

Chapter 5

Building Interaction Online: Reflective Blog Journals to link University Learning to Real World Practice

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ABSTRACT

In higher education in recent years the educational value of blog journals for facilitating student engagement, reflection and learning has been emphasized (Chu, Kwan, & Warning, 2012; Ellison & Wu, 2008; Richardson, 2005; Yang, 2009). According to Williams and Jacobs (2004), blogs are seen as a 'transformative educational tool', which assists in the development of 'reflective and critical thinking skills' (Joshi & Chugh, 2009). This chapter critically analyzes the reflective and collaborative value of two different systems of blog journaling used by postgraduate student to reflect on their arts industry internships. Firstly Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>), used between 2008 and 2012 and secondly, journal blogging in the Learning Management System (LMS) of Moodle (2014) are critiqued in terms their ability to promote student engagement, reflection, connection and collaboration. There is particular emphasis on how recent blog journals (2014) reflect how students' confidence, awareness and understandings evolve as they develop professional expertise.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss recent research that builds upon a previous study (Rourke & Coleman, 2009) that examined the effectiveness of digital diaries as a learning tool to encourage postgraduate students to share, reflect and capture their working and learning experiences, while undertaking

internships in the arts industry. This study applied Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) model of the 5-stage blogging process to analyze the blog journals of ten randomly selected postgraduate students, which were created in Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>). Rourke and Coleman (2009) devised a ten point evaluative system for thematically grouping and quantitatively analyzing students writing,

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the results of this research (2008-2009) will be summarized for the purposes of comparison to the recent study (2014).

Recent research has focused on analyzing the reflective thinking processes students use while writing their Internship blog journals using adaptations of Moon's (1999) 'map of reflective writing' and Zarezadeh, Pearson and Dickinson (2009) 'Model of Reflection in Inter-professional Education'. Moon's (1999a) 'map of reflective writing', identifies five stages: noticing, making sense, making meaning and working with meaning and transformative learning. Zarezadeh, Pearson and Dickinson (2009) model "offers a structure for reflection in three personal, professional, and inter-professional levels, considering the organizational context and the culture of patient – centeredness" (p.2) in nursing education. In the case of postgraduate students writing journal blogs about their internship experiences, the 'centeredness' will be related to their relationship with other students and other professionals in their arts industry placements. Rourke and Coleman (2009) devised a ten-point evaluative system for thematically grouping and quantitatively analyzing students writing, which' will be employed as a tool for comparing the recent study to the previous study.

The recent study will analyze blog journals produced over two university Semesters by two different cohorts of postgraduate students within the Learning Management System (LMS) of Moodle. Here comparisons can be made between utilizing digital diaries (2008 to 2009) outside of the LMS compared to blog journals produced within the LMS (2014). It will critically analyze each systems effectiveness towards promoting student engagement, reflection, connection and collaboration and discuss how recent blog journals reflect how students' confidence, awareness and understandings have changed as the world of technology and learning has changed around them.

BACKGROUND

Recent literature in higher education has argued the advantages of using blogs in education for promoting active learning, stressing their usefulness as a tool for aiding critical reflection and encouraging reflective practice (Luca & McLoughlin, 2005; James, 2007; Yang, 2009; Yang, & Chang, 2012; Joyce, 2013). According to Efimova and Fiedler (2003) blogs are "personal diary-like-format websites enabled by easy to use tools and open for everyone to read" (p. 490). Stefanac (2006) taking a less personalized approach defines a blog as an "easy to update website characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order" (p. 230). Both refer to the 'easiness' of this online system, Efimova and Fiedler (2003) seeing blogs as 'diary-like' and Stefanac (2006) seeing blogs more in terms of a 'website' with organized entries. In education, blog journals are a popular means of engaging students in the process of reflective writing. As Crowe and Tonkin (2006) suggested blogs "enhance student learning in higher education through reflective journals for individual, collaborative learning activities, learning diaries during internships and postgraduate research and forums for debate" (p. 2).

In particular the benefits of reflective journal writing to student learning (Sockman, & Sharma, 2008; Burnett & Lingam, 2007; Brandt, 2007); for creating a strong sense of community (Efimova & Fiedler, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2008) and encouraging peer collaborative reflection (Manouchehri, 2002) has been recognized. Blogs are interactive (Rodzvilla, 2002) and journalistic (Richardson, 2005) and are 'user-friendly', as they require only a simple interface that does not rely on having an understanding of HTML (HyperText Markup Language) or other web scripting. According to Alexander (2006) it is the simplicity and interactivity elements of blogs that has contributed to their popularity in education and other social settings.

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