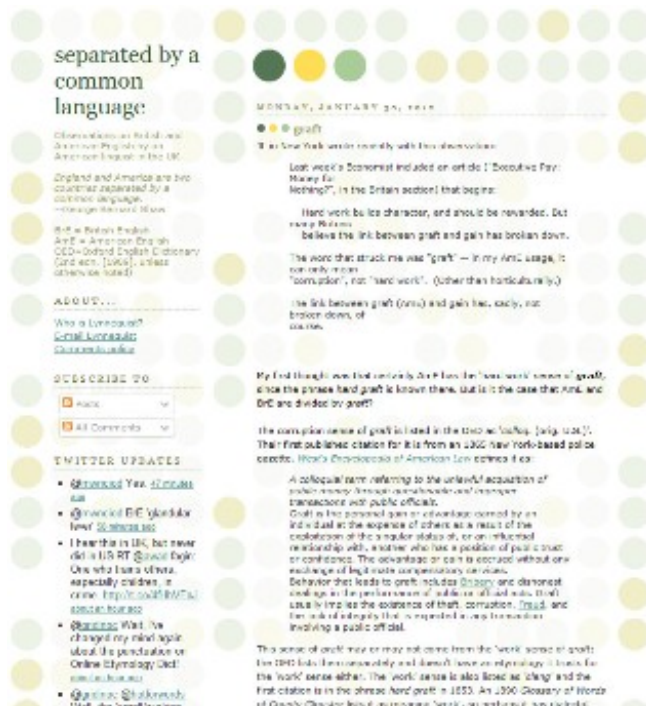


Lynne Murphy (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Lynne_Murphy)'s blog began life as a 'limbering up exercise' before she wrote work for peer-review. A somewhat accidental academic blogger, she notes that her online presence has become part of her professional profile... even if it occasionally serves as a distraction. Lynne also questions whether she is working for the University when she blogs, but doubts a future model of higher education that involves timetabling blog time for academics.



I'm not sure that I would have agreed to write a post for the LSE Impact blog if I had known that it would send me into the depths of a blogsistential crisis. But here I am: I am a blogger. I am a successful blogger, even. And I am an academic. But am I an academic blogger?

Before I address or sidestep these questions, let me introduce myself. At work, I am M Lynne Murphy (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/115259>), academic linguist at Sussex University. My research (<http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=M+L+Murphy+linguistics>) mainly concerns the organisation of vocabulary in the mind and the role of opposites in shaping word meanings and discourse. But on the internet, I am Lynnequist, who writes the Separated by a Common Language (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/>) blog and the @lynneguist (<https://twitter.com/#%21/lynneguist>) Twitter feed. Both the blog and the Twitter feed concern the differences between British and American English and (British and American communication) from my perspective as both a trained linguist and an American immigrant to the UK (and I do this in my own parenthetical writing style).



The blog is a success – I'm not going to be particularly modest about that because I do get a kick out of it. It has readers (usually 700-800 a day) and media attention. It gets me invitations for public speaking (<http://horsham.skepticsinthepub.org/Event.aspx/895/How-America-saved-the-English-language>), and it even has a day dedicated to it (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2010/02/happy-sbacl-day.html>). On Twitter, where I post a 'Difference of the Day' each day, I've passed 4300 Twitter followers. I'm no Steven Pinker (<https://twitter.com/#%21/sapinker>) or LanguageLog (<https://twitter.com/#%21/LanguageLog>), but neither do I try to be as I work my niche. And every so often, my blog is held up as an interesting example (<http://wp.stockton.edu/gah2107spring2012/2012/01/23/representative-blogs/>) of academic blogging.

But then when I read about academic blogging (on this blog or elsewhere) or when I hear the calls for academics to engage with social media, I see academic blogging categorised in two ways: (1) a way to disseminate (or think through) one's research or (2) a way to engage students in the learning process. In other words, we're encouraged to use blogs to do our jobs: to produce peer-reviewed research in a way that gets noticed and to teach the students who we are paid to teach.

I love both of those kinds of blogs -but mine is neither. While writing posts involves some research, the research is either what Mark Liberman calls Breakfast Experiments™ (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3017%20>) or it's like the research that I'd do in writing a textbook or contributing to a dictionary. These are all things I've done in my (non-blogging) career, but none of them are REFable or lead to anything REFable.

What I blog is educational, though. (For my sins, I also try to entertain.) Its readers are language

enthusiasts, travellers and expats, English learners, editors, and an awful lot of people (10-15% of my traffic each week, it seems) who want to settle an argument about whether the exclamation is *whoa* or *woah* (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2009/04/whoa-and-woah.html>). Yes, some linguists read it too (it's even been cited in a couple of academic papers (<http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=%22separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com%22>)), but the effect I have is in busting linguistic myths (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2011/07/anti-americanism-part-2.html>), offering translations or interpretations (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2006/12/slosh.html>), and making disconcerting cross-cultural experiences more understandable (<http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2008/06/compliments-nice-and-lovely.html>) through the delicate introduction of useful theoretical concepts. The comments and Twitter conversations are productive and cooperative—which is, to my mind, the greatest marker of a blog's success.

I am an academic. I am a blogger. I am a linguist. I blog about language. *But is blogging part of my job or a distraction from it?*

This has been an issue for me since I started the blog while on research leave in 2006. It served me then as a limbering-up exercise before writing the “hard” stuff that would be subjected to peer review. At the start, I was meticulously careful about keeping blog and work separate. I acknowledged my qualifications and title, but only in order to give readers some reason to think I knew what I was talking about. I don't blog at the office. And I still defensively refer to blogging as my ‘hobby’ on my Blogger profile (<http://www.blogger.com/profile/10171345732985610861>). But when I became aware that my blogging was (being acknowledged as) a selling point for the University and the programmes I teach on, I started being less meticulous about separating blogging/tweeting activities from my academic life. A few months ago, I added mention of my employer to my Twitter profile and I've started asking media contacts to mention the University when they introduce me, because otherwise I can't be listed among the staff ‘in the news’ (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/newsandevents/sussexnews>). But it is still a constant question for me: Am I working for the University when I blog? Should I be?

The answer to the *Am I* question is ‘no’. There's nothing in my contract about educating the non-paying public, nor about popularising my discipline and no one at the University asked me to do it, nor is anyone taking the trouble to performance-review it.

Should my blog be part of my job, though? As much as I would like to be paid* for the time I spend on it, I think I have to answer ‘no’ to this one too. (* I briefly tried taking advertising and decided it wasn't for me.)

I would hope that there could be (is?) some level of symbiosis between Lynneguist and the University (and academia in general). Lynneguist may not have a contract with the University, but she does contribute to it and to the mission of higher and continuing education. But at the same time, we don't have a way of measuring the blog's impact on the University itself, and I'm only comfortable thinking that it might be part of my job now that it is successful – and I think that's right. I can't imagine a model of higher education that involves timetabling blog time for any academic who wants to try their hand at popular writing on the web.

So. I think I'm an academic who blogs, rather than a blogger who's an academic. But whether I'm an academic blogger, I'm still not sure.

And, oh yes, before I go: I was asked to give tips for academic blogging. I'll give you instead the readership-maximisation tips of an academic who blogs:

- Make the theme broad enough to allow for an indefinite number of posts; make it specific enough that you have a clear niche that will attract a readership.
- Post regularly, and be prepared to post often at the start. You need to build up some content to make it seem worth people's effort to come back again.
- Don't get discouraged when you're not an overnight success. The comments section may be lonely at first.

- Network (by following and commenting on other blogs and Twitter streams). Don't limit yourself to other academics. Be generous about linking to others in your posts.
- Don't set out to compete with other blogs, but to complement them.
- Try to be patient and polite in all internet interactions and always read responses to your writing in the most favourable tone possible.
- Avoid jargon where it's not necessary and introduce it gently where it's helpful.
- A memorable blog name or handle doesn't hurt.
- Relate what you're writing about to everyday experience or current events. If it's your own everyday experience, be aware of the boundaries between you and your online persona and of the privacy of others who are part of that experience.
- Don't automatically assume that the university's website is the best place for your blog. Some universities' seem much more accessible than others in terms of format, findability and searchability. And you may want to move someday.
- Tweet. At a minimum, you should announce new blog posts or to link to old ones when they become topical again. But Twitter works best as a networking tool. Following and re-tweeting others is key. (But then find strategies for not spending all day on Twitter.)
- Do it because you want to do it.

Related posts:

1. The Impact of Blogs Part II: Blogging enhances the blogger's reputation. But, does it influence policy? (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/11/16/world-bank-blogging-reputation-policy/>)