

To this day, Lacan continues to divide professional opinion; my own view is that this can only be to the good. (After all, who wants to read a writer who only creates consensus?) Many commentators regard Lacan's work of 1959-60, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1992) and *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1977) to be among the most influential works of psychoanalysis of all time. Lacan's late work (dealing with masculine and feminine *jouissance* – or, loosely speaking, 'enjoyment' or 'pleasure') had great influence on feminist thought, as well as on postmodernism.

In addition to the Seminars, we have the enormous volume of collected writings, *Écrits*, a fine and fresh translation of which was published in 2006. There is even a slender volume called *My Teaching* (Fr. 2005; Eng. 2008), which is where I would advise anyone new to Lacan to start reading.

For more information on Lacan, there are hundreds of websites to browse. 'lacan dot com' can be found at

<http://www.lacan.com/lacan1.htm> (for Lacan with a US spin); or you might want to try <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/> or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwlirZQLAAg>. However, please be advised that due to the nature of the work that Lacan conducted, some of the material contains adult themes and the occasional swearword.

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## Will health students engage with a health information blog?

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### Abstract

**Background:** The health librarian at the University of Bedfordshire wanted to explore ways of reaching out to health students, especially distance learners and those juggling studies with full-time work.

**Objectives:** The aim of this action research study was to assess the impact of a health information blog on a cohort of distance and part time learners studying for MSc Public Health.

**Methods:** Data was collected by means of an online survey and visits to the blog were monitored using the Google Analytics programme.

**Results:** Almost half of respondents reported that they had not visited the blog as they were not aware that the blog existed, despite targeted publicity and emails alerting them to the blog. However, students who had visited the blog found the information useful, both for preparing assignments and in their professional health care practice.

**Conclusions:** Libraries need to ensure that blogs are adequately marketed and promoted, otherwise it is unlikely that they will be successful.

### Introduction

This small-scale action research study grew out of an interest in communicating with health students via a subject blog. Blogs are a form of online journal, and one of their main attractions and advantages is the ease of publishing quickly without the need to know computer code such as HTML<sup>1</sup>. Another advantage is the fact that it is usually free to set up blogs, making them a highly cost-effective communication tool<sup>2</sup>. Blogs have grown in popularity since 2000 and have been introduced within higher education as both a learning tool and a means of disseminating information<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, blogs have grown in popularity with libraries who want to reach out to their customers. Indeed, libraries have embraced Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis and podcasts, and while there are many published articles about how libraries and librarians are using these new communication platforms, there is a lack of significant research as to their impact. As Booth (2007:298) states,

libraries 'adoption of technology has been largely uncritical'<sup>4</sup>.

### Reaching out to health students at the University of Bedfordshire

The University of Bedfordshire has over 1000 health care students, many of whom are either located far from the main Luton campus or who are studying by distance learning. In addition, many health-related courses are provided to students who are either working as health care professionals full-time, or are required to undertake health care placements, which can make it difficult for them to access the library during normal hours. Although the librarian travels to all University campuses frequently to meet with students, and offers telephone and email support, academics report informally that only a small percentage of students who are referred to the librarian actually make contact. This could be for a number of reasons, including lack of time, lack of awareness of how the librarian can help, and lack of confidence perhaps. Research suggests that students studying at a distance may feel isolated<sup>5</sup>.

Health students at the University of Bedfordshire already have access to online support via the Health Subject Guide (<http://lrweb.beds.ac.uk/guides/health>). However, the guide is based on relatively inflexible content management system software which does not lend itself to rapid updates. This makes it difficult to tailor content towards different student needs which reflect curricular demands throughout the year. The advantages of communicating via a blog rather than on the subject guide itself is that a) blogging is easier and quicker than creating web pages on the online subject guide b) a blog allows readers to comment and communicate with the blog author and c) an easily searchable FAQ can be created for blog readers to search<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, providing this information via a blog enables students to access information where they are, rather than having to come to the library. Dickey argues that blogs may help distance learners to feel less isolated<sup>5</sup>, and Ramsay & Kinnie highlight the need for librarians to reach out to students rather than expecting students to come to the library<sup>6</sup>. For the purposes of this study, it was decided to focus on a cohort of 107 students studying for MSc Public Health, which offers a number of modes of study, including distance learning. The reason that this particular course was chosen is that students come from diverse backgrounds, both in terms of location (distance learners from all over the world, including Nigeria,

South Africa, India and Pakistan), and also in terms of professional background (the student cohort includes doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals such as dieticians). These students are juggling busy lives and may never have the opportunity to visit the library in person and so it was with these types of students in mind that the subject blog (called Health Info Blog) was created.

**Objective:** The aim of this project was to assess the impact of a health information blog (Health Info Blog) on a cohort of distance and part time learners studying for MSc Public Health. The blog was designed to act as both a current awareness service and a forum in which students could communicate with the librarian and each other. The impact of the blog was measured by analysing traffic to the blog, and also by examining whether students commented on blog posts. Additionally, an online survey asked students how they had used the information on Health Info Blog, and whether it had affected either their academic practice (i.e. writing assignments) and/or their professional health care practice.

**Methods:** The blog was hosted on the Google Blogger platform, a free platform which is easy to set up, with the URL [bedshealth.blogspot.com](http://bedshealth.blogspot.com). The blog was given a template to fit in with the University of Bedfordshire's house style. Students were alerted to the blog by BREO (the University of Bedfordshire's virtual learning environment) announcements and also by emails. After the blog had been running for two months, students were invited to take part in an online survey (hosted by SurveyMonkey.com) about Health Info Blog, focussing on whether they had found the information useful and if the information had any impact on their academic or professional health care practice. Throughout the study, the traffic to Health Info Blog was monitored using the Google Analytics programme.

**Results:** Eleven, or 10.2% of 107 targeted students responded to the survey. Of these, five students reported that they had not visited Health Info Blog. When asked for a reason why they hadn't visited, four of them stated that they didn't know the blog existed, yet these students had been told about the blog via a variety of publicity materials, including emails, announcements on the University's virtual learning environment, and the library's Twitter page.

However, six respondents had visited Health Info Blog and all of them found the information either

'very useful' or 'somewhat useful'. Three students indicated that they were able to use information from Health Info Blog in their assignments. There was a follow-up question asking how they were able to use the information but not all respondents completed this. One student commented: 'The children eating what they watch was useful in an assignment on bariatrics'.

Another reported that: 'Getting material for my assignments have (*sic*) been difficult but since this blog was set up by my faculty librarian it's been pretty easy'.

In answer to the question, 'Have you been able to use any information from Health Info Blog in your professional practice?' two students indicated that they had and four indicated that they had not. The two respondents who indicated that they had used information from the blog in their professional practice declined to answer the follow-up question (perhaps for reasons of patient confidentiality).

Students were also asked if they had been able to use information from Health Info Blog for any other purpose, and all six respondents indicated that they had. When asked in what way they were able to use the information, four students responded. One indicated that they had used the information: 'To expand my knowledge and further my reading'.

Another reported that:

I did not purposefully log onto Health Blog page, I went in there just like I log onto any other University website, because I knew very little about it. Then I found that information on the page was very interesting and useful for personal development. However, I've not been able to use the information for assignments because I've not had any assignments directly related to information on the page. But, I've often read the pages for personal development.

One respondent had used the blog to explain the concept, and it was stated: 'I was trying to explain how blogs meant for a particular discipline is useful to a friend and I used the health blog as an example'. Another respondent indicated that the blog had helped to shape their professional development, reporting that:

I enjoyed reading about the five a day for children and other useful topics. It has helped

shape my thinking and in my discussion and experience with other colleagues and non-health professionals.

The Google Analytics programme tracked visits to Health Info Blog and from 1st March to 31st May 2010 there were 171 'unique' visitors to the blog (unique in the sense of 'new' visitors, rather than those who were returning). It is likely that some of these visitors were not students at the University of Bedfordshire since blogs are available to anyone over the Internet. This figure works out to an average of 2.7 visitors per day throughout the period of the study. However, traffic to the blog was not steady and generally went in peaks and troughs.

Some posts on the blog were definitely more popular than others. Whilst most visitors (n=255) went directly to the 'home page' of the blog, the second most popular page (n=111) was a post about tips for students on writing academic reports. This post was aimed directly aimed as M.Sc. Public Health students who had an academic report assignment due imminently.

Blog posts about 'health inequalities' were also popular, as this is a very relevant issue for public health students. In fact seven visitors had searched the blog specifically for the term 'health inequalities'. Another relatively popular post (the page was viewed 10 times) was 'Do children eat what they watch?' which reported on a study linking childhood obesity to television advertising.

Although Health Info Blog was intended to be a communication forum there were only two comments on the blog during the time of the study. These were both from the same student. Post were generally written to attract comments and discussion and the librarian ended many posts on the blog with the question 'what do you think?'. Two of these types of posts attracted comments, including one on whether giving obese people financial incentives to lose weight was a good idea (public health themes were generally chosen for these types of 'discussion' post as it was assumed that the students would be interested since they are nearly all working in public health roles).

The survey asked students to indicate if they would be willing to take part in some follow up research. Five respondents stated that they would be willing, however only one student responded to the follow up. The follow up questions were

focussed on whether students were using any other blogs or Web 2.0 technologies, and whether they thought that a blog was the best vehicle for keeping up to date with health information. The student who answered the follow-up questions reported:

I do not usually use blogs generally, yours was the first I tried to keep up with and I must say I am enjoying it. It keeps me abreast [of] the latest health news. I hope to keep reading them.

When asked if blogs were the best way of communicating current health information, the student stated:

Blogs are good but maybe not the best way to provide current information. But the blogs are good, other alternatives are the media-TV and newspaper.

However, the student asserted: '... blog will and is helping me change my health care practice day by day'.

### Discussion

Although the response to the survey was poor, the findings indicate that students who visited Health Info Blog found the information useful. Additionally the blog traffic indicates that blog posts were read, and in some cases had over 100 hits. Blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies are becoming more popular in health care; however Ward *et al.* identified a number of barriers to their use in health care education, including a lack of support from health academics<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, the research evidence suggests that library blogs are most successful when they have support from academic staff<sup>8</sup>. The M.Sc. Public Health teaching team were very supportive of Health Info Blog, but in the future this could perhaps be reinforced in other ways, for example by putting information about the blog in course handbooks or other 'official' documentation.

Visits to Health Info Blog peaked when posts were directly related to assessment issues. For example, a timely post about how to write an academic report produced the highest number of visits to the blog as it was related to an imminent assessment on the M.Sc. Public Health course. Research has shown that library blogs are most successful when they demonstrate 'nearness' to their target audience<sup>9</sup> and this is something that Health Info Blog lacked due to its nature as an

information-giving tool. One of the ways around this might be to introduce 'guest bloggers', perhaps students or academic staff who could write one-off posts pertinent to current health issues or assignment topics.

There is some evidence to suggest that blog visitors feel more inclined to interact with educational blogs which share personal experience, rather than information-providing blogs such as Health Info Blog<sup>9</sup>. Interestingly, some students contacted the librarian regarding issues raised on the blog via email or face-to-face which suggests that perhaps students felt reluctant to post on the blog, or were perhaps unfamiliar with the nature of blogs or the technology. The literature is full of examples of 'digital lurking', where students will read and reflect on blogs and discussion boards but do not 'leave their mark'<sup>10</sup>.

Interestingly, Holley & Oliver argue that it is pointless to introduce technology and expect students to engage with it without understanding the social and cultural barriers they may face<sup>11</sup>. They make the point that students often have too much to do anyway, juggling work with studies and family life, and international students may also face language barriers. Perhaps, then, it should not be so surprising that students do not engage with new technologies. On the other hand, Wishart & Guy argue that online discussions remove barriers by enabling busy students to participate when and where they want to, giving them the flexibility they need<sup>12</sup>. Coldwell *et al.* make the point that previous learning experiences can influence students' engagement with technology, with those preferring a 'teacher-centred' approach less likely to engage with student-led online discussions<sup>13</sup>. They go on to make the point that 'Western' nationalities are more likely to engage with online learning, and also women are more likely than men to post online.

One of the largest (and few) studies of library blogs was carried out by Coulter & Draper, who examined whether blogs were effective as information skills teaching tools<sup>14</sup>. Their aim was to reach out to students, especially distance learners, and encourage them to be reflective and critical about the way they searched for and evaluated information. Ten blogs were created (each allied to a course) and linked to an online subject guide. However, Coulter & Draper found that traffic to all of the blogs was very low, and there was little to nil interaction between students

and librarians via the blog. When Coulter & Draper surveyed the students, they found that over half were unaware of the blog's existence. A major weakness of this study is the fact that Coulter & Draper (2006:104) did not heavily promote the blog 'to avoid the impression that other means of contacting [the librarian] (e.g. email, phone) were discouraged'. Similarly, Kozel-Gains & Stoddart (2009:133) found in a follow-up study of three library blogs aimed at Faculty members in Boise State University that 'readership was minimal to nonexistent'<sup>15</sup>. The authors determined that poor marketing and 'lack of visibility' was one of the major causes of the poor response.

Indeed, one of the major weaknesses of this study was the relatively timid publicity and promotion of the blog (although at the time the librarian felt that there had been almost too much publicity in terms of the number of emails to the students and posts to the University's virtual learning environment). Perhaps, like Coulter & Draper, it was because the librarian did not want the students to feel that they could not get in touch any other way. Also, the librarian was wary of 'over-egging the pudding' and sickening students to the whole idea of the blog due to the seemingly relentless promotion. As it turns out, both of these fears were unfounded since four out of five students who had not visited the blog were unaware it existed. It is likely that this unawareness was also the reason for such a poor response to the survey. It is clear that the methods used to promote the blog failed. The research literature shows that making a blog 'visible' to the target audience is fundamental to creating an effective, successful blog<sup>14</sup>, so in some respects Health Info Blog fell at the first hurdle.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, blogs do not have to be high-maintenance. And the software is easy to use and versatile, enabling a variety of media to be uploaded instantly without the need to know computer programming language. In this way, blogs have the advantages of ease and convenience over other more labour-intensive methods such as newsletters, which make them very attractive to libraries. However, the research in this area is scarce, but indicates that library blogs generally are underused. There is some evidence to suggest that students respond best to educational blogs which have a personal touch and which demonstrate 'nearness'<sup>9</sup> to them and these two things can be achieved by blending information-only posts with other, more personal,

types of posts. The 'nearness' factor can be improved by closer liaison with academic staff to ensure that blog themes are relevant and timely. Other innovations, such as introducing students as 'guest bloggers' should also be considered.

However, the research has shown that it is important to analyse the barriers students may face before implementing new technologies, otherwise students will not engage and may even feel more isolated. Notwithstanding this, the students who accessed Health Info Blog found the information useful and relevant to both their academic study and their professional health care practice. The hardest part was alerting them to the fact that Health Info Blog existed in the first place, and this was the major weakness of this small-scale study. Blogs, like any other library resource, require adequate and timely marketing, otherwise students will never know they are there.

### Key Messages

**Implications for Policy:** Although blogs are a convenient and cost-effective way for libraries to reach out to students, effective marketing and publicity needs to be put in place to make blogs a success.

**Implications for Practice:** Librarians thinking of starting a blog need to ensure that they have active participation and 'buy-in' from relevant stakeholders to maximise engagement.

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## Learning and Teaching in Business through Rich and Varied Information Sources

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### Introduction

There is an old Chinese proverb, sometimes attributed to Confucius, which states 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand', which suggests that experience is the best teacher. There is a close fit here with issues which Kolb (1984:21) discussed about the Lewinian experiential learning model which hinges progress in learning on the impact of the 'concrete experience'. However, another proverb sometimes attributed to Confucius says 'By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.' But there is no real dichotomy here, experience can be a bitter teacher – how many students do you know (or even colleagues or perhaps even yourself) who have learned through personal bitter experience the simple lesson of 'Read the question before you start, while you are answering it, and again when you think you have finished'. For a graded summative assessment failing to consider this can be personally disastrous, but it is a lesson remembered (hopefully) by most.

But is personal experience the only option? Can we learn 'experientially' from other people's experience? Dewey (1938:69) suggested a model of experiential learning based on observation of the environment (conditions), knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past – through personal experience **or from information, advice or warnings from those with wider experience**, and judgement to blend these into a decision (author's emphasis).

This paper explores areas around experiential learning, case study use, problem based learning and the requirement for students to engage with more complex learning and assessment environments. This requirement is driven by student learning strategies (Lim and Johnson, 2002) and employer perceptions of student competency shortfalls (CBI, 2007). A possible solution used by the author in teaching project management techniques is explored in terms of pedagogy, and student and teacher engagement. The approach offers a rich and varied set of information sources, and provides students with a complex environment to analyse and report on.

### Simplicity or Complexity – 'Customer Wants and Needs'

Goodwin and Jenkins (1997) assert that 'Lessons using stories, fables, myths, and legends have an advantage because they can deal with complex issues concisely'. But why do we need to consider complexity? Should we rather concentrate on simplifying teaching content and 'vehicles' to provide basic 'nuggets' of knowledge which the students then apply in whatever assignment we offer them? The answer here has two parts. Firstly, if we are content that our only goal is to get students through courses, and that students are a happy party to this concept as they all fall into Richardson's (2005:676) concept of strategic learners, then perhaps that works. However, if within Higher Education (HE) we are here to develop deep learning, then we need to consider how our approaches to teaching might support that Richardson (2005:677).