

A BLOGGING GOOD TIME – THE USE OF BLOGS AS A REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND FEEDBACK TOOL FOR FINAL YEAR PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS

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This article reflects on the use of web logs (blogs) as an assessable component in a third year professional placement unit for public relations students. The key objective behind the use of Web2.0 technology was to encourage reflective practice via an exchange between students and thereby limit the feeling of isolation during the course of this individual tuition unit (ITU). Secondary objectives were to encourage exchange between participating students based at different, on- and offshore campuses, therefore integrating an international perspective into the practice of public relations. From a unit coordinator perspective an additional objective was to create an opportunity that would aid in the early detection of potential problems and to provide a forum in which additional learning material could be provided in response to arising issues. Both challenges and opportunities are noted in this paper. Overall, the Reflective Blog trial can be described as a success, both from the staff as well as the student perspective. However, the Reflective Blog has its shortcomings, particularly from an administrative perspective. As additional students from offshore locations are slowly phasing in, the sustainability of the Reflective Blog will have to be closely monitored.

Introduction

The Professional Placement unit is a compulsory requirement for all public relations students at Curtin University of Technology, and a crucial element of the accreditation of the PR Major by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The final year unit is positioned as a *stepping stone* for a successful career in the industry and an opportunity to put into practice what has been learned during previous years. The majority of students retrospectively refers to the unit as (one of) the best unit(s) of their degree (Curtin University of Technology, 2007). However, due to its format as semester long *individual tuition unit*, a number of students have commented on feelings of isolation and loneliness, due to the lack of peer interaction. Despite the overall popularity of the unit, response rates to the university wide eVALUate end of semester questionnaire have been comparatively low, which might be explained by the fact that the majority of students commence their placement before the start of the actual semester and have, by the time the evaluation is due, already distanced themselves from their studies. Instead, they focus on their future professional careers. Additionally, despite the high overall satisfaction rate, the placement unit has traditionally scored lower than the university and faculty wide average on a number of pre-determined eVALUate items, such as *learning resources*, *quality of teaching* and the quality of ongoing *feedback*. eVALUate focuses solely on levels of agreement and does not take *unsure/not applicable* responses into account. With a strong focus on satisfaction rates and the aim to improve students' experience, a Reflective Blog was trialled as assessable component during semester 1 2008.

An introduction to blogs

Blogging is a contraction of the term *web logging* and can be best described as a form of micropublishing (Roberts, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). A blog, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is "a frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary"(Oxford University Press, 2008). Blogs first emerged in the 1990s, out of online forums, personal web pages and email lists (Alexander, 2006). However, over the past decade blogs

have evolved from simple online diaries to communication tools with the capacity to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate (Roberts, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Featuring no or very limited start up costs, few basic infrastructure requirements and ease of use, blogs enable users to publish their thoughts to a global audience, beyond traditional boundaries and without delays (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Blogs have the potential to provide everyone with a voice (Technorati, 2008), effectively reviving the notion of Habermas' *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989) by fostering citizen journalism. Blogs can provide the opportunity to combine text, images as well as links to other blogs, websites and other media related to its topic. Although not always enabled, the ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is a crucial component of many blogs (Schroeder, 2005). Some blogs have attracted large and dedicated readerships in the thousands; however, the majority of blogs are personal reflections and ongoing diaries or commentaries by individuals aimed for a small audience (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). There are also corporate blogs, which continue to gain popularity and attention from a public relations and communications' perspective, as well as video blogs (*vlogs*). Over the past years blogging has become more *mainstream*, with news services and even politicians using them as a tool to form public opinion. Blogs cover nearly every imaginable genre from travel, politics and fashion, to education, music and cooking. Relatively recently we have also seen the emergence of *fake blogs*, where companies create fictional blogs as a marketing tool with serious repercussions if found out (Boynnton, 2007). The blog search engine Technorati is currently tracking 112.8 million blogs (Technorati, 2008). User generated content has grown so rapidly in popularity that Time magazine named *You* as person of the year 2006 (Grossman, 2006).

Blogs as teaching and learning tools

With a focus on ICT as an answer to globally changing work environments, pressure has been put on education institutions to embrace flexible modes of delivery' (Beattie & James, 1997), 'open-learning' (Lockwood & Gooley, 2001), 'life long learning' (Field, 2006), 'virtual classrooms' (Reid, 2001) and 'institutions without walls'. This paper explores the potential of blogs as reflective e-learning spaces for students in higher education, particularly in the context of internship/placement units and individual tuition units, in which students may feel isolated or disconnected. Despite the fact that blogs have been around for roughly half the history of the World Wide Web, they have only relatively recently been integrated into the teaching and learning mix (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Furthermore, research into the effectiveness of blogs as learning tools is mainly clustered around its use as part of teacher training (Dickey, 2004; Divitini, Haugalokken, & Morken, 2005; Hernández-Ramos, 2004), and other disciplines where daily journals have traditionally formed a crucial part of the learning experience. From this perspective, blogs may be referred to as a new *genre* of learning journals (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). However, Williams and Jacobs (2004) describe blogs as having the potential "to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers" (p. 244). As such, they provide a nearly limitless amount of teaching and learning opportunities, but particularly lend themselves as a tool to promote reflective practice (Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Roberts, 2003). The current generation of students is highly familiar with online communication technologies such as ICQ, MSN Messenger or Skype, they competently surf the web for information and heavily rely on email and social networking tools in their day to day lives. However, despite their existing technical abilities, the *traditional* curriculum may have neglected the need for students to develop a high level of *information literacy*, commonly referred to as the ability to access, evaluate, organise and use information gathered from a wide variety of different sources (Humes, 1999; Plotnick, 1999). With the increased use of online technologies comes a greater need for students to develop critical thinking, analytical and cognitive skills in order to perform and solve problems in digital environments (Duffy & Bruns, 2006). Additionally, students have to keep in mind that "In the blogosphere, everything you say is *on the record*. Once a story is on a blog, keeping a lid on it is impossible," explains Neville Hobson,

an independent consultant on blogging and podcasting, quoted in the Shift Communications Report (2007). Students need to be aware that their current supervisor, placement organisation or even future employers will pay close attention to what they have been posting online (CollegeGrad.com, 2006; onrec.com, 2007). However, Jonassen (2000) argues that writing a diary, or blog in a public space, rather than solely for their own benefit or their instructor's eyes, usually motivates students to put more effort into the process, since the audience is more "authentic". This consequently may provide new opportunities, in fact, Trunk (2006) argues blogging is good for your career, as it provides people with an opportunity to establish themselves as an *expert* in their field. A number of public relations students (predominantly in the UK and the US) have reportedly been *snapped up* by companies as the result of the reflective (voluntary) blog they were writing whilst still at university (Bailey, 2006).

Methodology

The Internet offers hundreds of free blog hosts, however, the blog for this particular trial project was created on Blogger.com, arguably one of the best known blog hosting services (Downes, 2004), which has been around since 1999. The blog was used as a vehicle for student reflection in semester one of the PR393 Professional Practice unit, as part of the PR Major at Curtin University of Technology. Over the course of this study, 68 students were invited as authors, creating a total of 328 posts. Students were provided with a four page long *Blogging Guide* and required to post a minimum of four original posts and four responses over the course of their (minimum) 20 working day long placement. Due to flexible placement arrangements, students were blogging over different periods of time and at varying intensity, however, for the purpose of this project contributions were monitored between February and May 2008. Traditionally, students in this unit have been encouraged to keep a daily journal, which is a well known strategy to help them engage in *metacognition* (Hernández-Ramos, 2004). However, although these journals may have helped with the writing of the final report, they were a non-assessable component.

A blog is essentially an online diary, which reflects the personality of the author (Dickey, 2004; Downes, 2004; Nardi et al., 2004). However, instead of asking individual students to create their own blog, which appears to be a relatively common approach in teaching and learning initiatives that embrace blogging (Hernández-Ramos, 2004), a single Reflective *Group Blog* was created as a *one stop shop* for PR placement reflection, with the aim to make monitoring and student contribution as straight forward as possible. However, despite the blog design being predetermined, students nevertheless managed to develop their own (writing) style. Containing only two fields (title and entry), students were able to update their posts without having to worry about page formats or HMT syntax (Downes, 2004), with the option for more adventurous students to include images, photos, logos and links to work samples. The decision was made to restrict access to commenting tools to enrolled students, however, the blog itself was made publicly available, in order to give students a taste of writing for a *global* audience. The fundamental idea of blogs is to act as an open, uncensored forum, providing everyone with an equal opportunity to express their thoughts (Downes, 2004). However, as the Reflective Blog was used as a learning tool, it had to be monitored to ensure placement organisations' confidentiality was respected and students were discussing problems in a professional manner. Over the course of this study only a couple of students had to be asked to review their posts – with a particular focus on grammar and spelling. The Blogger technology allowed for all posts and comments to be automatically forwarded to the Unit Coordinator. Data analysed for this article came from a 14-questions strong online survey, created via SurveyMonkey.com, in which students were invited to participate. For the purpose of this article, responses on the five point Likert scale were re-coded to 'agree', 'neutral' and 'disagree'. Anonymity was fully guaranteed and perceived as absolutely crucial in order to invite critical reflection on the blogging experience. Additionally, comments in student emails to the Unit Controller and on the blog were taken into account. 76% (50) of eligible semester one students responded to the survey.

Discussion

Despite a slow start, students joined the blog without major difficulties. Only a handful of students allowed their original author invites to expire and one misread the instructions and created her own individual blog. By the end of the semester the entire group, representing students from three different campuses (Australia, Singapore and Mauritius) were very involved, with up to 21 posts a day. The vast majority of posts were self-reflective (“*I think that...*”) and when replying to posts, most students addressed their peers personally (“*thanks for the tips, Lisa*”). 90% of survey respondents stated that they had read a blog before, but only 54% had responded to a blog previously and merely 16% (8) had their own personal blog. Considering that the average respondent’s age was under 23, this indicates that current undergraduate students may be less familiar with web2.0 technology than widely assumed.

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The Reflective Blog assisted me with my learning in PR393	85%	9%	6%
The Blog encouraged me to reflect critically on my placement experience	89%	9%	2%
The blog encouraged me to reflect critically on what I have learned at university	81%	13%	6%
The blog provided me with an opportunity to exchange experiences with other students	96%	2%	2%
The Blog made me feel more 'connected'	83%	15%	2%
Reading other students’ posts and exchanging ideas provided me with a better understanding of the public relations industry	94%	4%	2%
The Blog provided me with an opportunity to gain insight into how PR is practiced in other countries (international perspective)	62%	23%	15%

Table 1

Responses to the Reflective Blog experience were overwhelmingly positive (Table 1), particularly in regards to the opportunity to exchange ideas and insights with other students, thereby ultimately widening their knowledge of and insight into the public relations industry:

“The Blog is a really good and innovative initiative, showing that Curtin is keeping pace with new trends. It’s an excellent way of exchanging views and connecting with fellow students on other campuses.”

“The blog was really great! It was great to be able to compare what you do with your other classmates and see how varied PR really is.”

Some students were surprised about how much they actually enjoyed the blogging experience:

“This blog has been more beneficial than I ever expected, I find myself reading the long list of blogs and becoming so interested in my fellow students experiences and comparing this to my own.”

” I found the blog fantastic! I learnt so much from what others had posted that it was incredible - even I was surprised! Not only was the blog a good tool for learning about others experiences but because blogging is such a popular form of communication in todays (sic) society I found it great to practice my actual blogging (sic) skills as well. [...] Overall I (sic) think that students can really benefit from this and I hope the blog stays a part of PR 393.”

Connectedness - A feeling of isolation and disconnectedness was one of the problems traditionally identified with the Professional Placement Unit. However, 83% of participating students found that the blog assisted them in overcoming the geographical distance:

“The blog was extremely useful to feel connected to other work experience students and see how they handled problems and issues within their placements.”

“Being essentially an external unit, i found that the 393 blogs allowed me to see what other (sic) students were doing, and made me feel like I had others to talk to about my experience. It reduced my concerns about the unit, which otherwise would have been quite isolating.”

Internationalisation - 62% of respondents found that the blog provided them with an international perspective of the PR industry, thereby maximising the opportunities provided by a unit which is simultaneously run across different campuses:

“the blog has provided much knowledge on the insights of the PR industry whether it is in Australia, Singapore or Mauritius, which would be very beneficial to students.”

However, due to the majority of students being based in Perth, with international students only slowly phasing in, the benefit of internationalisation was predominantly emphasised by offshore students:

“Knowing the experiences of international perspective has given me new insights into PR industry not just in Singapore, but also in places I might not get to work in. I am very thankful to be able to read about fellow student's experiences. It kind of (sic) made me feel I'm 'there' with them.”

Unfortunately, dissatisfied students chose not provide any qualitative feedback in this section.

Minimum requirements - Some students struggled with the prescribed minimum of four original posts and four responses, while others participated more than required, excited about the opportunity to stay in touch with their peers. They also used to blog as a vehicle to communicate achievements, upcoming projects and job offers. Most students agreed with the minimum requirement (81%), acknowledging that without the pressure they would have struggled to find the time:

“as much as the blog was great, i think unless it wasn't an assessment requirement i wouldn't have given it as much time and i think a lot of students would have the same feeling.”

“if I was not forced to write them I don't think my analysis and feedback would have been as comprehensive”

Having experienced the Reflective Blog, 64% of students stated they would participate in a similar activity in the future, even if it was solely for formative purposes: *“I did feel the blog helped me feel connected with other students and therefore would use it in the future, even if it wasn't part of my marks.”* This is a lower level of agreement than in William and Jacob's (2004) study into MBA students' blogging experience, arguably confirming different learning priorities at post and undergraduate levels. At the end of the trial, 81% of respondents agreed that they would like to see blogging used more widely as a learning/assessment tool in public relations and marketing;

“The blog is becoming a tool within the public relations industry and I believe it is essential for students to learn a new method of communication, but also be able to reflect on their placement experiences.”

However, some students pointed out that particularly the format of this individual tuition unit lends itself to the use of a blog. From a Unit Controller perspective, the Reflective Blog provided an opportunity to pre-empt student concerns and to publish additional learning material, based on current issues interns were facing. However, the integration and ongoing monitoring of the blog grew into a large administrative exercise, with serious impact on teaching staff's workload.

Conclusion

The results from this study provide reasonably strong support to continue the use of blogs as part of placement units, particularly in order to encourage internationalisation of the curriculum and student exchange, as well as to combat feelings of isolation as a side effect of individual tuition units. Students who may be shy in the classroom were provided with an equal voice and an opportunity to *shine*. While some students clearly submitted their posts only for the sake of receiving their marks, others fully embraced the learning opportunity and gained a far broader, complex and memorable insight into the industry than any *traditional* unit could have provided. Students have demonstrated that they can learn as much – if not more - from each other than from an instructor or a textbook (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). The success of the blog will have to be continuously monitored and re-evaluated. However, after the initial trial period, the blog has been embraced as an information portal for upcoming placement students, whilst first hand accounts and insights are being integrated in current lectures and tutorials to provide a student-centred insight into the *real world*. Future projects could look into collaboration between different universities, both national and international, to broaden students' understanding and insight. Research into the level of instructor involvement on the blog would be beneficial. When and how much should academics get involved – or should an opportunity to provide additional material be sacrificed for the *purity* of the blogging experience?

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