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'Yay! Not another academic essay!'[1] Blogging as an alternative academic genre

Abstract

Academic writing is a staple university practice required across disciplines to determine student success. Despite its ubiquity, however, literacy scholars have long argued that academic writing is both exclusionary and prohibitive. Drawing on the work of literacy scholars we make the case for the use of blogs in higher education as a way of providing a type of inclusive writing or 'regenring' that such scholars advocate. To achieve this, we trial the use of a blog in a final-year undergraduate module, employing a mixed-methods approach to explore student perceptions on whether blogging affords them a means to engage with and take ownership of their writing and learning. In keeping with the task we have set our students, we have presented this article using blog-like features.

Home

When discussing the article submission, one of us playfully proposed the idea of doing the write-up as a series of blog posts. This was rebuffed by the other one of us in favour of a more conventional approach, before reluctantly being resurrected in response to persuasive reviewer feedback. Perhaps paradoxically, this initial reluctance speaks to the power of the norms of the academy and the comfort that comes with familiarity with academic conventions, rather than sticking to our convictions, and challenging ourselves to become bloggers for the purposes of this exercise, just as our students are expected to.

Therefore, we present this contribution in the form of a blog in so far as it is possible without the possibility of using hyperlinks and other digital affordances of the blog genre. The 'blog' includes a series of blog posts followed by our imaginings of how different audience members would interact and comment, based largely on real conversations we have had with academic colleagues and the student cohort involved in the project.

About us

We are a Spanish lecturer and a sport sociologist. The former previously ran an Academic Support Service and has worked in literacy development for over 25 years. The latter has been lecturing at his current institution for over fourteen years, trying to engage undergraduate students with thinking critically about sport. In his spare time, he runs, or rather plods, over long distances and writes a blog about his experiences as a wheezy, middle-of-the-pack runner. Both of us have one thing in common: being witness to the everyday struggles of students striving to master what Andrews (2003) describes as an 'elaborate game' of writing academically. That is why we started talking to one another, and that is how we came to collaborate on exploring the use of blogs. More specifically, we collaborated to test out a hunch that we both shared: that blogging offers a more inclusive genre of writing than traditional forms of academic scholarship.

Okay, that is not quite accurate. It was when the Spanish lecturer heard the sport sociologist presenting at an internal staff workshop on getting his undergraduate students to write blogs that the two of us met and started to work together. This, along with their experiences of working with students who more often than not were able to articulate their ideas and understanding orally, but struggled to translate these thoughts onto paper, helped form the belief that blogging could take them interesting places. There was also a series of intuitions: that blogging would take them somewhere challenging; that some colleagues would view blogging as evidence of the 'dumbing down' of academia; and that some students, when faced with having to write in a way that was unfamiliar to them, would react with a mixture of panic and anxiety. An abiding question also arose: were the

1. One student participant in the study stated that this was his initial response on hearing that they had to produce a blog. Whilst it is not our intention to present essays as a 'straw man' in this article, we felt this remark captured the general sense of enthusiasm towards the task.

2. Tumblr is what is known as a microblogging site, which was selected because of its intuitive dashboard that supports multimedia content. Plus, the sport sociologist has no great technical expertise to call upon. In the words of McGuire (2017: 118) in comparison to other social media applications, Tumblr is 'more flexible for writing in the classroom. It can be used for more conventional writing activities, such as daily responses or free-writing that can get students in the habit of practicing writing'.

students prepared for their contributions to be read and commented upon not just by a university tutor, but by a wider public audience?

In the first instance, it took us to the University of Plymouth to present at the *Writing Development in Higher Education* (WDHE) 2016 conference about our experience and reflect upon using blogs within the classroom. It was at that point we agreed that a research study was required in order to progress beyond hunches and anecdotal student feedback. This leads us, appropriately enough, to the methods section.

About the project

The final-year undergraduate module where the blog was trialled is concerned with exploring an eclectic range of contemporary sporting issues. The students on the module were required to submit an individual blog post on an issue of their choice. In keeping with the genre of blogging, contributions had to be short (maximum 600 words) and incorporate web links, copyright free images and hashtags. In addition, students were asked to comment on at least three of their peers' posts, as well as attracting readers and commentators to their own blog. This combined to make up the formative part of the assessment, which fed directly into the summative assessment: a 3,000-word sociological analysis of their chosen issue, of which a third is earmarked to reflecting upon the process of writing the blog and how this informed their critical understanding.

The practicalities of how to go about writing a blog were covered in a series of hands-on work-shops facilitated by the sport sociologist who could point to his own experiences of blogging. He also took on the role of blog editor and gatekeeper, uploading the students' work using Tumblr.[2] Details of each blog post were promoted via the course Twitter feed, with students encouraged to share updates as part of their own social networking strategy to attract readers.

A mixed-methods approach was used to explore students' experiences of researching and composing a blog post as well as drawing on their reflections on the process. All 82 students under-taking the module provided consent that we could access, read, analyse and use anonymized quota-tions from their written reflections. This provided us with a rich data set to scrutinize. The cohort was 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 organize a focus group (four females, one male) to invite students to provide richer insights into their experience of blogging and how this compared with other forms of academic writing. As interviewer, the sport sociologist used open-ended questions and probes to help facilitate interaction between the participants (David and Sutton 2011). The discussion was recorded electroni-cally 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 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 writing.

Posts

Blogging with students: Part one, 1 July 2017, 16:55

Blogs 1 – Essays 0 (half-time)

In this encounter between conventional academic writing and blogs, it is difficult not to be swayed by the smallish but growing body of scholarship concerned with pedagogical uses of blogging. At times the literature reads like a sizeable list of potential benefits. For starters, Gregg (2006: 154) champions blogging due to 'the participatory nature of writing, response and counter-argument'. Sim and Hew (2010) agree, suggesting that blogs can enhance student learning, aid understanding, and help learners to organize their ideas. Drawing on the literature, here are five reasons why lecturers should embrace blogs and use them in their teaching:

1. *Blogging encourages collaboration.* It's fairly obvious, isn't it? Blogs are by their very nature participatory and thus help to foster online communities. In this way, blogging has the potential to provide students with opportunities for meaningful interaction (Blackstone and Harwood 2011).
2. *Blogging helps to develop students' social and cultural capital.* Put more simply, through attracting peers' comments, blogging can help with students' confidence, self-identity, and sense of belonging to their academic community. Neat, huh?
3. *Blogging supports knowledge generation and critical thinking.* This is a recurring theme in the literature that we came across, that blogs encourage reflective learning through the sharing of knowledge, knowledge transformation and generating knowledge (Sun 2010).
4. *Blogging promotes literacy development.* Getting students to compose their own blogs stretches their 'writing muscles' (McGrail and McGrail 2014) as well as facilitating literacy skills such as summary, paraphrasing, and the development of voice (Brooks et al. 2004).
5. *Blogging prepares students for writing on digital platforms.* Anyone working in Higher Education will recognize the push towards developing transferable the students' skills and employability (JISC 2017). That's another box ticked in favour of blogs.

From the above and to paraphrase Blackstone and Harwood (2011: 80), the question is no longer whether blogging enhances student learning, but how do we go about implementing it in the curriculum?

Comments

Dr Matthews – 3 July 2017, 20:58

Perhaps you'd like to take a moment to reflect on why essay writing is so ubiquitous before you dismiss this 'default genre' (Womack 1993) in favour of what'll probably turn out to be another technology-driven 'flash in the pan'. Personally, I'm struggling to comprehend how students are supposed to demonstrate critical thinking and wrestle with complex concepts and relationships in bite-sized written pieces. As for advocating a genre that actively promotes informal language, personal opinion and the use of frankly questionable web resources, this feels little more than the latest illustration of the 'dumbing down' of academia.

David – 4 July 2017, 11:15

There is no exaggeration to state that your perspective is one that we have confronted previously when presenting our work to fellow academics. We appreciate that some need convincing when it comes to the pedagogical value of blogging, perceiving them to be nothing more than opinion pieces that are short on academic rigour. Others have voiced their concerns with regard student anonymity, the likelihood of plagiarism, as well as issues with the technology (Walton 2016).

At the beginning we also harboured doubts. After all, to think intuitively is to risk making a fool of oneself. We were unsure how receptive our students would be to the task of writing a blog. What control, if any, would we have over keyboard warriors posting inappropriate comments? And what about the academic quality of the blog posts, especially as these could be read by anyone and not just their university tutor?

What we found in practice, however, was evidence that blogging can help develop students' higher order skills. Many talked about encountering ideas they had not previously considered; about their perspective altering through the online discussion; and of their interactions with peers stimulating further reading.

Lisa – 4 July 2017, 15:33

I think we had better clarify too that we are not arguing for the abandonment of essays, nor are we implying that they are of limited pedagogical value when it comes to students critically engaging with their discipline. What we are encouraging is for academics to be a little braver when it comes to setting assignments and to not be afraid to break with convention.

Keely [a third-year student] – 4 July 2017, 02:10

Don't get me wrong, I like that you are trying something different. But why introduce this in the third year when many of us don't even know what a blog is, never mind have any comprehension of how to write one?

Lisa – 4 July 2017, 15:50

In fairness, we have tried to introduce the blogging aspect of the module through a series of workshops, as well as stressing that this is a formative part of the assessment. There is a widely held assumption that students are digital natives, well versed in using social media, and thus one might think that they would openly embrace blogging in the curriculum. One of the themes to emerge from the data, however, is that whilst many students are indeed familiar with using a range of applications for personal communication, the majority had relatively little or no prior knowledge or experience of blogs or blogging. For some – such as yourself – this understandably has created some apprehension.

Drawing on the recommendations made by McGrail and McGrail (2014) we have invested considerable time to provide support and scaffolding to students, which has helped to allay some initial anxieties. This included discussing what makes an effective blog post, where we took our lead from Tomaszewki (2011) who advises 'at a minimum, a blog post should have a focused topic, be informative and engaging, and include some form of backed-up opinion. Posts should be provocative, yet respectful'.

Blogging with students: Part two, 8 July 2017, 20:26

Bloggers make better writers

Okay, that may not be 100% accurate, so we'd better start by qualifying the above. Blogging isn't a panacea for academic writing issues, but from our experience it has the *potential* to aid literacy

development. But don't just take our word for it. Others who have written about experimenting with blogs in the classroom have arrived at similar conclusions. Take Bryant (2014), for example. She introduced blogging into an Improving Writing course at Florida A&M University and discovered that many of her students gained an awareness about writing from exposing their writing and expressing personal views and this lead to a greater appreciation of audience, their peers, and their writerly selves.

Then there is McGrail and Davis (2011) who carried out a case study exploring how blogging influenced student writing at elementary level. Their findings reveal how student bloggers became empowered and motivated, taking ownership for their learning, ideas, and the writing process.

As a third example, Brooks et al. (2004) undertook a study involving students enrolled onto first-year composition courses at North Dakota State University. And guess what? They concluded that bogging has rich potential for writing development because of its simplicity, and because it incorporates familiar writing skills such as summary, paraphrasing, and the development of voice.

Of course it isn't just these other academics who are proponents for blogging as a means for enhancing literacy skills. Our data also speaks to this assertion, as illustrated by this (fairly typical) student comment: 'I have learnt a lot from writing a blog post […] it has helped me in improving my writing skills and has given me another writing style'.

What is presently missing from this narrative, however, is an explanation as to why. What is it about blogging that promotes engagement with learning in ways in which the production of a conventional academic assignment frequently doesn't? If we had to theorise about this, we'd conjecture that one of the principle reasons is that blogging acts a bridge, bringing together writing that students perceive as fun and enjoyable (what Lunsford describes as 'life writing' which includes communication via social media) and writing they consider to be work (academic assignments). But that is only part of an explanation.

Comments

Dr Barnett – 8 July 2017, 22:04

Having read a sample of papers from the emerging body of literature in this field, you appear to be painting a rather selective and uncritical picture. For starters, it needs to be acknowledged that the research remains scant, with only a handful of studies that have examined the use of blogs in Higher Education settings. What is more, the existing literature tends to be

concentrated in the areas of teacher training and other professions where the use of reflective journals is already accepted practice. As a result, is there not an increased likelihood of a favourable disposition towards blogs in the first place?

One other limitation is that the studies in favour of blogging have a habit of using self-report data (Sim and Hew 2010), as well as being founded on limited empirical research and much theoretical discussion (Farmer 2006).

> Dr Jolly – 9 July 2017, 08:27
>
> As someone who has experience of working within a number of HEIs, your article really resonates with me. So many of the undergraduates that I come across frequently voice their disinterest and frustration with academic writing, which frequently leaves them cold and disengaged. This is neatly summed up by Andrews (2003) who argues that for many students the conventional academic essay is a stultifying form, which restrains personal conviction. Isn't it about time that we challenged the hegemonic position of the essay as a form of assessment in Higher Education, and sought a wider repertoire of genres which enable our students to show us what they can do?

>> David – 9 July 2017, 16:52
>>
>> From the sounds of it, our experiences are not unusual. Come marking season, it is difficult not to feel a sense of disappointment when so many students, who we know to be eloquent and thoughtful people, struggle to demonstrate this within their coursework. And yet by perpetuating conventional approaches which tend to be both limited and limiting, are we not part of the 'problem'?
>>
>> Literacy scholars have long maintained that the complex facets of academic writing are exclusionary. Two authors in particular have informed the approach we are advocating here. The first is Peter Elbow, who invites us to reconsider the language of academic writing. He champions students' use of their 'Vernacular Eloquence' (Elbow 2014), in other words, their own, familiar language in their writing. The second is Fiona English (2011), who makes a persuasive case for the incorporation of a wider range of genres into our learning and teaching repertoire. Such an approach and the consequences of using a wider range of genres– that English calls the 'affordances of genres'– enables students to gain ownership of ideas and promotes the shift in position of the author to that of an expert (rather than a novice pretending to be an expert, as with the essay).

Blogging with students: Part three, 13 July 2017, 10:02

The transformative potential of blogging

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

The above comment came from one of the final year students involved in the Contemporary Issues module. It speaks to what both Elbow and English appear to be advocating. From the student's perspective, working with different genres both empowers and challenges students to think about their disciplinary knowledge in different ways. From the academic's perspective – and to draw on the work of English - such an approach encourages erudition and creativity.

In a nutshell, blogging enables students to perceive of themselves as writers. We found that respondents would repeatedly speak about their experience of blogging in terms of identity, with some referring to themselves as becoming 'bloggers' and 'writers'. In some cases, the interactive and participatory nature of the blog made them appreciate they were academics in their own right, fulfilling a role as an agent of change by raising awareness of an underexplored issue.

Comments

Dr Evans – 14 July 2017, 09:43

Whilst there are clearly some benefits – I'm referring here to your comments above about creativity and empowerment – can a blog be considered academic? Does it indeed match our expectations as to what represents academic writing?

David – 14 July 2017, 10:11

To some extent your questions can only be addressed by reflecting on what constitutes academic writing, and to consider what kind of learning and knowledge production are we wishing to promote. This in turn requires us to be prepared to shift away from the dominant genres of the academy. As noted in the initial reluctance of one of the authors of this piece to imagine this article as a series of blog posts and commentator interactions, asking academics to move out of their comfort zones is likely to be met with some resistance.

What we would stress however, is that based on our findings, the experiment with using blogs has proved to be a win-win situation. Blogging can both support literacy development, and through its participatory nature, encourage student engagement. And yet this only tells part of the story. We also found evidence of the impact of blogging on developing students' higher order skills. A number of students talked about encountering new ideas and ways of thinking thanks to the comments of their peers; about their own perspectives changing through discussion; about their interactions stimulating further research; and how commenting on other blog posts enabled them to make, often complex, connections.

Blogging with students: Part four, 16 July 2017, 08:45

No longer writing for an audience of one

In the words of Penrod (2005: 2) 'without a response, there is no communication. If there is no communication happening, then there is no understanding as to whether one's words make meaning or fall silent'. This quotation in many ways encapsulates the *raison d'etre* of blogging in highlighting the reliance on eliciting a response from the readership.

From our data, it is evident that the students were cognizant 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 undoubtedly had an impact on student engagement, as well as the level of thought and care required to produce successful writing.

This echoes the work of Godwin-Jones (2003), who contends that students are more likely to make thoughtful decisions if they know they are writing for an audience. Such awareness helps learners to be more sentient writers, as it forces them to reconsider their ideas, their voice, and their writing approaches.

Writing for an audience can of course be a terrifying prospect as you are putting yourself 'out there' for public scrutiny. Not only that, but you are actively encouraging people to comment publicly on your work. At the same time, however, it can be hugely satisfying. As this student remarked, 'the thought of being able to captivate an audience in so few words was quite something'.

Comments

Taryll (a panicking student) – 17 July 2017, 23:01

The pressure of knowing anyone could comment on my work as opposed to a few tutors was a new and somewhat unnerving experience. I've never liked it when we've had to share work

in seminars for peers to provide feedback, but having your work scrutinised by people that you may not even know is something else. I was worried because my blog post was quite opinionated and so what if somebody doesn't agree or if nobody agrees?

> Lisa – 18 July 2017, 07:13

> Through our own self-reflection of trying to shake off the discourse of the conventional academic paper and to experience the affordances of the blogging genre ourselves, we have a degree of sympathy. Being prepared to take a risk and not to worry about how other's may judge can be very uncomfortable.

After thoughts

So what are the implications of this case study? Is there indeed a home for blogging in higher education, and if so, how might this be received by both university tutors and students alike? By presenting our article as a series of blog posts with the subsequent toing and froing of a kind of conversation, we have tried to capture some of the scepticism that we have encountered. As one colleague at the recent *WDHE* conference bluntly remarked on hearing our paper, 'academic staff will never go for this'. Similarly, asking an undergraduate cohort to submit a blog, understandably sparked some apprehension as summed up by this comment:

> […] when I first heard that we were doing a blog I held quite a negative view because we're just so used to a traditional format of assessment, and then all of a sudden in the final year we are expected to write a blog.

> Encouragingly, what we have found is that the sometimes lofty claims regarding the pedagogical value of blogging identified in the literature were borne out in practice. Giving an appreciative nod to the work of Hamilton and Pitt (2009), it is our contention that blogs serve to loosen the 'straitjacket of genre' by creating new spaces to stretch and challenge academic conventions.

As the smallish, but growing literature concerned with the use of blogs as a pedagogical tool has argued, blogging has the potential to stimulate student engagement, to help develop students' subject knowledge and sharpen their critical thinking (Gregg 2006). Additionally, it has been found that blogs can have a positive impact on the quality of student writing and the assessment itself (Harwood 2010).

This piece has sought to illustrate how blogging can empower students, giving them agency in their own learning and enabling them to find pride and ownership in what they have done (McGuire 2017). What the students produced in their blogs far exceeded any expectations we had.

As signalled above, however, introducing blogging into the university curriculum is not without its challenges. As such, we would stress the importance of creating a supportive learning environment, which recognizes that many students may well be unfamiliar with blogs and blogging.

We would like to conclude with two comments from our student participants and to invite your own thoughts on the affordances of blogging within higher education. The first is from a respondent commenting on the practice of essay writing, who concedes 'I feel like I'm trying to speak as somebody I don't understand'. The second is a student reflecting on their experience of writing a blog who notes 'I felt like an expert who was actively educating and encouraging people to talk about grass roots disability sport and the wider issues of disability'. The latter observation is surely the aim and endpoint of a genuinely inclusive academia. Where essays can alienate so student writers feel like they are talking like someone else, blogging can make them feel like experts with a voice. It is this that we witnessed time and again in our study, and some enjoyed the experience so much they said they planned to continue blogging after the course. Students wanting to talk about their ideas with others, thinking about how best to explain their topic to their audience, thinking critically in response to other people's viewpoints and recommendations for further reading and feeling like they have something worthwhile to say: this is what university should be about. 'Yay! Not another academic essay' indeed.

Acknowledgements

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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