The Seminar Transformed: Use of blogs to enhance face-to-face learning at different levels

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1. Blogging: the definition question

Blogging, as it has evolved across the web over the last ten years, can be approached from a number of different angles. The veteran educational blogger Stephen Downes, in giving a succinct history of its development, highlights three particularly characteristic and successful genres within blogging: the original 'weblog' type, linking to and commenting on sites or news items from across the web; the personal diary, updated frequently enough to remain interesting; and the political comment site, offering intelligent analysis of the political scene from a particular perspective, and ideally sparking a great deal of stimulating and productive debate.[1] When blogging enthusiasts try to capture some of the creative energy manifest in the 'blogosphere' for Higher Education, they generally turn to one or other of these models.[2]

Using blogging in Higher Education would seem to be full of promise. Those who engage regularly with all these types of blogs, whether reading, writing or commenting on them, know how much creative energy a good blog generates; how blogging can build knowledge-based communities, make new voices heard from new places, and help individuals find their own distinctive voice, all things which educationalists are keen to promote.[3]

Not infrequently, however, capturing the anarchic energy of the blogosphere for higher education can prove elusive. Some would argue that the very use of blogs for educational purposes kills their spirit-what role have the frequently brutal cut-and-thrust of the comments page, or the inspired egocentricity and often idiosyncrasy of the online diary, to do with assignments and assessment?[4] Others, initially enthusiasts for the technique, have trialled blogging in higher education contexts, usually on their own courses, only to discover that the results have not lived up to expectations.[5] Some commonly reported problems include the following:

- Neither the students nor the instructors are sure what sort of 'voice' the students should be using. If they try to sound like 'real' bloggers, their blogs tend to be too superficial to count as a serious scholarly piece of work; if they try to produce scholarly pieces of work, they no longer sound like real blogs.[6]
- The students won't blog regularly if they aren't assessed.[7]
- 'Learning journal' blogs private to the student and the instructor are solipsistic, missing out on the group element of the blog.[8]
- If blogs are open to the world, students (especially women students) can attract offensive or hurtful comments from the large number of 'trolls'[9] and psychopaths who prowl the blogosphere and the web in general.[10]
- Giving detailed feedback or making substantial comments on (say) 20 blogs takes too much of the instructor's time to be practicable.[11]
- Blogging may in theory be 'what the kids on the street are doing', but in practice very few of them (certainly in the UK) have ever actually maintained a blog themselves.[12]

All of these problems can be effectively addressed, but in general, the more effectively they are addressed, the less the result looks like a traditional blog.

There are several possible responses to this dilemma by those who want to continue making use of blogging in Higher Education. One is the route proposed by Marcus O'Donnell.[13] He advocates using blogs in Higher Education not (or not primarily) in individual, assessed courses, but in parallel to the whole degree, as avenues of meta-learning. Students should be encouraged to keep their own blogs, develop their own voices, chase their own links, throughout their educational careers, developing as they go a new form of learning: learning as networking, connecting one's own conceptual node to an ever-increasing number of further pedagogical nodes.

An alternative is to recognise that there are two possible definitions of blogging: blogging as the emerging genre discussed above, and 'anything you do with a blogging tool'. Our own findings match those of Cox et al. in suggesting that course-based blogging may be most successful when it ignores the norms of the internet genre of blogging completely, and looks instead for creative ways to use a blogging tool[14] in the service of teaching and learning. To those who ask (as webphiliac colleagues looking to employ the technique in their own teaching often do) 'But is that really blogging?', we reply that the whole point of the Web 2.0 revolution is to put tools in the hands of the users and encourage them make use of those tools in as many ways as they can think of. Educational users should be no exception. And furthermore, in the spirit of content sharing, we should make our different ways of using these tools as widely known as possible.

2. Context: the Scottish degree structure

Teaching at the University of Edinburgh, as at other Scottish Universities, is generally based on the four-year degree programme. This, arguably, combines the virtues of the North American system, with its breadth of education, with those of the English system, with its early specialisation. In particular, this structure provides a stepped approach to higher education, with each year involving more focused specialisation within the chosen discipline, though in the School of Divinity, years 3 and 4 are taught at the same level and courses can be taken in either year depending on

availability.

In their first year, students on most programmes attend survey courses consisting of three or four lectures a week giving an overview of some major subject within their discipline; in the second year, they begin to specialise, but the courses are still largely lecture-based. One of the three courses in each of these years will normally be in an 'outside subject' which they need pursue no further. In the third and fourth years, they move on to seminars in specialised subjects within the main discipline.

In the first and second years, the lectures are given by the University professors and lecturers, but they are often given before very large numbers (well over two hundred in some subjects). These lectures are in general supplemented, therefore, by weekly one-hour tutorial groups of about ten people, generally led by a postgraduate tutor. In third and fourth years, the seminars, which are led by University professors and lecturers, generally number around fifteen to twenty students.

The University also runs a number of one-year taught Masters postgraduate programmes, leading to the qualification MTh or MSc.

The make-up of students in any given tutorial group in first or second year of undergraduate study can be very diverse. It will normally include some students who are taking the subject as an outside course, some who are visiting students from the Erasmus programme or from North America, and some who are intending to specialise in the discipline. In the School of Divinity, there is often a mixture of 17, 18 and 19-year olds and mature students (some training to become Church of Scotland ministers.) Across the University as a whole, there will be a mixture of state-educated and privately educated students, Scottish and English students (with a smattering of Welsh and Northern Irish), women and men, with the numbers of each varying enormously from degree programme to degree programme. There will also be students with various disability issues, and some who do not have English as their first language. The latter is particularly true in the Masters programmes.

The exact mixture of all of these within each tutorial group will vary enormously, both from year to year and course to course, and also from one tutorial group to another within the same course. This is also true within the School of Divinity itself. Integrating these students, who have often been educated to very different levels of articulacy and come from very different backgrounds, can be a real challenge.

3. Blogging within the School of Divinity: the first phase

In spring 2006, we began an HEA-funded project[15] in the Ecclesiastical History subject area of the School of Divinity, entitled 'Blogging to encourage Reflective Learning in History'. As initially conceived, the blogging envisaged would have been a reflective learning journal, in imitation of Dr Jessie Paterson's experience of keeping such a journal while studying for her MSc in e-learning at the University of Edinburgh. But as the project progressed, the approach evolved to a group use of the blog to prime seminar discussion. This is the form now most frequently used in the School of Divinity.

The first course to use blogging was a new Honours (third/fourth year) course, Early Christian Writers. Each week, one or two students, depending on numbers, wrote an 800-word commentary on the text for the week, and posted it, using the blogging tool, five days before the next class meeting. They were asked to address five aspects of the text (a work by the Early Christian Writer of the week):

- the date usually assigned to it (including whether there were any major scholarly disagreements about it),
- a bit of background on the author,
- any three other points they thought were particularly noteworthy.

All the other students in the class then posted short comments responding to this in the days leading up to the class. The lecturer would not comment on the blog at all, but pick up the discussion in the class itself. At the end of the course, the blogs were all marked, with the mark (blog plus regular comments) worth 10% of the overall mark for the course.

There was a computing lab-based introductory session to explain the procedure, and 'to walk' the students through the use of the blogging tool on a neutral subject ('what did you have for breakfast, or what would you have liked to have had?').

This approach was adapted from a similar idea used in a previous course, The Making of Christian Orthodoxy 325-451, but based on paper. Students took turns to write traditional commentaries on key documents from the Nicene and Chalcedonian controversies. The students photocopied these and distributed around the class, but in a large class this generated a considerable amount of paper, and it was difficult to have a deep discussion, as they were only distributed at the class itself with the students unable to reflect on the writings prior to the class meeting.

Most of the fourteen students who took Early Christian Writers had taken the previous course, and they could see how moving to using blogs solved some of the problems the paper commentaries had caused. The paper was eliminated, and as people had seen the commentaries several days before the class, they were able to engage with them more fully. Most of the students reported in feedback that they liked the technique, although one strongly disagreed.

For the lecturer, the technique was a clear boon. It was very obvious even before the class took place how much work the students had put in, and how well they understood the texts and the concepts behind them. It meant that the discussion began several steps ahead-it was possible to leave out some questions as they had already been given a thorough airing in the blog discussion, and turn to others which had not yet been addressed. It was possible to encourage quiet people in the class to elaborate on a good point they had already made in their blog comments. Also it was clear that some people had changed their initial ideas through the blog discussions before the class even met. The lecturer felt that the technique was very much preferable to a discussion board, because one or two students had to take responsibility for the blog, putting the spotlight on them in particular, but only for that one week. The others could be more reactive until the week when it was their turn.[16]

In autumn 2006, this blogging technique was tried in three further Ecclesiastical History classes at three different levels: first year, second year, and taught Masters.

In the first year class, History of Christianity as a World Religion 1A, there was one closed blog per tutorial group of ten, visible only to that group, with the postgraduate tutors responsible for setting the tone and monitoring the discussion of their own group. The students were told they could use 'semi-formal' prose, which they interpreted fairly widely. Again, one student per week was given responsibility for the blog each week with the rest of the group commenting. They were asked to comment on the tutorial text or texts for the week, and were given some questions to guide them. This time, as an encouragement to work hard on the blog, it was worth 20% of the overall course mark, 10% for the blog, and 10% for the comments.

This course was, and remains, the most successful use of the blog in the School of Divinity. Those tutors who had taught the course prior to the introduction of blogging listed many gains when blogging was introduced-the groups 'gelled' much faster; people got to know each other's names and backgrounds much more quickly than before. It was far easier for the tutors to draw out the shyer students, and for everyone, both tutors and other students, to challenge the more confident students who otherwise would tend to take over. The lecturers were able to see from the comments (they had viewing rights to all the groups) how much sense the students were making of their lectures, or not. The course organiser was able to gauge the level of tutorial effectiveness as they could demonstrate each students' level of participation in the case of any failures or complaints-it would no longer simply be the student's word against the tutor's. For the students feedback was almost universally positive. The blog was introduced into the sister

course, History of Christianity as a World Religion 1B, by general demand in the spring semester of 2007 (the tutors were the same, and 95% of the students were the same, as those of 1A). The two new students were given training in using the blog tool.

The texts in the second year course, EH2A: Christianity in the Pluralistic Roman World 100-314, are more demanding, and the tutorial groups bigger: 18-20 in each group. The class contained some very bright students who did very good work. It was much more difficult for the less committed students to 'hide' (keep a low profile) than it would have been without the blog, and the blog also allowed some of the students who got no room to talk in the class to say something of value online. However, the blog did not create the same palpable energy that it did in HCWR1A, perhaps partly because the standards demanded were higher. The blog in this case was worth 10% of the total course mark (5% for the main blog, and 5% for the comments, meaning each comment was worth 0.5%).

Students on the whole liked the blog at this level, or at least felt neutral about it. They reported that it encouraged (or forced) them to work more regularly than they would have done otherwise. They would have liked more guidance on what to write. The tutors/lecturers (they were the same in this case) reported that the discussion went much better than it had done in previous years when there was no blog. Again, it allowed them to see something of the students' level of understanding of the topic each week, to get to know something of their abilities more quickly, and to pick up in class on aspects which had not been covered in the online discussion.

The final course in which blogging was tried in this semester was the Masters course Creeds, Councils and Controversies I: Patristic and Medieval. The course organiser had predicted that the blogging technique would work best in this class, where the students were older, a good proportion (80% in the 2006-7 session) were from North America (and could thus be assumed to be more technologically literate than many students from the UK), and they could be considered mature enough to enter into discussion online without the need for the carrot of assessment. For this reason, this was the class that was chosen to be the second instance of blogging surveyed for the HEA project. But this was the class in which the technique was least successful, measured in terms of student participation. Of the ten students in the class, three never blogged at all, and most weeks there were no more than two or three comments posted.

The reasons for this would seem to include the following. There were serious technological problems with the course website at the beginning of the semester. As a result the introductory hands-on session in the School computing lab was cancelled, with the students asked to go off and try to work out the technology in their own time on the basis of a paper handout of instructions, and come back to ask for help if they needed it. Three of the students (the three who never blogged) were much less technologically literate than the others, but did not have the confidence at that stage to ask for help. All of the students but one were male. The level of ability in the class varied considerably. And the lack of assessment meant that the students had little to lose by not participating. Once a critical mass of students were no longer posting, there was little incentive for the more conscientious students to do so either.

Despite all this, however, about half of the students reported in their written feedback that they did like the blog and did think it should continue, and the others did not express any strong feelings against it. In the focus group, the feedback was even more positive.

We reported all these findings in our HEA project final report, which noted the importance of robust technical platforms, an initial 'hands-on' introductory session, and assessment.

4. Blogging within the School of Divinity: other Honours courses

Over the last three semesters, six other members of staff in the School of Divinity tried blogging in their third/fourth year courses. We gave them the following questionnaire on how they felt the blogging had gone:

- Briefly describe how you used blogging in your class (what the students were asked to do with the blogging

tool, whether it was assessed and by how much).

- Did student feedback indicate that the students liked blogging as taught in your class? Did their performance suggest that they got something out of the exercise, and if so, what?
- Did you feel your blogging experiment was a success? Why/ why not? Would you use/have you used the technique again? If so, would/did you modify it, and how?

All members of staff responded, some at more length than others. They reported mixed success, with four saying they would definitely try using blogging again and the other two saying they might, but they weren't convinced it was worth the effort involved.

One lecturer, in the course 'Byzantine Church and State 451-1672', asked the students to write 800-1000 words introducing the text of the week three or four times during the semester. This work replaced an essay, and the three blogs together were awarded 30% of the course marks (students who did four blogs were able to discard the lowest of the four marks). The students had been asked to vote on a choice of this or an essay at the beginning of the semester. Students were not asked to comment on each other's blogs (partly because it was a small enough class-8 people-to allow full participation by everyone during the class itself). The feedback was positive and the task was on the whole done extremely well. The blogs contributed to very good class discussion, and gave the students solid material for revision. This lecturer said he would use blogging again, but if the class were larger he would have them add comments to the blog for a further 10% of the total class mark. (That 10% was given for oral presentation in this instance of the course.)

Another lecturer, teaching 'The Body in Islam', had a different student post 200 words on the readings each week, with the others adding comments of about 50 words. He reported that the students were positive about blogging to some extent (seeing it as helpful for revision, and as forcing them to do the readings), but one or two really hated it. He felt he would try it again, but mix it with other forms of weekly assessment, to avoid it getting too repetitive.

On a Christian Ethics course, 'Ecology, Ethics and Religion', the students giving the weekly presentation were asked to do individual reflection blogs prior to giving their presentation. The presenters mainly did this very well, but there was a low number of comments on the reflections by the other students. The blog was thought to have contributed to higher quality and more focussed discussion. The professor in this class felt that he would use blogging again, but it had not brought about as much collective online discussion as he would have hoped, perhaps because students are under so much time pressure these days because of part-time work and also social commitments.

Blogging was reported by the lecturer to have been a success in a large class on 'Reformation Theology, Protestant and Catholic' (with 35 students). She felt it had given the students more 'airtime' and primed the discussions, and would definitely use the technique again.

In a course on 'A People Apart'? Explorations in Modern Jewish Thought, students were asked to analyse and contextualise a source text and raise topics for class discussion. The main blog (which the students each did once in the course) was 1000 words, and the others were asked to respond with comments. The blog was worth 10% of the total course mark. Students reported in their feedback that they liked the blog because it forced them to prepare for the class, but the lecturer herself felt that they had done the absolute minimum, and that the depth of the discussion in the class was therefore rather limited. She felt she would move away from the blog and ask the students to do written-up presentations next time, and then distribute them for revision. She felt this would better allow them to build up their presentation skills.

In a course on 'New Age Religion', there was also a 'one main blog plus comments' format. The blog plus comments were worth 10% of the overall course mark. The lecturer felt both students' reactions and students' performances were mixed. Some liked the blog, others were neutral; some put a lot of work into their comments, others were fairly

muddled (reflecting their seminar performances). But he also found that the blog, rather than enhancing seminar performance, actually detracted from it, because some students seemed to feel they had already made their contribution. He ended the course less than convinced that the blog format and process could tackle the kind of written and oral skills appropriate for Honours level, and also found it time-consuming to deliver.

Dr Sara Parvis tried blogging in two more Honours courses, 'Augustine and his Age' (in Spring 2007), and 'The Making of Christian Orthodoxy 325-451' (in Autumn 2007). In both cases, she had the students write three blogs of 1000 words each instead of an essay. (In the latter course, the assessment had previously been three 1000-word commentaries on paper.) The comments on the blogs together with class participation were worth a further 10%. On the whole, the students liked this format, as it gave them more revision material and took away the pressure of one of the essays they would otherwise have expected to do, but they felt it would not work to have more than one course per semester using a three-commentary model. One or two students, however, really did not like the blogging tool, either because they felt it militated against a serious academic format (as footnotes have to be added into the main text in square brackets), or simply because they disliked the posting up their work in this kind of way.

We are currently in the process of gathering some general cross-course feedback from students. One important question is whether when blogging is used across the whole four-year programme and across a number of courses there is a saturation level-after a certain point, have students simply tried blogging too often to find it helpful for generating or supporting discussion? We are not yet in a position to answer that question fully, because no cohort of students has yet tried the technique across more than two years of their programme. Next academic year, however, we will have a cohort that will have been in a position to have tried blogging at every level of the undergraduate degree programme: it is this cohort which should be able to tell us whether using blogging at every level of a Scottish degree programme is sustainable.

Conclusion

The School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh has now tried blogging, or some form of weekly posting with comments using a blogging tool, in every year of teaching undergraduate theology and religious studies, at taught Masters level, and a number of different Honours (third and fourth year undergraduate) courses.

At the moment we can report that, within the Scottish degree structure, it seems that blogging works best of all at the first year undergraduate level. It helps students from a wide variety of backgrounds to gel with one another quickly, and to come to respect one another's work on a basis other than simply a given student's confidence in speaking in public. It helps with the transition from school to university. It helps to bridge the gap between the lecturers and the students, and helps to provide a record of what is taking place in tutorial groups. The novelty and informality of the technique act as an ice-breaker. It also helps to build up some basic IT skills.

If the technique is to be continued in second year and beyond, there needs to be a change of intellectual pace, and that change needs to be well communicated. Deeper engagement with historical texts, and more sophisticated analysis of historical trends, will need to be demanded.

Blogging at third and fourth year level seems to be most successful when doing duty for an old-style commentary and replacing the essay entirely, which gives an incentive for working on the task with a seriousness of engagement appropriate to Honours level. However, although this works well as a one-off option, student feedback suggests it should remain the exception. Students still value essays. The feedback also suggests that too much inconsistency of use between courses is to be avoided.

More work needs to be done on whether using blogging at every stage of a degree programme is sustainable or not. Nonetheless, a majority of students, tutors and lecturers surveyed in the School of Divinity remain of the view that using blogging to support the face-to-face seminar is a worthwhile and helpful pedagogical technique.

With thanks to Rory Ewins, University of Edinburgh.

Endnotes

- Stephen Downes, Educational Blogging, ***EDUCAUSE Review***, vol. 39, no. 5 (September/October 2004): 14-26
- An example of the use in Higher Education of the classic 'weblog' consisting mainly of links to sites and news items of interest, with a commentary on their usefulness, is described in Jo Ann Oravec, 'Blending by Blogging: weblogs in blended learning initiatives', Learning, Media and Technology 28:2 (2003), 225 - 233. The use of blogging as an 'e-diary' reflecting on learning is discussed in Anne Bartlett-Bragg (2003), ***Blogging to Learn***.
- An excellent account of the pedagogical advantages of blogging in general can be found in Marcus O'Donnell, 'Blogging as Pedagogic Practice: Artefact and Ecology' ***Asia Pacific Media Educator***, Issue No.17, Dec. 2006.
- Cf. Downes (2004). It should be noted that this sort of point is more frequently made by bloggers themselves, who have a great sense of the anarchic mystique of their calling, than by educators.
- This sense of disillusion is discussed in O'Donnell, 2006.
- See the account in A. Cox, S. Webber, P. Levy & P. Stordy, 'Blogging to support Inquiry-based learning (IBL)' ***Shock conference***, University of Oxford, March 2007 (accessible from the website).
- The question of whether students will blog regularly without the carrot of assessment is considered in JB Williams and J Jacobs, 'Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector', ***Australasian Journal of Educational*** Technology, 2004. See also the discussion below.
- Either Downes or O'Donnell (check)
- A troll is someone who posts deliberately irrelevant, disruptive or unhelpful comments on a blog or a message board, usually repeatedly on the same thread.
- Evidence of this happening in the educational sphere is anecdotal, but it is a common feature of e.g. the Guardian's Comment Is Free multiple blogsite (**guardianunlimited.co.uk**).
- Communication from University of Edinburgh colleague.
- Cox et al., 2007.
- O'Donnell, 2006.
- Cf. Cox et al., 2007
- **http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/resources/detail/briefing_papers/using_weblogs_to_encourage_reflective_learn**
- A number of commentators debate whether there is any real difference between blogs and discussion boards or forums, in practice, but rightly point out that there can be a real problem with the use of forums in Higher Education before a group has gelled, or early in the students' educational career, of no-one taking responsibility for making the discussion work. See Peter D. Duffy and Axel Bruns, 'The Use of Blogs, Wikis and RSS in Education: A Conversation of Possibilities'. In Proceedings of the Online Learning and Teaching Conference, Brisbane 2006, pp. 31-38, available at
- **http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00005398/**.

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