

Enabling learning: blogging as an assessment strategy

Nina Morris (@_NinaJM), School of GeoSciences

Hazel Christie (@christiehazel), Institute for Academic Development

University of Edinburgh

Aims

- Extent to which blogging was used as an assessment tool at the UoE.
- Student and staff experiences of, and views regarding, the development of research skills within courses using blogs as a means of assessment.
- Best practice relating to the development of research skills in courses where blogs are used as assessment.
- Student and staff opinions on satisfaction, usability and acceptability of blogging as part of the assessment process.



Methods

- Online, University-wide, **survey** of teaching staff
- **Interviews** with Course Organisers of four undergraduate courses drawn from the institution's three colleges selected to cover a variety of blog formats, Virtual Learning Environments, and class sizes
- **Focus groups** with a sample of the students on each course
- Analysis of student **evaluation surveys**
- **Consultation** with other relevant stakeholders (e.g. IT support officers, administrators, EUSA)
- Four case study courses - Law, Veterinary Medicine, Geology and **Geography**



Students' reflections

- Blogging is...
 - enjoyable
 - freeing
 - engaging



Enjoyable - free, fun, exciting, creative

- ‘So this gives you somewhere to let your mind run and do that aspect of creativity. But not necessarily in a way that's formed and functional’
- ‘I liked it. As soon as I got into it, it was very much a welcomed way of learning. Because I definitely do think I've learnt from it. And I think it had value in it being different but still learning and not being so rigid and boring’



Freeing – personal, individual

- ‘doing the admin, the pictures and the font and colour and stuff, I think I really enjoyed that because it comes back to having your own personality and individuality attached to an assessment. Whereas essays are standardised font and layout and everything, and this just...if I want to have a green font, fine. If I don't want to use Times New Roman then it doesn't matter, you know what I mean? And maybe little ways can help convey your message or whatever’
- ‘[They] allow people's personality to come through more, [...] there's a degree of flexibility with how you do them, and obviously what you can do it on as well. And I just think that's encouraging people to think outside the box and be a bit more unique and individual’



Freeing – personal, individual

- ‘I found it good. It was good to put in your personal reflections, whereas essays don't tend to do that so much. So that was fun and exciting, and it gets you to engage with the course in that personal level’
- ‘you can do anything, I found that quite difficult because you could do anything. So as this course relates to so many things that we're personally engaged with, I'd just be walking around and be like oh, I could write my blog on this, I could write my blog on that, oh, oh. And every day would change. So it'd be quite hard to actually stick with one idea and keep that. But in the end it is really rewarding when you do’



Engaging – crafty, subliminal

- ‘Everyone can relate, everyone can do it and it can make you think different...not maybe think differently, but think about things, more aware of things outside of the lecture’
- ‘it tricks you into enjoying it’



Cons and pros

- 'linking the literature was quite difficult. It was a really fine line between being too personal and linking the literature. And sometimes you wanted to...the literature you were linking your thoughts to, you wanted to delve into it a little bit more to explain why'
- 'I think it's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged with a course [...] Like I leave and I talked about it with people. I just think oh, I did this, I'm going to write my blog on this. [...] I've literally never done that. Even if I've enjoyed a course, I've never fully felt...I don't know, like it's impacted the way I think fully. And I think the blogs definitely have helped that'



Against the essay/exam factory

- 'I think it was a new challenge. I think up to this point the only way I've been assessed is through essays and exams. And I think I liked it. I was a little bit daunted by it at the start [...] but I liked it. As soon as I got into it, it was very much a welcomed way of learning. Because I definitely do think I've learnt from it. And I think it had value in it being different but still learning and not being so rigid and boring'
- 'The pictures and the font and colour and stuff [...] I really enjoyed that [...] having your own personality and individuality [...] essays are standardised font and layout and everything, [...] for me university assessments feel like they just want everyone to be the same. [Blogs allow] you a different way of expressing thoughts and your perspective and stuff'



But the need for staff support

- ‘It was, have you thought about this? Which was really, really useful, because when you wrote the first one you had...when you wrote your first marked one you had the formative one beside it just going oh right, she didn't like when they did that, or she thought you should do that a bit better or she really liked that I did that. That was really, really helpful to have that comparison’
- ‘You don't get that in essays’ [...] ‘Yeah, you absolutely don't. You just get someone in to annihilate your essay plan’



Key messages

- Assessment in inherently emotional process
- Blogging as a way in which to enhance student engagement and active learning
- Creative learning environment
- Heightened engagement
- Personalised learning experiences
- Requires strong support from course team.

