



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Every student a researcher: supporting the use of blogging as a form of student assessment

Project type:

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator: Dr Nina Morris

Schools/department: School of GeoSciences

Team members (including Schools and Departments):

Dr Hazel Christie (Co-I) (Institute for Academic Development)

Mr Jacob Barber (research assistant) (School of GeoSciences)

For further details, please contact:

Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?

Blogging is an innovative and creative form of assessment that has the potential to foster research skills in our students as well as to enhance the process of active learning. Little was known about how widely blogs are used here at the UoE, about their challenges and affordances from the point of view of the staff, or about students' perceptions of them. With the assistance of postgraduate Research Assistant, Jacob Barber, we set out to interrogate these issues. In partnership with the Directors of Teaching Network we distributed a survey to all Course Organisers in the University to find out if, and where, blogs were being used as an assessment method. We then identified four courses to use as case studies conducting interviews with the Course Organisers and focus groups with the participating students. We also undertook a small number of interviews with administrative and support staff to examine their perspectives on the use of blogs. All of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full and detailed analysis was undertaken using thematic coding to identify key issues.

What did you find out?

Blogging is not widely used across the University; of the 31 responses received from the Course Organiser survey, only 17 were using blogs as a (formative or summative) component of their assessment. A desire to enhance the research and writing skills of the students appears to be a key factor the COs decision to include blogging as a form of assessment in their courses. According to the COs blogs: enhance students' abilities to write in a scientific but engaging and accessible manner; allow students to produce 'bite-sized' pieces of writing that hone their critical thinking skills; provide the opportunity to investigate key research ideas in a different medium; and, help to ensure that students are engaging with learning materials either prior to or after (and often,



long after) taught classes. The case study interviews and focus groups confirmed that the blogs were a useful way to enhance the students' research skills. Common themes included: the ability of the blogs to let students refine ideas and concepts in an accessible and engaging way; the opportunity to work at the leading edge of research and to make an original contribution to debates using a range of traditional and non-traditional sources; and, the development of research skills that were transferable to research proposals and dissertations, as well as to potential future employment tasks. It was clear from the focus groups that students were strongly engaged with the blogs. They variously described the process as 'enjoyable', 'fun' and 'creative'. Their accounts clearly indicate that blogging can be used to promote active and engaged student learning. Students valued blogs as an alternative to more conventional essays and exams because they allowed them to personalise their learning experiences and to be much more active in working consistently throughout the course. Having a set blogging requirement, often weekly, made them focus on the material for that part of the course and engage with it to a greater extent than if they had just had an essay or an exam to prepare.

Two other important messages also emerged from the research. First, for innovative forms of assessment such as blogs to work, both staff and students require appropriate and dynamic support from academic colleagues, computing staff, and departmental administrators. This includes the provision of opportunities to share good practice and discuss novel forms of assessment within specific disciplinary contexts in addition to those provided by dedicated teaching and learning forums, access to relevant ICT training/advice and a responsive rather than prescriptive approach to software provision (e.g. the development of software packages with enhanced blogging capabilities), and adequate time allocation in workload models. Second, there is a need to stimulate cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional debate about what constitutes best practice in relation to assessed blogs (e.g. what constitutes a blog, formatting techniques, marking criteria), and a need to refine/expand debates on innovative forms of assessment in a context where open, accessible and collaborative learning is becoming increasingly important. Future work might support and find ways to empower instructors and students to engage in innovative forms of assessment especially when this activity challenges institutionalised or disciplinary norms.

How did you disseminate your findings?

To date, we have disseminated the research findings in the following ways: 1. Preliminary findings were presented at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Transforming Assessment in HE Symposium (2017) at the HEA Headquarters in York; 2. A summary of the project and preliminary findings formed the basis of a Case Study published as part of the [HEA Transforming Assessment: A Case Study Series](#) (2017); 3. a co-authored conference paper was presented at the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers Annual Conference (2017) in London as part of a session 'Innovative assessment of geography students in Higher Education' co-organised by the research team (and sponsored by the Higher Education Research Group); and, 4. The PI contributed a [post](#) to the Teaching Matters blog (2018). The PI was also invited to attend an Academic Blogging Service User Consultation Event organised by the University Information Services (2018). In preparation are: a co-authored Pecha Kucha presentation for the University of Edinburgh Teaching and Learning Conference (June 2018); a co-authored paper for the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*; a co-authored paper for *Studies in Higher Education*; and, a set of Grade Related Marking Criteria for use across the University. The PI is also incorporating material from the focus group research into a paper for *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* based on her Honours option course teaching and assessment (which formed one of the case study courses).

What have been the benefits to student learning?



There were two main benefits to student learning. First, blogging was a key way in which to enhance student engagement and active learning. This included: creating a much more creative learning environment which students were more likely to engage with; students had an appreciation of the differences to conventional essay writing and were keen to engage; the continuous and iterative nature of the process enabled them to engage much more fully with the course materials; and they could see the value of the skills they were developing for the rest of their courses and, in particular, research proposals and dissertations. Second, students felt that blogging was an important way to personalise their learning experiences both through the design of the blog and through the opportunity to find their own voice when writing the various posts.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

Blogs are under-utilised as a form of assessment across the University. They are of relevance and benefit to students across all three Colleges and could be more widely incorporated as a (formative or summative) assessment method. It is important, however, that COs and students receive appropriate support from management and relevant services and that ICT developments take a responsive rather than prescriptive approach to software provision.



Financial statement:

This project has remaining funds unused and we require details of how to return the balance. The Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:

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