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'It's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged': developing student engagement using blogging as a form of assessment

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Title: ‘It's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged’: developing student engagement using blogging as a form of assessment

Abstract:

There is widespread debate in higher education about how best to support students in becoming more active and engaged learners. Geographers have occupied a central position in these debates having long been concerned with understanding and creating teaching spaces that encourage active and experiential learning. Recent pedagogical innovations have seen a movement away from a reliance on lecturing as the key pedagogical method and a redefinition of the roles of both teacher and learner. In this paper, we look at the role that assessment, specifically assessed blogs, can play in enhancing student engagement. Drawing on interviews with Course Organisers from two case study courses, student focus groups, and course evaluation surveys we show the various ways in which blogs enhance engagement. We draw attention to how blogging enabled students to personalise their learning and make it more meaningful to them, as well as to foster greater engagement with the course materials

including making connections across the course as a whole. Further, we show how blogging enabled students to develop transferable skills that would stand them in good stead for the rest of their time at university and in their future professional lives.

Key words: blogs, assessment, student, engagement, undergraduate

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Introduction

There is widespread debate in higher education about the reasons why we should, and how best to, support students in becoming more active and engaged learners (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Lambert, 2012; Lom, 2012; Manolis, Burns, Assudani and Chinta, 2013). **An umbrella term, active learning is widely used to describe learning and teaching methods that allow students to take active control of their learning through participation in meaningful activities (c.f. Anderson, 2013). There is less agreement about what student engagement is (Mandernach, 2015; Boekaerts, 2016), who it benefits (Buckley, 2018), and how to measure it effectively (Fredricks, Filsecker and Lawson, 2015; Sinatra, Heddy and Lombardi, 2015). Zepke (2018: 435) argues that a “single definition would be generic and blind to individual, cultural, discipline and historical differences”. It is broadly understood, however, that student engagement is a multidimensional construct with at least three dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (Sinatra et al, 2015; Mandernach, 2015; Boekaerts, 2016). It is also widely accepted that a complex array of factors influence student engagement (Fisher, Perényl and Birdthistle, 2018), including personal motivation and energy, influences from outside the classroom, the nature of the teaching environment, and institutional support (Zepke, 2018).**

Withstanding formal definition, and following Fisher et al (2018: 4), in this paper we understand student engagement to be characterised by “enthusiasm, interest, belonging [...], deep learning [...], self-regulation, time and effort invested in studying, interaction and participation [...], feelings of autonomy, and choice and control”.

Pedagogical innovations designed, at least in part, to foster active learning and engagement have occurred across the entangled spectrum of spaces in which learning

now takes place. Thus we have heard much about the relative merits of flipped classrooms (Graham, McLean, Read, Suchet-Pearson and Viner, 2017), virtual laboratories (Mui, Nelson, Huang, He and Wilson, 2015), peer learning (Nicholson, 2011), experiential learning (Sim & Marvell, 2015; van den Bemt, 2018), and Web 2.0 technologies (Rourke & Coleman, 2009; Smith, 2010; Zawilinski, 2009) to name but a few. Geographers have occupied a central position in these debates having long been concerned with understanding and creating teaching spaces that encourage active and experiential learning (Krakowka, 2010; Whalley, Saunders, Lewis, Buenemann and Sutton, 2011). Even the field course, that staple of any geography curriculum, has recently been subject to scrutiny leading to a number of creative and energetic pedagogic innovations (Cook, 2000; Phillips, 2015; Philips & Johns, 2012). As Golubchikov (2015, p.45) has cautioned, however, fieldtrips “do not automatically connect experiential and critical learning” and recently attention has turned to the links between active learning and assessment methods (Ferguson, 2016).

Traditionally, assessment has been driven by conventional examinations and written essays but there is an increasing acceptance amongst educators that these ‘high-stakes assessments’ fail to accommodate more complex achievements like creativity and imagination, reflection, and the development of ‘voice’ (Whalley et al, 2011). There has also been a push to make assessment more authentic (that is pertinent to both the lived experiences of the students and to the tasks they might be asked to perform in a future professional setting) (Anderson, 2013; Smith, 2010). The result has been a growing uptake of more innovative assessment methods, which proponents perceive to be better able to interrogate not just students’ knowledge and understanding of course content (Golubchikov, 2015) but also their capacity for analysis, synthesis, application, and (re)presentation. Blogging (**an increasingly popular form of assessment in the University-sector**) is one such method; with blogs said to open up a space

for students to become active and engaged learners through the completion of a more authentic (as in, personally relevant) task (Farmer, Yue and Brooks, 2008).

Blogs vary in format (Brown Jarreau, 2014; Dunleavy, 2014; Minocha & Roberts, 2008) but, for undergraduates, typically consist of a series of short online posts across a set period of time that are then assessed as a whole. The process of blog writing is **always** continuous; **however, the processual design can vary. An instructor may allow** students the opportunity to reflect on feedback received and to revise (or ‘manage the knowledge’ in (Farmer et al, 2008) their blog posts before final submission (**flexible approach**).

Alternatively, they may prevent subsequent editing in order to provide a snapshot of the students’ learning at a particular stage in the course, which the student (and instructor) might later reflect on (fixed approach). Blogs can be either formative or summative, public or private, individual or collaborative, with the option to be seen solely by staff, or to be opened up to peers and/or the public (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014; Murray & Hourigan, 2008). The style of the blogs is important, and students are encouraged to write in an accessible and engaging way that is cognisant of the disciplinary structures and conventions in which the course is embedded, as well as of the audience they are trying to share their knowledge with (Chang, Liang, Tseng Meiho, Tseng, and Chen, 2013; Gallagher, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Further, students are encouraged to make their work intertextual (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014) and multi-modal (Glass, 2014) by embedding hyperlinks, images, sound files, videos and so on in their posts. **As such, blogs share many of the characteristics and potential benefits of online portfolio assessments (Fernsten and Fernsten, 2005; Nicholson, 2018; Farrell and Seery, 2019), without necessarily the same degree of emphasis on student achievement, competency, and growth over time.**

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we situate the literature on blogging in wider debates about student learning and student engagement. Second, we turn to the empirical part of the paper, setting out the methods we used to derive data on two undergraduate courses, one from human geography and the other from the earth sciences, where blogging is used. We then turn to the findings from the research and look to if, and how, blogging allowed students to become more active and engaged learners. In the conclusions, we draw attention to blogs as a new space of assessment in higher education and their implications for change in the geography curriculum.

Blogging as a tool for enhancing student engagement

Much of the literature on student learning is caught-up with the idea that the nature of education is undergoing a transformation (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Manolis et al, 2013). Education has traditionally been viewed as the means to convey information — students were perceived as identical empty vessels to fill with knowledge (Manolis et al, 2013), and teachers were seen as transmitters of this knowledge (Biggs & Tang, 2011). In the last few decades, however, there has been a profound shift away from these notions. On one hand, there has been a movement away from the reliance on lecturing as the key pedagogical method. A wide-ranging critique of such teaching methods suggests that traditional lectures, coupled with written examinations, encourage a ‘binge and purge’ or ‘banking’ (Cook, 2000) mentality amongst students, which does little to develop deeper levels of knowledge and understanding of course content (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Further, lectures have been subject to scrutiny from critical educators and activists who suggest that they contribute relatively little to students' knowledge because they do not acknowledge individual student differences (Ali, 2016; Badenhorst & Mather, 2014) and ignore the role of experience in knowledge formation

(Cook, 2000). On the other hand, there has been a redefinition of the role of the teacher from 'repository of knowledge' to 'facilitator of learning' (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Golubchikov, 2015). This has shifted the emphasis away from what the teacher does and on to the learning activities that the student engages in. This has also required a redefinition of the learner, as "a more self-reflective and self-managed role [is] offered to students" (Golubchikov, 2015, p.143; see also Cook, 2000). In this scenario traditional pedagogic power relations are destabilised (Brendell, 2017); students become active agents of their own learning with teachers enabling them to draw on their own knowledge and experience creating a deeper, more meaningful, and engaged learning experience (Brown Wright, 2011).

In a concerted effort to encourage deeper learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Smith, 2010) or 'higher order thinking' (Purcel & Xie, 2014), there has also been a shift toward more learner-centred (Brown Wright, 2011; Hansen, 2016) forms of assessment that allow students to engage more fully and more meaningfully with the course content (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Traditional assessment methods (e.g. examinations and essays) enable students to rely on memorisation rather than encourage conceptualisation (ibid.). In such an environment, the successful students are the ones who have mastered the ability (all too often at a low level of knowledge acquisition) simply to reproduce information delivered by the teacher (Brown Wright, 2011). In contrast, rather than encourage students to rote-learn, blogs can assist students in becoming more reflective by encouraging them to seek connections between their personal experiences and the material covered (Glass, 2014). In an ideal world, what evolves from blogging should be an assessment method that transforms knowledge from the classroom into the students' everyday lives (and back again). The retention and utility of this knowledge tends to be more profound due to the students' direct engagement in constructing it (Anderson, 2013). **The continuous nature of blogs (whether flexible or fixed in design)**

allows for the provision of formative feedback as well as opening up a space in which students can develop their understanding of the course content in a cumulative fashion as they work their way through the learning activities. Further, instead of writing an in-depth essay about just one topic, blogs require students to engage with all elements of the course not just individual elements. In short, Anderson (2013) argues that assessments such as blogs allow students to construct a reciprocal feedback loop between academic ideas and their own experiences as a direct result of the heightened engagement they prompt.

The process of writing a blog also necessitates adherence to certain stylistic conventions, which can further enhance student engagement with course material. Just because an online blog may not follow the formal structure of an academic essay, it does not mean it is an “unstructured free-for-all” or an assessment with ‘no rules’; rather it is an assessment with a ‘different set of rules’ (Cook, 2000, p.17). Concision is critical, as is a mastery of linguistic strategies for discussing or explaining points (e.g. summary, paraphrasing). A blog may utilise less-formal language to illustrate examples (Ryan, 2012), however, students must still be aware of the correct disciplinary terminology and often are required to explicate their knowledge in a format accessible to non-specialists. Students are required to incorporate multimedia resources into their posts in order to create content that is more creative and engaging. As a result, students who write blogs tend to be “learners who are both more engaged with the world around them and better equipped to be active, literate and critical participants in an increasingly networked and technologically complex world” (Burgess 2006, p.112 cited in Badenhorst & Mather, 2014, p.194). Combined, these attributes encourage students to develop their own ‘voice’ as part of the assessment process by choosing a path that integrates both “scholarly and lay voices into a bricolage of understanding” (Anderson, 2013, p.391).

Fostering engagement through blogging is not always easy or straightforward (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014; Minocha & Roberts, 2008; Purcel & Xie, 2014). Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup and Conole (2008), for example, note that the integration of blogging into courses can be difficult if not ‘well-embedded’ into the learning design; they, and others, also cite problems with student compliance particularly when posting is not compulsory (Krause, 2004; Minocha & Roberts, 2008). The scope of this paper prevents us from exploring the wider advantages, disadvantages, and technicalities of assessed blogs (**the latter of which attracted the majority of the negative comments from participants**). Instead, we focus on the use of assessed blogs in the Geography curriculum **and the extent to which they provide a space for students to expand their knowledge, develop their communication skills, facilitate self-discovery and reflection, and foster motivation** by engaging them more fully in learning activities. We demonstrate how blogging allows students to draw on their unique experiences as part of the process of creating new knowledge - or ‘personal geographies’ (Roberts, 2013 in Brendell, 2017) - which is of direct relevance to them. Creating such an innovative space allows students to individualise their learning and to tailor it to their own needs. We show that developing their own voice enables students to engage with the curriculum in more meaningful ways than those permitted by conventional essays and written examinations. In so doing, **the paper addresses a significant gap in the literature relating to the pedagogical value of blogs, namely their potential role in enhancing student engagement. Correspondingly, it makes useful contributions to wider debates on assessment in Higher Education on the importance of authenticity, reflection, and the cultivation of creativity.**

Methodology

Part of a wider project investigating the use of assessed blogs across the University of Edinburgh, this paper focuses on the findings from two case study courses based within the School of Geosciences: one (for which the PI was Course Organiser (CO)) oriented toward the social sciences/arts and humanities (Course A) and one oriented toward earth science (Course B). In so doing, we suggest that, although some courses are perhaps better suited to being assessed in this way, blogging has as much potential for physical geography students as human geography students; reflecting on the earth sciences, for example, the CO for Course B commented dryly:

If you talk about different, novel ways of teaching, you get shot-down round here still. [...] People [say] ‘you can’t do that, that’s not traditional’ [...] if you try new things you get told, ‘oh, you don’t have time to do that’ or ‘that won’t work’ [...] ‘we’ve been doing this for years, why do you need to change it?’

Course A is an optional course for undergraduate geography students (**in Years 3 and 4 of a four-year degree programme**) assessed by an independently written 2,000-word blog (distributed over five posts) (40%) and a 3,000-word essay (60%). Course B is compulsory course for final year Geology students (**in a five-year degree programme**) assessed by an independently written blog (c.500 words per post, minimum six posts) (30%) and a technical report (70%). Both courses are small, enrolling ≤ 32 students each year. Both COs were keen to explore various non-conventional ways of assessing their students, and to use Web 2.0 technologies to support this. In both cases the blogs were hosted on the University’s main VLEs; Course A using the journal function in Learn and Course B relying on PebblePad. **In both courses, the blog content remained private between the student and the CO; both**

COs were aware that blogging was likely to be an unfamiliar form of assessment for their students and believed that privacy would give individuals the confidence to test out this relatively new form of academic communication without fear of embarrassment. The CO of Course A additionally felt that privacy allowed the students to make more personally meaningful (and perhaps intimate) connections with the course content and encouraged them to take risks (e.g. to express themselves creatively, to experiment with representational techniques, to be ambitious and/or innovative in their choice of/approach to examples). In both cases, students wrote posts on a weekly basis, using other learning activities (lectures, interactive workshops, field trips, laboratory classes and so on) as a springboard for reflection. Early, and detailed, formative feedback was given in each course (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

We collected data from interviews with the two COs and focus groups (FG) with students taking each course in the 2016-17 academic year. Students were recruited using face-to-face methods with volunteers contacting the project postgraduate research assistant (Barber) via email. Barber conducted all the interviews and FGs, with five students (out of 30) participating from Course A and four students (out of 8) from Course B. **Prior to the recruitment Barber had had no previous contact with the students from either course.** Interviews with the COs centred on their reasons for choosing blogs as a form of assessment and their advantages and disadvantages. In the FGs, we used semi-structured questions (Table 1) to tease out the students' experiences of blogging and to provide opportunities for them to reflect on what had and had not worked well, the extent to which blogging allowed them to develop their own voice, and the pros and cons of using blogs as an assessment tool. **Focus groups, we felt, would elicit a detailed, individualized, contextualised understanding of student engagement; however, we acknowledge that interviewer bias and 'social**

desirability factors' may have influenced the accuracy of the findings (Mandernach, 2015). At the start of each FG, Barber informed participants that the transcriber would assign each of them an anonymous identifier (e.g. A1 denotes 'Student 1' from 'Course A'); however, because of the small sample size identification may be possible depending on the information they shared. We also drew on the Course Evaluation Survey (CES) results for each course from the academic years 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17. Student self-report questionnaires undoubtedly have their limitations (e.g. response bias, memory errors) (Salmela-Aro, Moeller, Schneider and Spicer, 2016), however, the students who submitted these evaluations were unaware of their participation in the research and, as such, the CES presented an opportunity for the voices of less-satisfied or less-motivated students to emerge. The interviews and FGs were recorded and transcribed in full before being uploaded (alongside the CES) for analysis using the NVivo software.

An in-depth analysis followed the constant comparative method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where coding takes place across the whole data set. This means that we gave each data item equal attention in the coding process; the themes we identified were checked against each other and back to the original data set; and, the research team independently checked the themes to ensure that they were internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. **We paid particular attention to Course A in case the PI/CO's contact with the students could have affected the data collected. For example, the students who participated might have been those who enjoyed blogging, liked the course, or wanted to impress the PI/CO. In analysing the data every effort has been made to identify the themes which were important across the courses as a whole and not unduly driven by the (often positive) insights shared by the students on the PI's course. In looking at particular themes, we**

referred to both an entire section and to the remainder of the transcript to ensure that any extracts used were consistent with views expressed on other topics. We found this method of analysis particularly useful for giving a holistic picture rather than a fragmented view of individual variables. The quotations selected for this article are those that represented significant constructs that appeared across both the interviews with the COs, the student FGs, and CES.

Developing personal connections

Both COs were highly committed to assessing the students on their courses using blogging. The driving force for both was a desire to move away from a traditional model of curriculum delivery and assessment, which they felt encouraged students to be ‘passive underachievers’ (Guyton, 2000; Manolis et al, 2013). Instead, they favoured a more active and participatory approach that not only encouraged the students to engage more meaningfully with the learning activities, but would also allow them to tailor the assessment to the course content and learning objectives. One commented on the pedagogical reasons for her dislike of exams:

I’m not sure they test people’s knowledge, I think they tend to test people’s retention of information, under stressful situations. And I felt, also, that the subject matter that I’m teaching on, which is on sensory perception, which is a very subjective and personal thing, I just didn’t feel like you could really assess people’s understanding and knowledge of that through a timed exam (A CO).

This CO was keen to create an assessment that would allow students to make use of their own experiences in order to create new forms of knowledge and understanding, and then use that

new 'embodied' knowledge to reflect on real world issues. She felt that a blog would allow students to develop these skills in ways that would simply not be possible using conventional assessment methods (Manolis et al, 2013). She commented:

I thought it would be much fairer and more interesting for me, and the students, to let them think about it, and apply the theory that I introduce them to, to their own understandings and experience of the world around them. So that's why blogs appealed to me (A CO).

She went on:

It just seemed a bit more of a creative way to do things. I liked the idea that the blogs will allow the students to draw upon other sources that are not necessarily academic and linked to real world examples. [...] I just feel like exam answers can sometimes be a bit dry and a bit stale, and sometimes just end up reiterating what the student has remembered the theorist has said (A CO).

Both the COs were clear that the blogs were an important aid to understanding by getting students to construct their own knowledge and to reflect critically on it. As one commented:

It's definitely made them think a lot more about what they were (sic) doing. Instead of just writing down what they did today they now have to think about, 'Oh, we have done something new. How well do we actually understand it?' and I think they reflect a lot more on it than the bits of work I saw prior to me taking over this course (B CO)

Giving the students more control over **their** own learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011) they felt, encouraged the students to engage with the theory they encountered in a more pro-active and applied manner (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014).

The students were in agreement with the COs that blogging was a welcome addition to their portfolio of assessments; however, for different reasons. Their comments focused on the standardised nature of traditional assessments:

Writing the blogs was a welcome change from the relatively dry and formal academic writing we usually have to do (B CES 2016-17).

essays are standardised font and layout and everything [...] for me university assessments feel like they just want everyone to be the same. Here's your mark criteria, you've got to adjust, no matter how you feel, how you think, what your perspective is, where you've come from or whatever. [...] all 200 of you in geography, [...] something like **blogs** allows you a different way of expressing thoughts and your perspective and stuff (A4).

They welcomed the opportunity to express their individual identities rather than feeling homogenised by the academic system. They commented:

I think it seems to allow people's personality to come through more, whereas essays [...] it feels like everyone's is the same or they want everyone's to be the same, in a certain way. Whereas blogs, there's a degree of flexibility with how you do them, and obviously what you can do it on as well. And I just think that's encouraging people to

think outside the box and be a bit more unique and individual, rather than worrying about what everyone else is doing and it's got to be to a certain format or whatever (A4).

It was good to put in your personal reflections, whereas essays don't tend to do that so much. So that was fun and exciting, and it gets you to engage with the course in that personal level (A1).

As such, the students felt that the blogs allowed them to (re)gain some ownership and control over the writing process (Farmer et al, 2008; Gallagher, 2010).

While the students agreed that, as a relative 'unknown' (i.e. they felt they knew what a blog was but most had never written a blog themselves and none had been assessed via blogging), blogging was 'daunting' at first, they really appreciated the perceived 'freedom' and opportunities it offered (Walker, 2017). They stressed how enjoyable and motivating they had found the experience once they got in to it; in comparison to essays and exams, they said they found blogs 'fun', 'refreshing', and even 'exciting'. In part, because they were required to include their personal reflections;

It also made the course a bit more fun, [...] rather than writing [**a geology**] essay about something that's quite dry. It was a bit more excitement, coming in, you could have fun with the blog (B3).

But also because it offered them an opportunity to be more creative;

Really enjoyed writing blogs instead of the usual boring assessments. Gives more-creative students the chance to shine! Do not believe in essays all the time as ways to assess students. Think this was a refreshing way to think about a course and shows that the geography department need to branch out from standard assessments. Liked that we could have some creativity in the course (A CES 2015-16).

A final factor noted by both staff and students was the authentic nature of the blog assessment, as one CO described it:

[It has] been unbelievable. I've had, last year, one of the guys went round and recorded urban sounds, and then made a dance track out of them, I've had people write about cooking spaghetti Bolognese. The wealth of examples that they bring to it, and the amount of thought that they seem to put into them is just astonishing. So that, for me, is an advantage, and I think for them, it gives them a chance to really make connections between their own lives and the theory that they're reading, which can be a bit dry sometimes (A CO).

The students on this course preferred to use language that was more prosaic, describing blogging as 'not fake' and less 'forced'. The students' enthusiasm for the blogs was such that some "almost looked forward to doing it" (A2).

Fostering student engagement

Student engagement is widely recognised as an important influence on achievement and learning in higher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011; **Sinatra et al, 2015; Fisher et al, 2018**).

As noted above, a desire to enhance student engagement was an integral part of the COs

course design philosophy and their chosen methods of assessment played a key role in this. It was clear from the students' accounts **that the continuous nature** of the assessment did make them engage with the course content in a more sustained and meaningful way than assessments that were more traditional might. This happened in two ways: 'in-class' and 'across the course'. In the Geology course, for example, where the weekly classes focused on the range of scientific instruments used in collecting geological data, the students felt the blog had stimulated their engagement in individual classes:

[I] had to sort of pay attention in a different way, to the lecturer. [...] we didn't have to, like, write extensive notes, or memorise it for an exam. It was more, what you were gonna take away from it [...] rather than just regurgitate[e] it, like, an exam question [...] You actually remembered it, because you were paying attention (B3).

Likewise, in the Geography course:

The way they were set out in five, [writing the posts] allowed you to reflect on each lecture [...] usually you just go to a lecture and then it's done with. The next time you think about it is either in exam revision or if you're using it for an essay, or even a lot of the time you don't have to think about it at all (A4).

The sustained engagement required by blog assessments also limited the opportunities for the students to be thematically selective about what they 'learnt' (in the sense of cramming or 'question spotting' for an exam at the end of a course). This meant that the assessment forced their engagement with the entire course content:

this course doesn't have an exam, so I don't think I would've concentrated so much on the lectures if we didn't have the blogs. I would've only focused on the things I would write (A1).

otherwise, I wouldn't have forced myself to read on mass spectrometry, or other techniques (B2).

Salmela-Aro et al (2016) caution that engagement (especially emotional) must always be considered in relation to negative experiences (e.g. anxiety, stress) and, certainly, students from both courses commented negatively on the “time-consuming” (B CES 2016-17; A CES 2014-15) nature of blog-writing. One student in particular stated:

A blog for every lecture definitely felt like too much, it took a full day to write a good post (B CES 2014-15).

Overwhelmingly, though, the significant impact on the amount of time that the students had to invest in the course over the semester because of blog writing was seen as a positive thing:

Yeah, not like dropping off at week six or once you've handed in your essay and stuff like that. It's been like continually gone on (**sic**) (A3).

Importantly, it prompted the students to make connections across the course content. One commented:

[with a] standard essay [...] technically you only need to have a good in-depth knowledge of two or three max topics. And you could do amazing in the subject, whereas this, it requires a bit of thinking around all the lectures and all the topics and that and interconnecting them (A4).

As such, the students' learning was cumulative and progressive (Farmer et al 2008). A 'surface approach' (Biggs & Tang, 2011) to learning became increasingly untenable and they could not avoid becoming more involved.

The students particularly welcomed the opportunity to repurpose the content of the learning activities in ways that were more personal to them and therefore to interrogate the materials in a more engaging, contextualised, and meaningful way:

if we'd been writing an essay, we would have paid more attention to how precisely the instrument works. But with [the blog] we were [...] saying, 'oh, how old is this instrument', and 'how long has it been in the uni', and 'how did they build it', and 'what was it used for'. Just more interesting, and appealing facts (B1).

As well as empowering and motivating them to think independently and assume responsibility for their own learning (Hansen, 2015; Park, 2003; Smith, 2010), the blogs also stressed the validity of the learners' own experiences as a basis for knowledge generation (Walker, 2017). The students found the assessment brought their learning 'to life' complimenting the course content by actively encouraging them to make connections between the course material and their everyday lives (Smith, 2010). As these students commented:

it has made me think about academia in my everyday life and in my everyday experiences. So it's made me think about making those linkages every day (A1).

I did one on silence on trains, because I commute into uni every day, and it was about how you get a commuter train in the morning and you expect it, because it's so busy, to be really, really loud, but it's always silent. And it was like is this like a learnt cultural thing. And then I was bringing in links on train etiquette from Japan where [it's] completely frowned upon to talk on the train and things like that. So it gave you a chance to put your work in like a social aspect (A3).

As the students developed their reflective skills, they became more thoughtful and articulate observers of their world. They also found themselves 'caring' more about the course material (Glass, 2013; Park, 2003). One commented:

I think it's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged with a course, like thought. Like I leave and I talked about it with people. [...] I've literally never done that. Even if I've enjoyed a course, I've never fully felt ... I don't know, like it's impacted the way I think fully. And I think the blogs definitely have helped that (A2).

Having taken the course content on board, having engaged meaningfully with it, this student found themselves thinking about how they might, and actively wanting to, share it with other people.

The COs earned a grudging respect from the students for devising a learning activity that drew them in to the course materials in an engaging way. One put it thus:

It's tricking you into enjoying it (A3).

When the students enjoyed something, and were able to build on their own experiences, they felt that they were more likely to learn from the process, as one participant so eloquently said:

it renders something that's so hard-core academic into something you can relate to.

And if you can relate to it that means you can learn it better, if you can learn it better it means you can perform your best (A1).

This corresponded to the course organisers' perceptions of how the students used the blogs to enhance their understanding of the course:

Actually, at the end of the course they really enjoy it and they go, 'it actually made me think about it a lot more than I would have done otherwise' (B CO).

The evidence from our study suggests then that such engagement affords students the opportunity to engender a greater knowledge 'footprint' into their learning experience – students thought about the learning activities more frequently, in more scenarios, and retained the understandings they developed through it for a longer period.

Fostering transferable skills

Both COs identified the academic importance of being able to write in a concise and engaging manner and to identify and evaluate sources of information. Each used blogging as a way of making the students more conscious of their writing style, for example, how they might paraphrase arguments and express their ideas succinctly. The students were fully aware of the benefits of learning how to write in a pithy and accessible way. One commented:

[s]omething I struggle with is condensing ideas into a small ... like 2,000 words. I find it quite hard a lot of the time to answer everything that it seems the marker is looking for. [The blog] really made you think 'this is my point, this is what I want to say' and 'what's the best way I can say it in 400 words?' Which really isn't a lot, and I think going forward I think that's probably a good skill to learn and use (A4).

They also saw the transferability of these skills in relation to other assessments they would do at university:

I certainly found it helpful for [the] dissertation, because you've got to write your abstract and your abstract can only be 300 words and it's got to be a summation of 12,000 words of your knowledge and your research. [...] So it's quite good in that it's related to other challenges (A3).

Further, learning a new genre of writing gave them an appreciation of the differences between texts and a more nuanced understanding of why academics write in the way they do:

you're so indoctrinated into writing in the academic style that it's really, really helpful to have that right, we're going to refresh, we're going to reset what you know how to write, which was quite good (A3).

it made me a lot more aware of how different the writing styles are, the academic and informal ones (B1).

They also began to appreciate more fully the importance of presentational standards:

the aestheticisation of looking at stuff online. [...] if you go onto a restaurant's webpage, if they've got text everywhere and their photos aren't aligned, you're like 'oh, that's a bit scruffy looking'. You'd be more likely to go with something that looks a bit more professional. So I think it's just that idea that if it looks a bit misaligned or scruffy, it looks like you've not taken care of it or put the effort into the work (A3).

One CO commented on how students used these new skills both for the blog and for their more conventional essays:

I've definitely seen progression in terms of their writing ability [...] in their academic essays after Easter. They seem to develop an ability to be much more concise and are better able to draw on examples, that are not academic, but also, how they bring the academic literature in to support their own ideas. So **[you]** don't get big chunks of direct quotes. I tend to find much more paraphrasing of the academic theory (A CO).

These responses suggest that teaching academic conventions by rote is not enough; blogs can act as a 'bridge' to academic writing in order to convince students of its validity (Gallagher, 2010).

The COs felt that blogging encouraged the students to think more carefully about the structure of their discussion and the clarity of their arguments (regardless of what they might be writing about). One commented,

I think it makes them think about what they've learnt and [...] how they will explain it to someone else who may not have the geological background. I think that focus helps them actually really understand what they're talking about. [...] it's another skill, because it's a communication skill that we don't cover in other aspects of their courses (B CO).

Indeed, in the Geology course, one of the key learning outcomes explicitly stated the development of transferable skills:

It's a course with transferable skills so I decided the transferable skills would actually be to write a blog rather than just a straight forward diary recording what they did, but also get them to think about writing it for a public audience because it's a great communication skill for scientists (B CO).

This CO felt that these transferable skills were essential both to the students who would go on to pursue a career in Geology as well as to those who left the discipline to follow other employment opportunities:

you're teaching the students a lot of different skills which is what they need. Because we have to be realistic, they're not all going to go into geological research. Not all of them are going to go into a geological job, so having all these skills is what the graduates need (B CO).

This further required consideration of their audience and an understanding of how to pitch an argument to them in an accessible way. This was perhaps the first time that the students had thought deliberately about their audience (despite having written countless essays and exam answers) and viewed themselves as 'knowers' rather than 'receivers' (and in turn simply 'regurgitators') of knowledge (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014; Lambert, 2012). As such, it was often a profound moment of insight for them in developing their writing style/voice. One student put this well:

it allows you to take a step back from it and think about how you'd be able to communicate that to somebody that doesn't know that much about the science you're looking at. So it's really, it makes you think, wait, what are the basics, again, how can I actually tell somebody about that, because that's, I suppose, that's what science is about, it's about communicating stuff (B 3).

Explaining research techniques in simple and accessible terms was a really useful exercise as it made it clear how important it is to properly communicate science and research to a wider audience (B CES 2016-17).

As such, the blogs encouraged the students to develop a sensitivity both towards those who would read their work and to themselves as purveyors of knowledge.

The second transferable skill that blogging afforded the students was the opportunity to develop research skills in seeking out and evaluating their own source materials that were relevant to the kinds of experiences and theories they were drawing on (Alvarez, 2016).

Again, this drive toward intertextuality (Badenhorst & Mather, 2014; Gallagher, 2010) was a very deliberate learning outcome set by both COs. One commented:

I think finding literature [...] it seems to make them look more actively for material of relevance, specifically within geography [...]. But **[also]** outside of the discipline quite broadly, [...] And kind of understanding, I think, how [...] how the work of geographers relates to **[for example]** social anthropology, which is the discipline that we tend to draw on most, because that's where most of the work [in this area] has been done to date (A CO).

The students were also encouraged to look beyond conventional academic source materials and, once they had overcome the fear of doing this, they enjoyed the freedom to explore a diverse range of texts in a variety of different media. One commented:

I was writing about silent discos, and then I found everything about silent discos was in girly mags, like in Style and Elle and stuff, and I was like 'can I put in Style in this?' It's just so weird. I was overwhelmed by that option and that freedom, but it is good. And YouTube videos and stuff like that and multimedia, that was fun (A1).

It was not clear from the data what degree of skill the students achieved in reflecting critically on these unconventional sources, however, there is no doubt that their ability and willingness (rather than simply relying on supplied readings) to source relevant academic and non-academic literature/material was much improved.

Overall, students were conscious of the written communication skills they were developing as part of the process of blogging and were able to comment on the value of these for their future professional selves:

I think I want to go into development and humanitarian stuff and [...] I think a blog is a really accessible way to convey what academic research is saying to the wider audience and in a concise way as well (A2).

I want to do a PhD, but [...] I guess it's communicating science, that's what I'll take away from it, but also, I want to do some [outreach] work that, with schooling, and stuff like that [...]. So, like, being able to communicate to children the basics of geology, is really important (B3).

Blogs [are] a good way to practice outreach communication (B CES 2014-15).

Finally, not only the students benefitted from the blogs; the COs also found them a rich and creative resource through which to develop their own understanding and knowledge of the material and, indeed, a helpful way of garnering examples for future course content:

it's so much more interesting to mark what they write, and it helps me, because they give me ideas. There's so many times when I read the blogs, that they give me material, that I teach in the following year, because it's an example that I've not come across, or they've found a reading that I've not come across. It's given me ideas for my own research (A CO).

The resulting blogs were also a source of great job satisfaction:

It's really lovely to see them develop in terms of starting off doing something that they've never done before, most of them. And then the ones who really flourish with it, it's really lovely to see them begin to develop a voice of their own [...] and become really quite creative. They really seem to push themselves with the blogs, more than I expected actually (A CO).

Both the COs were proud to have aided the transformation of their students into active and engaged learners leaving both parties feeling enriched by the process.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, numerous positive teaching and learning outcomes have been associated with the use of blogs as a form of assessment, and many of these were evident in the empirical evidence from this case study. Significant in our findings, however, was the extent to which assessed blogs can enhance student engagement as delineated at the start of the paper. At a basic level, **the continuous nature** of blogging compels students to engage more, not just in individual classes, but also across the course as a whole. As a result, students are

more able to make connections between course themes (e.g. different theoretical approaches, methodologies, equipment) and make evaluations based on a broader subject knowledge base. The students believed that this increased engagement also had a lasting impact not just on the depth of their understanding but also their knowledge retention. Particularly when compared with writing essays (notable, at least amongst students, for their focus on individual course themes) or exam revision (which is commonly associated with selecting preferred, or seemingly 'easier', course themes and ignoring others).

On a more complex level, the students valued blogging not just because it was 'new' and 'refreshing' (a view which was universally held by the research participants), but also because it enabled them to personalise their learning and tailor the course content to suit their individual needs and interests. This made the learning experience more authentic and meaningful. Blogging enabled the students to make more easily direct connections between what they learned in class and their everyday lives and experiences. The result was that they cared more about the course content and were more motivated to deepen their learning and understanding of key concepts and ideas. Likewise, they were encouraged to inquire more deeply and critically into their own social worlds/practice (Haertling Thein, Oldakowski and Long Sloan, 2010; Kidwell et al, 2012) and to engage in positive self-examination and reflection (Yang, 2009). As such, blogging provided students with the means to become active participants in knowledge construction and assume responsibility for their own learning (Hansen, 2015; Park, 2003; Smith, 2010). It also, we found, had a positive impact on their understanding of themselves as 'knowledgeable beings'; the confidence this instilled, some students confessed, had sparked in them a desire to engage in discussion with others about the course content.

The more relaxed style and formatting of blogs relative to academic essays allowed the students to (re)gain some control and ownership over their writing. The students enjoyed the opportunity to be more creative and, despite initial trepidation, they welcomed the chance to incorporate multi-modal, multi-media materials and non-academic sources in their work.

Writing informally also enabled them to experiment with language and find their ‘own voice’ in an environment that was perceived to be less pressured (despite the blogs in both courses being summatively assessed). At a more complex level, the process of blog writing forced the students’ to engage more consciously in matters of structure, language, and presentation.

Learning a ‘new’ writing style (as opposed to churning out another essay or exam answer), **was perhaps time-consuming, but** made them think, many for the first time, about the audience they were writing for, the need to develop a meaningful connection with the reader, and the nuances of communicating within different contexts. As a result, blog writing gave the students an appreciation not just of the skill of writing for a peer or non-specialist audience, but also of academic writing and the techniques academics use to convey arguments, authority, and value. Through this engagement, the students felt they had developed an important set of transferable skills and understood clearly how they might employ these skills in their future careers and other academic work.

Although a small-scale study based in a Russell Group university in the United Kingdom, **and despite possible bias resulting from what we must assume was a highly motivated self-selecting group of participants**, this research has wider resonance for the discipline as a whole. Web 2.0 technology is now a firm feature in the landscape of learning and teaching and the nature of our assessment practices is changing (e.g. paperless marking). Geography is well placed to take advantage of these changes both because the subject matter lends itself well to the new tools and because our students expect the curriculum to prepare them for life

within and beyond the academy. While some might argue that blogging is better suited to human geography, where source material is open to interpretation and theoretical frameworks are particularly important, we have shown that this type of assessment works in the physical sciences too. Blogging, as Dunleavy **and Gilson (2012)** put it, is quite simply, one of the more important skills the contemporary academic can have in their toolkit and, as such, it is something that we should be teaching our students. The fact that students find it a fun, creative and refreshing way of being assessed which helps them to **engage and** learn more deeply, and COs derive greater satisfaction from it when compared with more traditional assessments, augurs well for its future development within the curriculum.

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General	<p>Compulsory course? No – prior knowledge of assessment? Did assessment influence course choice?</p> <p>Students more/less likely to take a course assessed by blog? Why?</p> <p>Communication with students who had taken the course previously?</p> <p>Blogged before? Academic/personal?</p> <p>Other course assessments? Yes - are the percentage weightings are appropriate? Would you change anything?</p> <p>How often do you submit posts? Are you satisfied with this? No - how would you do it differently?</p> <p>How do you feel about the blog being collaborative/commenting ‘publicly’ (as applicable)?</p> <p>Would you like your blog to be publicly available (as applicable)? Course/internal to UoE/external to UoE?</p>
Learning/skills development	<p>Do you think that blog writing has had any impact on your learning?</p> <p>Do you think that blog writing has had any impact on your research skills?</p> <p>Do you think that blog writing has had any impact on your overall writing skills?</p> <p>Do you think you have acquired any transferable skills from the blog assessment?</p> <p>What have been the main advantages/disadvantages (beyond the above)?</p>
Expectations/understanding	<p>Has the experience of blog writing been what you expected or different? What did you think it would be like? Has it been harder or easier than you thought?</p> <p>Did the blogs have assessment criteria? Yes - how clear were they? Would you suggest any changes?</p>
Technical/support	<p>What technical support/guidance were you given/do you get? Are you satisfied with this support/guidance? No - what would you appreciate?</p> <p>What writing support/guidance were you given/do you get? Are you satisfied with this support/guidance? No - what would you appreciate?</p> <p>Is the VLE easy to use? Does it allow you to do what you want it to do?</p> <p>Are you aware of any support/resources available internal/external to the UoE? What support/resources would be helpful to students writing assessed blogs?</p>

Table 1: Sample Focus Group questions