narrative. Through the blog we told the stories of our travel and conference experiences (our academic rites of passage). We then told each other our stories of writing the blog. Our collaborative analysis then generated three over-arching themes from this discussion: *Relational Context and Practice; Immediacy*; *Performing Identity*. These themes drew together some of our initial analyses, and also reflected the higher-level meaning-making process in which we were engaging. In the following section we present those themes.

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**Presentation of Findings**

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**Relational Context and Practice**

Our first theme describes how the blog was created as a group endeavour, in the context of relationships within the main blogging group, 'guest' bloggers, and our readers. The blog was mainly written by a group of post-graduate students and early career academics travelling (loosely) together to an international conference without knowing each other well. Early postings were therefore written in the context of forming relationships, both within and outside the blog. The embodied relationships that were contemporaneous with the blog evolved over the course of the 7-10 days of writing. The conjunction of early posts within the blog contrasted with the geographical separation of members of the group; some of whom were already travelling, while others were still at home. Later, posts were written when we were together as a group in our transitional, travelling space, and forming embodied relationships. Gradually the writing of posts became a more collective activity, written and uploaded while we were physically together.

Relationships *with* the blog also evolved. Jan, Lorena and Jessica each began blogging at different stages, and for different motivations. For Jan, blogging was part of her

role as a conference delegate, and (like several of the blog authors) she wrote in response to

the title of the panel "Neither Here nor There":

> You guys were all over in Chicago, and I was back home, so it felt like a good
>
> positioning of you are there and I am not… every time I blogged I was very much
>
> working back towards the 'Neither Here nor There' in my head.  It was like an
>
> assignment question.  (Jan)

Jan's relationship with the blog began before establishing strong embodied

relationships with the group, as opposed to Jessica who engaged with the blog only after

connecting with the other authors: "I had actually got to know [the other authors]… so I felt I

had some kind of connection. I suppose in my mind the people who were reading the blog

were us" (Jessica).

Jessica's sense of connection to the blog began through developing relationships, but

was also promoted through manipulation of the blog technology, "I felt so much more

connected to the blog through [other author] and I going through that thing with the

technology, and nearly crashing it" (Jessica).

Lorena describes how she initially avoided engaging with the blog, but was drawn into

this through her embodied relationships with the other authors:

> I didn't feel the responsibility to add to the blog when it was initially created.  But when
>
> everyone started adding on the blog, and we started having conversations about why I
>
> chose not to upload something, I started feeling the pressure.  (Lorena)

For Lorena the relationship with the blog was, to an extent, imposed upon her.  She

describes how she became drawn into it because other authors were writing about her:

Everyone was adding stuff, and they were adding stuff about me as well… so when

[author] wrote something about the four of us being on the train, I realised that I was

being part of the blog… without actually participating consciously, and so I started

reading it.  (Lorena)

In Lorena's account the blog is powerful, and others' interactions with the blog have

the power to drive her into a relationship with it.  But what was the source of this power, and

does it differ from the power of other forms of communication such as email?

We suggest that much of the power of the blog arose from its location in the public

domain, where the readership is both uncertain and uncontrolled. Uncertainty about readers

was present from the start, although as time went on, knowledge of the blog readership

developed through comments, and embodied encounters with readers:

I arrived [at the conference], and I realised people were reading the blog because

somebody came and had wanted to know who [Jan] was… that left me feeling somewhat

uncomfortable about the whole thing.  (Jan)

We knew we had a readership, but this was also obscured by the technology of the blog

because readers were not immediately visible or present to us. There was an experiential

disjuncture between the connections with others established through the medium of the blog,

and embodied connections established outside the blog space.  By obscuring the readership,

the blog alters the intentionality of communication.  As Lorena explains, where the

readership is unknown or indistinct, the blog may create communication without care for the

reader:

If I want to share something with someone then I will make an effort to do it, it will be

intentional.  But putting a blog out there… for me it kind of has that quality of I don't

care about you, or I don't make an effort communicating with other people so I just do

my part. And you on your part, you can do whatever you want, you can read it or not

read it, or you can comment or not comment (Lorena)


A distinctive characteristic of our blog was that it was both a personal account in public

space, with an indeterminate readership, and also a group creation between individuals who

had relationships outside the blog.  Thus there was an awareness that, as authors, we had to

manage our posts in order to protect ourselves against a readership with whom we had no

caring relationship.  And at the same time, as authors, we wrote to and with each other, from

within caring relationships.  Our blog was therefore written in a relational context. It was

contextualised by relationships, and was also an integral part of this network of relationships,

as authors related both to each other and to the blog itself.

Relationships with and through the blog were mediated by technology, and as we shall

discuss in our next theme – 'immediacy' – technology played a formative role in determining

what could be done through the blog.  We have already identified one of the key aspects of

the blog technology as being its public nature, and in the next section we discuss how the

blog technology introduced a sense of immediacy to the writing of our experiences.

**Immediacy**

The concept of 'immediacy' had a central role in our analysis.  We began with the

assumption that blogging captures and represents immediate experience.  However, on

discussing our blog post-production processes, it became clear that each of us had carefully

constructed our posts in a way that might *appear* immediate, but that was censored and edited.  As Jan describes, far from being 'of the moment', her first blog post was considered and created over a period of time:

> I think the actual writing of it probably took place in my head on the Saturday,
>
> driving in my car… obviously when I was driving there was some stuff that I
>
> couldn't check out.  Like I write [in the post] about the Beagle 2 landing. I had to
>
> go and Google that… I was kind of going for something quite topical, not really
>
> academic, something that I was interested in… I had the idea of that's what a
>
> blog was meant to look like.  (Jan)

Jan deliberately constructed her post in light of an effect she wanted to create within her hypothetical readers, motivated by her belief of what a blog was supposed to be.  For both Jessica and Lorena, Jan's account came as a surprise.  While we each knew that our own work was censored and edited, we were less aware of the censoring and editing being carried out by others.  It was only upon discussing our production processes as a group that we understood the degree to which the sense of immediacy was illusory: "I think that as the reader, [Jan's post] seemed like it was very natural, and it was kind of stream of consciousness.  It felt like something that someone had just written [without editing]" (Jessica).

During the period of blogging there was little discussion about *how* we were blogging, and with what aims. A norm of immediacy was therefore formed within our blogging group with little reflexive awareness, but where did these ideas about blog writing come from? As a group of novice bloggers we looked to one another to understand how to blog.  Jan's post was the second entry, after the introductory post by the blog founder, and her stream of consciousness writing style was reflected in many subsequent blog posts.  This may reflect

our immersion within a popular culture of blogging, which influenced the assumptions we brought to our own blog. For example, on discussing how the tone of the blog was created, we all remembered the first post as being in keeping with our blog norms of immediacy and informality: "I think there was that first post from [the founder], which was quite jokey. He was calling us 'intrepid explorers'… and it had a light-hearted, informal feel about it" (Jessica). Upon re-reading this post, however, we realised that the tone of the writing was actually quite formal, and yet, for each of us our (mis)perceptions of that post at the time had fundamentally influenced how we understood what the blog was supposed to be.

For Lorena blogging was a highly artful process. Unlike other authors, Lorena understood her post as reflective rather than immediate (although nevertheless continuing a personal tone of writing that conveys a sense of in-the-moment communication):

I wrote mine over a few days… I think I started writing something the last day of the conference, or right after our presentation. I had a word document that I re-wrote a bit on the plane. And then I think in Edinburgh… I came home and I made myself a cup of tea, and I did the final editing and then I posted it… so for me it was kind of a closure of the whole trip. (Lorena)

Here the blog is reframed as making meaning from outside the space of travelling, rather than from within a transitional space. It was only upon returning home that Lorena completed and posted her entry.

The idea of immediacy is further destabilised when we consider that a blog becomes a permanent record. The technical process of posting on a blog can foster a degree of immediate production in that posts can be created and uploaded within seconds. However, once uploaded the 'immediate' becomes 'permanent'. The immediacy of production makes

blogs ideal for quickly communicating amorphous, liminal or discombobulatory experiences to a wider audience, but what are the consequences of creating a permanent record of the self within such spaces?  At the same time the public nature of blogs may also have an illusory side, as we reflected when we tried, unsuccessfully, to find our blog through search engines, although in the public domain, the blog was effectively camouflaged amongst a host of other blogs.

It is clear that our blog was not an uncomplicated presentation of in-the-moment experience, but rather a conscious engagement with the re-presentation of in-the-moment experience in artful ways.  At the same time, the technical process of production could, in itself, discombobulate this illusion of immediacy, allowing an unintentional degree of immediacy into the blog.  In the creation of the blog, therefore, immediacy was both desired and avoided, both deliberate and accidental.

**Performing Identity**

Our final theme is that of performing identity.  As discussed above, writing posts was framed firstly by their relational context.  As authors we were conscious that the blog was in the public domain, and could be read both by a known or unknown audience.  Blogs were therefore deliberately constructed and edited to perform a public identity: "I was putting a projected type of self on the screen as opposed to my own self…slightly larger than life" (Jan).

Since the blog posts were largely about personal experience, performing identity was an integral part of blogging, but the unknowable nature of an audience meant that this activity was undertaken without the cues of an embodied relationship.  As authors we were unable to

observe or form judgements about our audience, while our audience could observe us, as

Lorena experienced:

> [a colleague] said 'I read your blog, I really liked it'… because she wouldn't
>
> expect me to write such a personal thing in such a personal way I think and I felt
>
> bad, or… a little exposed.  But I had edited and re-edited what I had put, so I was
>
> okay with it.  (Lorena)

If the post is 'edited and re-edited' with the intention of censoring personal exposure,

what does it mean for the interpretation of the post as 'personal'?  In this context the word

'personal' seems to reference a sense of authenticity, a conceptualisation which relies on self

as fixed and singular.  The implication in Lorena's story is that the 'personal' style of writing

in the blog presents a more authentic self than more scholarly writing styles.  And yet, as

discussed above, this is an artful performing of identity.

Despite the censorship of posts, there is an emotional quality to the blog posts which

can be contrasted to more formally styled, scholarly papers. This may communicate

something to the reader, which may feel 'authentic' in a way that a polished paper does not:

> If you read an academic paper it's so perfect… you don't get any of the
>
> messiness, whereas on [the blog] you get a lot of messiness.  Maybe if you've
>
> never been to a conference, and you're feeling really anxious about… how on
>
> earth do you navigate that kind of world, [reading the blog] you get the fact that
>
> these messy, chaotic, emotional people went to the conference and did things like
>
> get lost, have moments of panic  (Jessica)

We suggest that even though there was a deliberate editing and censoring of experience (a particular presentation of self), blogging and its particular tone opens up the possibility of creating a different kind of connection with a reader, which can be beneficial for both parties.

**Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

Our blogging story began with entering the liminal space of travel, and transitioning through the academic rite of passage of presenting at a conference. As novice bloggers our blogging was shaped by unexamined assumptions about what constitutes a blog and its aims. We wrote from a place of discombobulation, trying to make meaning of our experiences and find ways of communicating these to others. Curious about this process, we then developed a collaborative study to further explore this. The process of consciously reflecting together enabled us to uncover and explore pertinent issues around the use of blogging to generate reflexive accounts of personal experience. We suggest that this learning can be helpful to other reflexive qualitative researchers who are interested in using blogs.

A fundamental feature of our blog was that it formed part of a network of relationships (with fellow authors, readers and the blog), reflecting popular conceptualisations of blogs as dialogical (cf. Olive, 2012; Shoemaker, 2013). Our (group) blog was produced in relationship with others in the offline world and this seems to have fostered dialogue to an extent. However, as an activity and an outcome, our experience also recalls Dean's (2010) concept of the 'blogipelago', in that our blog did not connect to any other blogs; and our blog posts felt individually exposing rather than communal.

We began with each blogger posting in relative isolation, and it was only as relationships developed that the blog became more dialogical. So, while the technology may offer opportunities for dialogue and alternative, or even radical collaboration (cf. Speedy,

2015), this is not guaranteed, and is entangled in a complex meshwork of identities and offline relationships.

An important part of the relational character of the blog was the relationship with audience. The power and unknown nature of the audience emerged recurrently in our analysis, and we reflected on the anxiety that this generated. For bloggers within the academy, the association with powerful institutions may feed this sense of anxiety further influencing what is written (Kirkup, 2010).

Narrative meaning circulates, arising from pre-existing communal meanings, and returning to these to inform future narratives (Ricoeur, 1983/1984). The audience (whether real or imagined), therefore has a significant influence over what can the author expresses and how. The public nature of blogs is seen as a key characteristic of this method of storytelling and can feed assumptions about uncensored communication, which is enhanced by a writing style suggesting in-the-moment creation. Arguably, this reflects the technology of blogs, which allows for a rapid, unmediated publication process. However, our analysis interrogates this appearance of immediacy, uncovering the interrelated editing and censoring process of blogging. We identified two reasons behind this process. First, as Rettberg (2008) argues, blog writing is a recognised genre, in which we unquestioningly immersed ourselves. Second, we wrote with an awareness of the public and permanent nature of the blog and our offline, academic identities. These observations perhaps reveal the technology of the self which was concealed beneath the chatty, relaxed style of our blog posts (Foucault, 1978; Kirkup, 2010).

The technology of self, highlights an important function of blogging, the performing of identities. We agree with Kirkup (2010) and Dennen (2009) in that blogging offered an

opportunity to perform identities through the construction of personal narratives. However, our experiences of performing a public identity, feeling exposed through this, and struggling with balancing of personal/professional identities highlighted the anxiety evoked through blogging.

We argue that the author's ability to tell certain stories, and their lack of control over their interpretation, are key to our understanding of blogging as a meaning-making process. This is particularly significant when we juxtapose a personal writing style with the blogger's relationship with a wide, perhaps unknown audience. If, as Kirkup (2010) argues, the blogger's experience of their audience is primarily an idea than an actuality, then this suggests a particular context for the process of narrative meaning-making, a context imagined by the blogger and drawing on their own (liberatory or oppressive) understandings.

To conclude, researchers seeking to use blogs in research should be aware of the multiple and complex influences on blogging. Blogs should be understood as being subject to the same social and cultural processes as other forms of communication, which, given their public nature, may be even more pronounced in blogs. An idealistic view of blogs may obscure ways in which the produced meanings are shaped by powerful normative discourses, and the author's ability to use the scaffolding of communally shared meanings and stories.

We argue that the distinctive quality of blogs as a research tool lies in the relationship with the audience as actualised, embodied, and communicative, and also perceived, assumed and immanent. This relationship is constraining, as it exposes the blogger to social norms and expectations, but its immediacy also opens up new opportunities for meaning-making.

Finally, while bloggers communicate with an audience, they also engage in internal meaning- making processes through the construction of narratives of personal experience.

When exploring our own experiences of blogging, we asked what happens when we blog during a times of ambiguity or rule breaking, when the blogger is writing from and of liminal space. We argue that the publically located narrative structuration of experience being communicated through the blog is likely to influence the blogger's ongoing experience of this discombobulating, liminal space, as well as their sense of themselves and open up opportunities for reflexive research practice.

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