Assessing with Blogs

Overview

A blog (abbreviated from "web log") is a website where people publish short items on a continuing basis. A blog can have one author or many. Blog entries (posts) display in reverse chronological order (that is, the most recent post displays highest on the page). Authors can embed hyperlinks, images, videos and podcasts in the content of the post, and can leave a section at the bottom of each post open for readers' comments.

You can use blogs in a course to facilitate students' formative learning towards key assessable learning outcomes, including academic literacy (Dysthe, 2001) and digital literacy skills. Generally you do this by requiring students to write and publish regular posts, and by giving feedback, and/or encouraging the students' peers to give feedback, in the comments section of the posts.

When to use

Collaborative eLearning has its basis in the work of Vygotsky (1978), who researched the importance of the cooperative learning experiences of children and how they develop and learn together. As a community of practice, a blog encourages students to read posts, comment on the work of others and reflect on their learning as it develops throughout a course.

- You can require students to contribute reflective journal writing about course readings; tutors can post to encourage questions, or to pose questions that act as a catalyst for reflection.
- Reflexive posting can encourage students to think about each week's topic in relation to the lecture or online material provided.
- A digital diary for a group task such as an oral presentation can increase a student's perceived accountability in a group task and in turn improve the quality of their work.

To help you decide whether to use a blog, a wiki or a discussion forum, visit the page Blog, wiki or forum—which should you use?

Benefits

Blogs enhance students' engagement in participative and collaborative learning. In higher education, people have been writing about blogs' usefulness as an e-learning tool and for assessment since the early list-style weblogs (Dysthe, 2001; McMahon, 2010). Many students publish or read current web-journal types of blogs for formal and informal learning and recreational purposes. These transferable skills can be aligned with a course's learning
outcomes in an assessment plan.

For students

- Blogs facilitate students’ formative progress towards academic literacy (Dysthe, 2001) and digital literacy (among other outcomes) by requiring students to regularly write, and by peers and educators providing feedback in comments on the posts.

- Students can contribute to a blog as members of a learning community, sharing ideas publicly. The learning and assessment processes are made explicit, clear and visible to the community, democratising the assessment and building greater capacity for student learning.

- Many students are familiar with blog technologies. Few have not written, commented on or viewed a blog on the Internet. Transferring these skills into blogging as a learning and assessable task can be quite straightforward, requiring little time or training.

- Students who may be reluctant to contribute in face-to-face classes can find blogs liberating; they are no longer constrained by personality types and learning styles. Individual blogs offer students freedom to write reflectively about a topic without feeling inadequate. They also allow students to learn from their peers’ blog content, layout and style. Students are increasingly demanding the freedom to learn anywhere, at any time, and blogs provide this flexibility.

For staff

- Blogs enable reflection through dialogue with others. Using a blog, students can construct knowledge collaboratively, and engage in self and peer reflection. Peer assessment can enhance students’ learning as they read and assess one another, developing their discrimination skills and learning from the discourse community. As a single complex task, blog participation can facilitate critical thinking and higher order learning in which the student designs their own learning.

- Blogs are becoming an integral part of Western culture. You and your students can use them as a series of authentic tasks or as a single complex task completed over a sustained period.

- It is quite easy to create a blog for learning and assessment. Most blogs have a standard format, are easy to set up and navigate, and offer accessible templates and semantic mark-up capabilities.

- Blog sites provide a record of learning for assessment purposes and can be archived for use as work samples and as worked examples of scaffolding.

- Blogs make feedback easy, and the resulting dialogue about assessment can occur immediately and continue as readers come and go online. With the provision of clear criteria, blogs can also utilise peer review. Feedback is integrated in the form of comments, other posts by peers and the instructor on the same blog, or links to their posts on their own blogs.

- As an assessment tool, blogs can be used to generate group discussion. Require weekly posts about the lecture topics as formative assessment, or a reflective diary that is used throughout the course as an authentic task.

- Using blogging with large cohort courses has many pedagogical benefits, including:
  - “assisting students to become subject matter experts through a process of regular scouring, filtering and posting,
  - increasing student interest and ownership in learning,
- giving students legitimate chances to participate and acculturating them into a community of practice
- providing opportunities for diverse perspectives.

**Challenges**

The challenge for students is to know how, when, what and how much to post on a reflective blog. Provide sample blog entries and exemplary responses; support students as they explore the topic, the new tool, and perhaps the new experience of self-exploratory writing.

As McMahon (2010) suggests, the issues that arise with blogs are generally in relation to students regulating and directing their own learning. Supporting self-regulation involves providing marking criteria, rubrics and requirements such as word limits, as well as indicating how often students should comment and post.

Blogs are an accessible technology for most students. Students whose first language is not English can feel isolated in the face-to-face classroom, but if you support them in their use of blogs, including giving them examples of blog posts and comments, they can take their time with their posts and responses and be more relaxed about interacting with their peers and teachers.

Similarly, students with learning disabilities and difficulties can connect with their peers, which may not be possible face to face.

**Challenges for staff include:**

- When you consider a blog activity for assessment, remember that the assessment design must stay aligned with the learning goals, the course content, the instructional design, the learner task, the instructor's and students' roles and the technology.

- Establishing and assessing an authentic task using blogs may require you to rebuild a course from scratch, or to significantly revise an existing course. It takes time to establish a student-centred approach to learning and assessment; for the time-deprived instructor, assessing-by-blog can seem overwhelming.

  But a blog (utilised as a problem-based learning tool, as a published product or as an investigative enquiry) may prove itself to be more efficient and effective in the long term for assessment purposes. If you facilitate self and peer review with a clear and explicit rubric, marking criteria and worked examples, you can ensure that a collaborative space develops and informs the learning process for students, while making assessment more efficient.

- Instructors and tutors must put in a lot of time early in the semester to establish an online community. The pressure to monitor and motivate your students' blog use is likely to ease once the collaborative space is established and students engage, but initially students look to the instructor or e-moderator to set the pace of usage and the tone of interaction.

- Aligning the learning design with the assessment demonstrates the purpose of the blog as a whole, and of individual blog posts, as a learning tool. Without this alignment, students may lose sight of the end goal of the blog and let their contributions slide.

- Student learning styles, personality traits, socio-cultural factors and writing styles will contribute to the type and content of the blog posts students put up. Just as in the face-to-face classroom, students' different degrees of self-regulation and self-direction influence the dynamics of the discussion and conversation on and around a blog.
You can deal with any issues arising from this by responding to student responses, reminding students of the rubrics, marking criteria and course learning outcomes and, if necessary, indicating by private email how a student might regulate their online manner to obtain a better response to posts or comments.

**Strategies**

Use a procedural approach when designing a learning task that assesses with blogs, and in your instructions be explicit about the learning you expect. Consider the following dimensions when you develop a learning strategy:

- Develop the learning outcomes first and ensure that the technology, the content and the task align with them.

- Decide whether you will use group or individual blogs. Which suits your course and your students’ learning objectives better? Group blogs and individual blogs have differing purposes and require different assessment features and rubrics.

- Develop formative assessment before you develop summative. Formative assessment indicates to students how they are tracking against what they are expected to achieve, but does not penalise them if they get things wrong.

- Plan to formatively assess a blog early in the semester, when students are posting and commenting frequently. Students who receive feedback early on will continue to post and comment throughout the course.

- Plan for inclusion: develop strategies for students from different socio-cultural backgrounds and with different levels of technology usage, ownership and knowledge.

- Develop assessment criteria and rubrics for student use as self and peer reviewers. Self and peer review promote collaboration and help develop a trusting community of practice.

Using a rubric and marking criteria to support the student learning process can remove some fear of the unknown for students who have never blogged, or have only used micro-blogging sites such as Facebook. Show students the style of language, standard of writing and content expectations you have of their blog posts, reflective journal posts and comments. Provide examples so that they can see these aspects clearly.

- Post the rubric and criteria on the group blog or as a comment in the individual blogs.

- Hold an initial face-to-face meeting. Show the students the different elements of a blog, and examples of exemplary blogs. Explicitly outline your requirements of them, and discuss these with them.

- Ensure that your expectations about the number of posts, comments and reviews are absolutely clear to your students.

- Provide a safe, flexible and inclusive environment where students can develop skills for risk taking and self-regulation. Blogs should offer "an environment where learners can practice, fail, succeed and learn in a rich and realistic setting" (Morison, 2003, 359).

- Encourage student reflection using leading questions, statements and content, and ask students to present their reflection and its results in writing on the blog.

- Provide students with a range of potential blog content and ideas to encourage their learning beyond the classroom.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Content knowledge</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Structure of ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Sequences of information is difficult to follow</td>
<td>Reader has difficulty following work because posts do not flow</td>
<td>Student presents information in logical sequence which reader can follow through the posts</td>
<td>No entries have a connection to the course structure and content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>Student does not have a grasp of the content; student has difficulty providing posts relevant to the topic</td>
<td>Student is able to demonstrate basic concepts in the course in their posts</td>
<td>Student is at ease with the course content; there is little elaboration of the topic or subject matter</td>
<td>Few entries have a connection to structure and content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>Little time was spent preparing posts; each post has spelling and grammatical errors</td>
<td>Student has not planned, prepared or edited posts, some incorrect spellings and/or grammatical errors</td>
<td>Posts are edited, planned and course specific; student demonstrates correct use of domain-specific language</td>
<td>Most entries have a connection to the course structure and content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of ideas</td>
<td>No entries have a connection to the course structure and content</td>
<td>Few entries have a connection to structure and content</td>
<td>All or almost all of the entries have a connection to structure and content</td>
<td>All or almost all of the entries have a connection to structure and content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>Posts display no references or reference list</td>
<td>References are missing from posts or not listed at the end of the post</td>
<td>Most posts contain references and provide a reference list</td>
<td>All posts are referenced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total**
At UNSW, teachers use blogs to provide content, as noticeboards and as assessable venues for classes to take part in student reflection and journal-writing. Many are set up using blog tools such as WordPress, Blogger and LiveJournal.

Blogging facilities are also part of the Moodle learning management systems.

The UNSW blog platform was established as part of a broader pilot project to provide "flexible spaces for learning and teaching...for collaboration and communication". The platform offers a number of special tools and features, including custom UNSW themes and a wide selection of widgets and plugins that can give a blog additional functionality. Click here to sign up.

Faculty blogs can run from a faculty server, such as the Art & Design blog and provide services for students and staff with postings of events, news and student opportunities.

The MedED Interest Group staff blog, a UNSW blog, is an example of a group network blog. It aims to "bring together medical faculty staff interested in education issues to support scholarly practice, encourage research and create new networks amongst its members".

The Faculty of the Built Environment has a student, staff and alumni blog where bloggers can post comments about university events. This also serves as a noticeboard for scholarship notices and prizes in the field. Staff, student and alumni contribute as guest bloggers, encouraging readers outside the university to post comments. Many secondary students have posted messages and questions to students about how to gain entry into the course and what fields they can study in the future.

Further readings


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