JISC

Engaging learners in critical reflection
University of Edinburgh

What is a blog?
A blog (web log) is an online reflective journal in which other internet users can post comments. Blogging tools integrated into VLEs allow access to be restricted to members of a closed group (for example, a course, module or tutorial group) to support formal learning activities.

What is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)?
A Virtual Learning Environment or VLE is an online system comprising a range of tools to support learning and the management of learning. For example, VLEs provide online access to learning resources and support peer-to-peer and learner-to-tutor communication.

Background
Students following courses at the University of Edinburgh's School of Divinity include undergraduates on four-year MA (Hons) courses who study full time on campus, and postgraduates following a taught Masters degree programme, who include mature students returning to formal learning.
Following successful trials that began in 2005, blogging has been used as part of a wider blended learning strategy within the School of Divinity to develop skills of critical thinking and reflection.

NB. A course at the University of Edinburgh is a 10- or 11-week programme made up of a combination of lectures and face-to-face tutorials for Year 1 and 2 students, or seminars for Year 3 and 4 Honours degree students. Undergraduate pathways in some cases enable students to select their own choice of courses, so the composition of groups varies, and students do not always know one another at the start of a course.

A blogging tool within the university's VLE, Blackboard® WebCT Vista™, has now replaced an earlier tool developed in house.

Challenge
Small-group tutorials and seminars are part of the culture of a traditional research-led university such as the University of Edinburgh, yet students are often insufficiently prepared to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by small-group teaching. Less confident students avoid taking part, while stronger contributors tend to dominate face-to-face discussions. Tutors may have no knowledge before a tutorial or seminar whether students fully understand the topic set for the week, nor can they assess in advance which strategies to use to instigate discussions.

Transforming practice
An assessed blog on a text of the week was introduced on some courses as a pilot. The blog was written by one student, but commented on by all students before the weekly face-to-face tutorial or seminar. The blogging component formed 10% of the assessment total – 5% for writing the blog on a selected week, and 5% for commenting on others' blogs during the remaining nine weeks of the course – replacing the 10% reserved for oral presentations on honours courses. (On one course, the blogging component replaced an essay.)

The blog is now an established mode of assessment on at least seven divinity courses. Writers are asked to contribute a commentary on the selected document or historical text of the week. Because the aim is to develop critical and reflective ability, commentators are asked to avoid simple agree/disagree responses, but instead to pose questions, point out omissions, correct false premises or challenge preconceived ideas. To enable students to find their own voice as reflective commentators, a more colloquial style of writing is encouraged (excluding text speak, swearing and abusive language).

Students participate in introductory blogging sessions in the university computer labs, and are supported, post induction, by how-to guides on the VLE.

e-Learning advantage

The blogging activity has increased participation by all students in reflective activity, improving the consistency of engagement with set texts and changing the dynamics of face-to-face sessions. Students are aware that commenting on each other's blogs is assessed and so contribute readily. However, there have been other positive outcomes from the introduction of blogging. Findings, after several years of using blogs at the university, suggest that:

- Normally reticent students are more likely to post comments and even challenge a more dominant group member while blogging

- Students work steadily rather than selecting preferred areas and avoiding what does not appeal

- The quality of discussion on the blogs is often high, with more competent students raising the performance of weaker students

- Those leading the blog for the week take greater ownership of their learning; those commenting on the blog benefit from being able to participate at times convenient to them

- Students are better prepared during face-to-face sessions; because no one can remain a passive observer on the blog, tutorials and seminars are more likely to be energised, and discussions more lively

- Tutorial groups gel faster in the early stages of a course – students get to know one another through blogging and through more active participation in face-to-face sessions

- Blogs provide a record of discussions and can act as an aid for revision

Members of the academic team, Sara Parvis and Jessie Paterson, feel that the key outcomes from the blogging are increased student confidence and ownership of learning. Those students who dislike open discussion, for example, are now able to think about their responses before challenging others on a blog. Students for whom English is a second language as well as dyslexic students can rehearse their comments before pasting them into the blog – a strategy that is possibly being employed to enhance the performance of less skilled writers. The decision to use a closed blog has also helped to bring about the success of the activity – no outsiders can view the blog on the VLE.

The pilot has been evaluated by means of questionnaires and focus groups and involved tutors as well as students. Evaluative comments have revealed that undergraduates especially are enthusiastic

about blogging – they find the blog easy to use and are engaged and stimulated by taking part: *'It's great fun! Encourages everyone to contribute each week'... '[It] pump-primes discussion – gets ideas going.'* The blogging exercise allows students to prepare for a tutorial or seminar at their own pace, yet also imposes a discipline: *'I start thinking and [can] see other people's arguments before the tutorial – I'm better prepared.'* It may also help students to prepare for written assignments by enabling them to take incremental steps towards expressing opinions and challenging viewpoints.

Tutors have also found the blogging activity brings advantages. By reviewing activity on the blogs before a tutorial or seminar, tutors have better knowledge of how students are progressing and can assess how to approach a face-to-face session: *'You hit the ground running, so the level of discussion is much greater and is at a much deeper level.' Tutor, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh*

In addition, tutors report that:

- Group blogging helps to unite a diverse body of students
- Less time is wasted checking students' understanding of topics in face-to-face sessions
- Individual students' difficulties can be recognised and addressed more promptly
- Records of students' contributions to discussions are available for future reference
- Knowing more fully what students know and do not know has increased the satisfaction gained from face-to-face teaching

The time involved in monitoring blogs has not proved to be excessive – in fact the blogging activity may have reduced the time spent supporting students who are experiencing difficulty. Academic staff who monitor tutorials led by postgraduate students also have a clearer view of the direction taken in tutorials, what has been achieved and what needs to be addressed.

Lessons learnt

- Effective induction in the use of a new technology is essential. How-to guides on the VLE can also help in case of difficulty.

- Reasonable time should be allowed for students to make posts during assessed blogging activities. However, a deadline for contributions also needs to be set to allow tutors to view blogs before tutorials or seminars. Tutors may need training in how to assess students' contributions.
- No problems have been experienced with students' behaviour on the blog. Students have learnt rapidly how to challenge a viewpoint while still remaining supportive of the efforts made by the proposer. As a result, formal moderation of blogs has not been found necessary.

- Trials with postgraduate students, in which the blogging activity was not made compulsory and was not assessed, were less successful. It is possible that students view blogging as an additional burden if it is not an assessed component of a course.

- Care should be taken not to overburden students with the same model of assessment on all courses. Experience from Edinburgh suggests that undergraduate students are able to use assessed blogs successfully on up to two of the courses they study at one time.

Key points for effective practice

- Assessed blogging can help to engage students in more challenging academic topics.

- Integration of what takes place on a blog with face-to-face tutorials extracts the full value from the activity: a course blog should be a central rather than a peripheral component of a course.

Learners' perspectives

'Taking part in the blogging exercise has been helpful when [it] comes to writing essays – [it] gives your brain the right to have your own thoughts.' Clare, undergraduate divinity student, University of Edinburgh

'I start thinking and [can] see other people's arguments before the tutorial – I'm better prepared.' Ian, undergraduate divinity student, University of Edinburgh

Future developments

Different models of assessed blogging are now under consideration in the School of Divinity; these include replacing an essay-based coursework component with an assessed blog for students in the third and fourth year of one particular course. Blogs also form part of the assessment strategy in other schools at the University of Edinburgh.

Further reading

Dawson, J., Murray, K., Parvis, S. & Paterson, J. (2005) *Using Weblogs to Encourage Reflective Learning in History* – www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/projects/detail/round_4_using_weblogs

For a discussion of reflective blogging for personal development planning, see JISC (2008) *Effective Practice with e-Portfolios*, p.18 – www.jisc.ac.uk/effectivepracticeeportfolios

Key words

Critical thinking, reflection, summative assessment, blogs, humanities, undergraduate, postgraduate, divinity, Jessie Paterson, Sara Parvis

References

Blackboard® WebCT Vista™ – www.blackboard.com
The University of Edinburgh – www.ed.ac.uk