



## Empowering student participation in face-to-face classes through blogs

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## Web 2.0 enabling?

- Social networking
- Empowerment of the user
- Increased availability
- Looking at material in novel ways

*Trampoline versus safety net*



## Blogging at Edinburgh

- For teaching and learning
  - Embedded within WebCT
  - In-house system
  - Restricted access
- Safe not exposed to the “whole world”
- Is it blogging? Does it matter?



## Blogging in Divinity –Why?

- Student in MSc E-learning
  - Use of blogging:-
    - Reflective
    - Collaboration tool
- Found “empowered” me as a student
- Grant applications – Higher Education Academy, University E-learning funds



## Reflective

- Assessed
- Left to student to choose style prose
- Edit/delete/add to during course (discouraged deletion)
- Purpose was to reflect on the topics under discussion in own context
  - Deeper engagement?



- Invisible
  - Safety net?
- Increased confidence to contribute to discussion forum




## Collaboration tool

- Assessed
- Think differently
- Additional resources
- Felt responsibility when was week in charge (ownership)
- Issues:-
  - Timing
  - Work load



## Courses used in Divinity:

- First year undergraduate
- Second year undergraduate
- Honours level (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> year)
- Masters level



### First year: History of Christianity as a World Religion 1A & 1B

Teaching structure:

- Team of 6 lecturers
- Postgraduate Tutor-led groups of 10
- Tutorials supplement lectures by looking at historical texts in depth



### Second year: Christianity in the Pluralistic Roman World 100-314


Teaching structure:

- 1 lecturer
- Tutorial groups of 15-20 led by lecturer/experienced tutor
- Tutorials supplement lectures by looking at historical texts in depth



### Third/Fourth year:

- Augustine and his Age
- Early Christian Writers 3/4
- Explorations in Modern Jewish Thought
- Ethics in a Technological Society
- New Age Religion
- Representations of the Holocaust and Jewish Identity



### Teaching structure:

- Seminars led by lecturer
- 10-40 students
- Blogging marked as 10% of course mark
- Or at 40% (Augustine)



## Masters level

- Creeds, Councils and Controversies 1: Patristic and Medieval
- Creeds, Councils and Controversies 2: Reformation and Modern

Team-taught courses in seminar format:  
blogging was not part of assessment



## Problems addressed by blogging:

- Shy students not talking
- Confident students dominating
- Tutors have no 'safety-net'
- Course manager and lecturers have no access to tutorial discussion at 1<sup>st</sup> year level
- Level of discussion can be superficial
- Work-shy students can 'hide'



## Blogging empowers students:

- Shy students can make their good points
- Students with imperfect English are equal
- Text-bound students gain confidence for discussion
- '3am' students can contribute their best ideas
- Confident students can be challenged by the less confident
- Students encouraged to work steadily, not just in bursts



## Blogging empowers tutors:

- Tutors know what tack to take in tutorial before it begins
- Discussion is far more lively because students feel more confident
- They can pick up different elements of the blog discussion and work with them
- They have written back-up in case of complaints
- Student presentations are much less dull!



### Blogging empowers lecturers:

- They can see whether students understand and are engaging with the course material
- They can see whether a given tutorial reading 'works' or not
- Not unfeasibly labour-intensive in this form



### Blogging empowers learning:

- More incentive to prepare well for every tutorial
- Informal discourse creates a sense of energy and engagement
- Tutorial group 'gels' much earlier in year, making students feel more involved
- Written record useful for revision



However...



### Issues of Control:

- Works best if both blog and comments are compulsory and assessed
- Can be time-intensive for all participants, especially if tutors or lecturers give weekly marks or feedback
- Clear guidelines needed, especially at 3/4 level
- Potential for boredom if used across too many courses



## Empowerment

Students feel more empowered if:

- Induction is given
- Instructions are clear
- Feedback is given early
- 'Fairness' is enforced
- Time demanded is reasonable



## Tutors feel more empowered if:

- Adequate training is given
- Good support is available
- Time demanded is not excessive
- Deadlines allow time to read comments



## Lecturers feel more empowered if:

- Time demanded is not excessive
- Colleagues share experiences and advice
- They can spot problems early and move to address them
- They can try out different versions of 'blogging' (but beware of causing student confusion)



## In conclusion...



### We suggest:

- Blogging as a 'controlled' Web 2.0 technology can be a very useful tool in Higher Education, empowering students, PG tutors and lecturers
- It should be used as part of a wider blended learning strategy which also makes use of other social networking tools



Thank you!