

Using blog posts for peer to peer learning and summative assessment

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Abstract

This paper provides an example of how a blog tool in a virtual learning environment such as Blackboard Ultra can be used for peer learning and both formative and summative assessment. By breaking down larger pieces of assessed work into shorter blog posts students who had been out of education for several years were able to gain confidence and receive initial tutor feedback on their work. This assessment mechanism also enabled students to learn through providing peer feedback to each other. The learning process through providing peer feedback was emphasised to students in order to highlight the mutual benefits it delivered. By asking for short blog posts on specific topics the likelihood of students overlooking a required part of the summative assessment was reduced. Recommendations for practice are provided. This includes emphasising to students how they will learn from reading and commenting on their peer's blog posts because when they return to their own work it will be with a fresh pair of eyes.

Introduction

This overarching aim of the part-time BA in Professional Development degree at the University of Aberdeen is to provide opportunities for students to learn how to reflect on their professional practice. The degree is delivered in a blended, or wholly online way, depending on students' location and ability to attend study days in person. The introduction of blog posts for peer and summative assessment happened as a result of merging two courses. Students began the programme with two 15 credit courses and sometimes this caused confusion about which virtual space to attend for an online class. The two courses were merged to create a new 30 credit course and I took the opportunity to reflect on the best way to assess this new course, entitled 'Professional Learning and Inquiry'. Having successfully used blog posts as a method of assessment in another 30 credit course I decided to incorporate blog posts. This was partly to model the use of blogs for reflection beyond the degree programme and partly to help the students with their first piece of assessed work.

Deng and Yuen (2011, p.441) cited Stefanc's (2006) useful definition of blogs as an 'easy-to-update website characterized by dated entries displayed in reverse chronological order'. The

use of blogging can be understood as a way to reflect on and process problems (Reupert and Dalgarno, 2011). As Petko, Egger, Schmitz, Totter, Hermann and Guttormsen (2015) highlight, people who voluntarily choose to blog, combine the traditional benefits of journaling, which include dealing with emotional issues and framing them in new ways, with the advantage of finding support online. Nackerud and Scaletta (2008) noted that there were students who blogged before blogging in the classroom became more formalised. While general blogging online is often used as a way to deal with stress (ibid), Sim and Hew (2010) discovered that in higher education settings the requirement to blog can be stressful for students. Academics are encouraged to blog in order to reach a wider audience and produce greater impact for their work and resources have been developed for this, for example, Sackstein (2015). It has been suggested that blogs can support four areas, namely 'self-expression, self-reflection, social interaction, and reflective dialogue' (Deng and Yuen, 2011, p.441).

There are currently limited instances of using blog posts for assessment in higher education (for one example, see Bryan and Clegg, 2019). Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2014) have commented on how students posing comments on their peers' blog posts can provide a form of peer assessment and can help the learning of the student making the comments. Robertson (2011) has reported on the educational affordances that blogs can provide in relation to self-directed learning skills such as the generation of learning goals by students, planning how to deal with a problem, evaluating their learning goals and then re-planning. Writing blogs, like journal writing, can be used to enhance reflective practice by students (Ray and Coulter, 2008). Nückles, Hübner and Renkl (2012) put forward three conjectures on how to design effective instructional support for self-regulated learning through journal writing. I suggest that journal writing is sufficiently close to what students are asked to do when writing blogs to use these recommendations which are as follows:

1. Students should be provided with prompts that foster all essential sub-processes involved in self-regulated learning.
2. The effects of prompts can be enhanced:
 - 1) by providing information about the utility and functional value of the prompted strategies ('informed prompting') and
 - 2) by providing a learning journal example that illustrates the strategies contained in the prompts.
3. In line with the learners' growing competencies in journal writing, the prompts should gradually be faded out to avoid negative side effects (ibid).

These recommendations chime with those of Freeman and Brett (2012), whose findings led them to suggest that, for students on an online course, in order to scaffold writing as authentic blogging practice, it is necessary to focus on the frequency of writing, the level of resonance a topic has in relation to students' own interests, and the timeliness of their entries.

Blog posts in Professional Learning and Inquiry

The 'Professional Learning and Inquiry' course is a 3rd year undergraduate course which runs for one semester. The total assessment now consists of a series of eight blog posts (totalling 4000 words) in the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE), *Blackboard* (as opposed to a blog website such as <https://wordpress.com/> or <https://www.tumblr.com/>). In order to ensure the privacy and security of the blog posts it was decided to use the institutional VLE rather than an external site. Topics and assessment criteria for the blog posts were provided and

students could see each other's posts and were asked to provide peer feedback. As in Robertson's (2011), study most of the students in this course had face to face encounters as well as virtual exchanges. Documents, weblinks and photographs could be inserted into the posts or as appendices. Overcoming students' reluctance to post their work was dealt with by setting soft deadlines (which were for guidance only) before online/face-to-face classes. Formative feedback by the tutor and peers was given to students when they uploaded blog posts. Students could then revise their posts up to the assessment deadline at the end of the term or post new versions of each blog post. The same academic writing standards were expected in line with more traditional essay assignments with references provided in the correct format. The students did not mark or grade each other's blog posts. Thus, this type of peer assessment activity relates to analysis and feedback with no grades given (Reinholz, 2016).

Peer assessment can support self-assessment and learning. Peer assessment has been defined as "a set of activities through which individuals make judgements about the work of others" (Reinholz, 2016, p.301). It generally comes from students on the same course (Topping, 1998) and distinguishes peer assessment from other activities such as peer mentoring or coaching. An important part of the rationale for the introduction of the blog posts was for the students to comment on each other's blog posts, thereby learning through the act of assessing another's work so that when they returned to their own work they would see it through the eyes of a third party in the same way as they had looked at their peer's work (Reinholz, 2016). The aim was to create inner assessment of their own work having already acted as a third party with their peer's work (see figure 1 below).

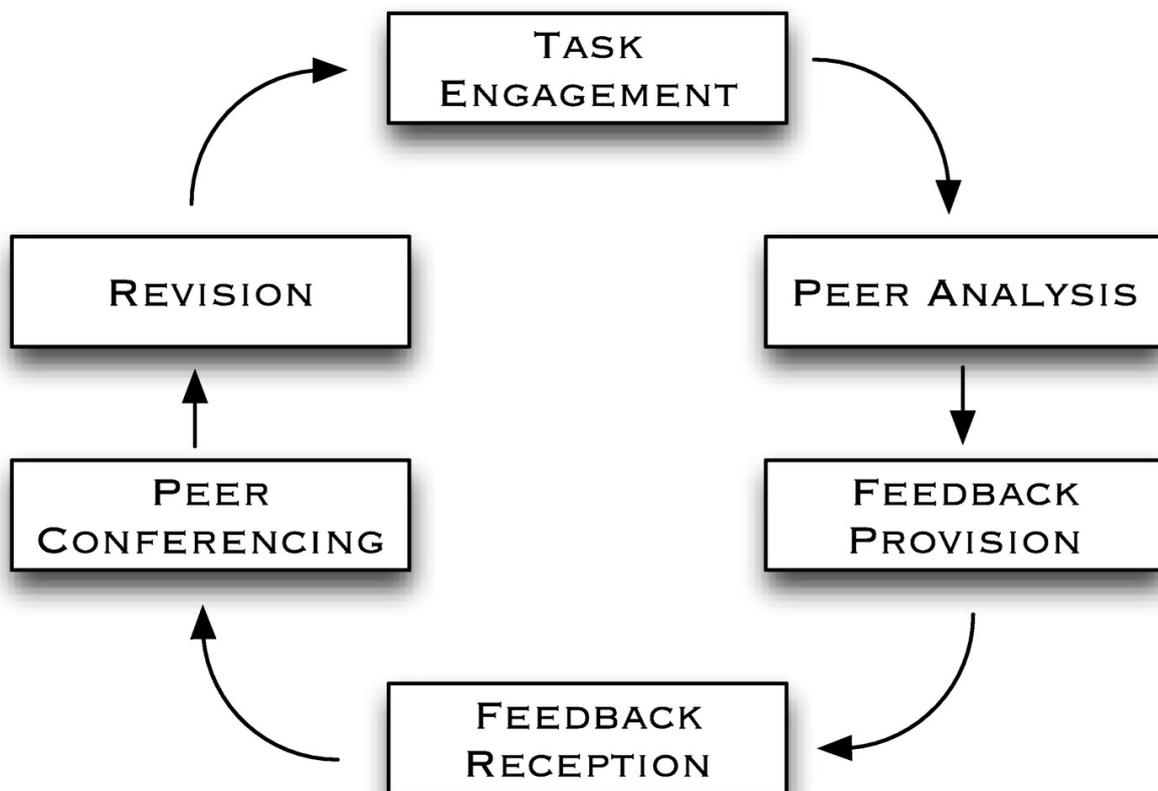


Figure 1: The assessment cycle (Reinholz, 2016, p.305).

One reason for introducing the blogging was to reduce the assessment burden on students, as blog posts as an assessment tool had worked well in another course. Previously students had to write two 3000-word essays, which at the beginning of their university studies, was daunting for mature students who were sometimes returning to formal education for the first time in 20 or even 30 years. An additional aim was to encourage students to blog in the future as part of their professional practice to disseminate their own work and learning.

Students had to write eight blog posts on topics such as: theoretical ideas on reflective practice and their potential use; how their professional context and/or professional practice has changed over the last five or ten years; a description and analysis of some aspect of professional practice and/or context; rationale for a particular research inquiry; the methodology, methods and data collection techniques for the inquiry; how the research data would be analysed; and ethical issues involved.

Implementation and evaluation of blog posts for peer review

A pragmatic approach has been used to evaluate the introduction of blog posts including course evaluation forms, informal feedback from students via email and in a tutorial discussion. Course results and the pass rate will be tracked over time so that the effects of introducing blog posts for assessment can be compared more robustly with previous results. In addition, a research study involving former students is planned in order to understand the long-term benefits of the blogging activities. As Sim and Hew (2010) have noted, there is a lack of such longitudinal studies.

There were teething problems with the blog posts, for example I had to overcome students' reluctance to post their work in the Blackboard virtual learning environment. No one wanted to be the first person to post. By setting soft deadlines before study sessions, this problem was resolved. I explained that I would post formative feedback once to each student on each of their blog posts and I asked students to post comments on at least two other students' work for each round of blog posts. The students could then revise their blog posts up to the end of term assessment deadline. Students were able to do their work gradually rather than all at the end in two longer essays.

What started as an assessment choice in order to promote blogging and the use of professional social networks was favoured by students because, firstly, it broke the assessment task into manageable chunks. The word 'manageable' came up repeatedly. This is perhaps not surprising as these are students working full-time while studying part-time, often alongside caring commitments. Time and lack of time were referred to by many students, for example: "the ability to break it down into sections was great not only for keeping me focussed on those points, but also made time management a little easier". Secondly, because students could peer review, this took away some of their assessment fear: "I found it really helpful to be able to see other people's submission, [it] reassured me I was on the right track with my submissions". Thirdly, it meant they addressed all the assessment criteria leading to a higher pass rate for the course. Finally, a student noted "taking each element as a stand-alone piece with the ability to connect them together as a fuller piece of writing also helped build my confidence for writing larger essays". While my aim had been to model blogging as professional development, instead what has transpired is a helpful and authentic method of assessment which allows both peer and inner assessment by the students which they enjoy and appreciate. Not only did the students understand and feel more confident about handling the course assessment through the use of blogs, they gave each other emotional and cognitive

support (Robertson, 2011). None of the students said that they found it hard to have multiple dates to remember or that they would have preferred a more traditional essay assessment.

While the effect on the range and level of results for the new merged course did not change dramatically, for example, the mean from the previous two courses over two years was 14.1 (out of 22) and the mean for the first three years of the new course with blog posts has risen to 15.3, there has been a reduction in those having to resit with no one failing in the new format. I believe this is because each blog post covers a specific assessment criterion meaning it is harder to do the assessment without addressing all the necessary criteria.

Students had suggestions on how to improve the use of the blog tool, such as being permitted to see blogs from the previous year's students, earlier exposure to 'the world of blogs' so that students could see 'how each blog could be standalone yet drawn together as one piece'. I used Brookfield's (1995) four lenses (students/self/peers/theory) to reflect on (1) the students' experiences, (2) my own experience, (3) that of colleagues including the second marker and external examiner, and (4) through academic literature. Using Sim and Hew's (2010) recommendations on the use of blogs in higher education, I considered the Professional Learning and Inquiry course (see table 1 below). I could see that I had implemented several of the recommendations. However, in relation to the third recommendation above, it is important for student guidance to provide examples for students, such as blogs written by practitioners in their field, to look at before the course starts, as well as previous students' work (with their consent), screenshots to show a step by step process of how to access your own and others' blog posts and how to add photos and other files is essential.

Recommendation	Professional Learning and Inquiry course
Icebreaking activities	Saturday study day before any blogging activities
Restricted access to the blogs	Blog situated in the course in Blackboard virtual learning environment
Practice sessions and guidelines	Screenshots, suggestions of blogs to look at and guidelines issued
Extrinsic and/or intrinsic motivation to take part	Blog posts were the format for the summative assessment (extrinsic motivation) and the benefit of providing peer feedback for their own learning (intrinsic motivation) was emphasised

Table 1: Using Sim and Hew (2010) recommendations on the use of blogs in higher education

I should point out that I have not always found it useful to include blog posts in courses, for example in one 15 credit course I taught, the requirement for students to post blog entries was to show that they had read course materials in-between weekly workshops and so was more similar to posting on a course discussion board than writing a blog. This links back to Sim and Hew's (2010) fourth recommendation as there was no motivation for the students to take part.

Conclusions

With the 'Professional Learning and Inquiry' course I discovered that there were clear benefits to breaking up an assessment into smaller chunks as blog posts I found that having blog posts as the assessment method meant that students could be both formatively and

summatively assessed and provided with the opportunity to learn through reviewing and commenting on each other's work. It was important to motivate the students by having deadlines in place and explaining to them the benefit they would receive through commenting on their peers' blog posts. Finally, there has been a slight improvement in the results for the course and since the introduction of blog posts no student has failed the course at their first attempt.

Recommendations for Practice

In addition to Sim and Hew's (2010) recommendations above in Table 1, I would also add the following five recommendations:

1. Take time to explain the benefits of blogging and reviewing peers' blog posts;
2. Encourage students to see their blog as a safe place for them to reflect on their experiences;
3. Make the blog posts an integral part of the course and not an add-on or extra activity;
4. Allow students some leeway so that they can combine blog entries rather than sticking to a rigid word count for each topic or post;
5. Emphasise how students will learn from reading and commenting on their peer's blog posts because when they return to their own work it will be with a fresh pair of eyes.

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