Blogging 101: the effectiveness of a reflective online journal as part of a final year placement unit

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Abstract

Blogs have been around for roughly half the history of the World Wide Web and are increasingly used as part of the communications mix and, however, they are still only scarcely integrated in the teaching toolkit. This study reviews the effectiveness of blogs, or online journals, within the context of a compulsory, final year placement unit, with a particular focus on combating feelings of isolation, enabling a broader insight into the industry and encouraging an international perspective on industry practice. The results suggest that despite the high administrative workload experienced by academics, the introduction of the Reflective Blog was an overall success, suggesting that blogs are particularly useful in the context of an individual tuition unit, effectively shifting the focus away from mainstream, standardised textbooks to 'offbeat', interactive teaching tools, encouraging peer to peer learning.

Introduction

This paper reflects on use of web logs (blogs) as 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. 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 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.

An introduction to blogs

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). 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, such as Boing Boing and the Huffington Post, 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 et al., 2004). Today, blogs cover nearly every imaginable genre from travel and politics, to education and cooking. The blog search engine Technorati is currently tracking 112.8 million blogs (Technorati, 2008). User generated content has grown so much in

popularity that Time magazine named You[1] as person of the year 2006 (Grossman, 2006). From a marketing perspective, blogs are being increasingly integrated into the communications mix to increase sales and build brands (Crossland, 2006; Kent, 2008). Particularly corporate blogs have become popular over the past years, providing organisations with an opportunity to engage in two-way communication with various stakeholders and to show themselves in a more human, approachable way (Lee, 2006; Weidlich, 2003).

Blogs as teaching and learning tools

With focus on Information and Communication Technology (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) and 'virtual classrooms' (Reid, 2001). This paper explores the potential of blogs as reflective e-learning spaces for students in higher education, particularly in the context of internship and individual tuition units, in which students can frequently 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 (Gray, 2007; 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). Blogs have 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" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, 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. However, the traditional curriculum has largely 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, if done well, blogging can be good for your career, as it gives you an opportunity to establish yourself as an expert in your field (Trunk, 2006). There have reportedly been a number of PR students, particularly in the UK and the US, that have been 'snapped up' by companies as the result of the (voluntary) blog they were writing whilst still at university (Bailey, 2006).

Public Relations 393 Professional Practice

The Professional Placement unit is a compulsory requirement for all public relations students at Curtin University, and a crucial element of the course by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The final year unit is positioned as a stepping stone for a successful career

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[1] Refers to "You", as in 'you, the reader'

in the industry and an opportunity to put into practice what has been learned during pervious years. Retrospectively, the majority of students 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 interaction with their peers. 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, with a focus on their future professional careers. Additionally, despite the high overall satisfaction rate, the placement unit has traditionally scored lower than the university wide average on a number of prescribed eVALUate items, such as learning resources, quality of teaching and the quality of ongoing feedback received. 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 improved student experiences, a Reflective Blog was introduced as assessable component for an initial trial period during semester 1 2008.

Methodology

The Internet offers hundreds of free blog hosts. 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. Over the course of this study, 68 students were invited as authors, creating a total of 328 posts. Students were provided with a 'Blogging Guide', touching on issues such as confidentiality and professionalism, 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. Instead of asking students to create their individual 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. 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 an openly accessible 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 small number of students had to be asked to review their posts; particularly due to poor 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-question strong online survey. 76% (50) of eligible semester one students responded to the survey.

The Reflective Blog as learning tool

Despite a slow start, students joined the blog without major difficulties. Only a handful of students allowed their original 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. 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 might be less familiar with web2.0 technology than widely assumed.

Table 1. Student perception of the effectiveness of the Reflective Blog as Learning Tool

Using the following scale, chose the number that best describes how much you agree with each statement. 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
The Reflective Blog assisted me with my learning in PR393	28%	57%	9%	4%	2%	1.96
The Blog encouraged me to reflect critically on my placement experience	43%	47%	9%	0%	2%	1.72
The blog encouraged me to reflect critically on what I have learned at university	34%	47%	13%	6%	0%	1.91
The blog provided me with an opportunity to exchange experiences with other PR393 students	74%	21%	2%	0%	2%	1.34
The Blog made me feel more 'connected'	55%	28%	15%	0%	2%	1.66
Reading other students' posts and exchanging ideas provided me with a better understanding of the public relations industry	66%	28%	4%	0%	2%	1.45
The Blog provided me with an opportunity to gain insight into how PR is practiced in other countries (international perspective)	30%	32%	23%	11%	4%	2.28

The response to the blogging experience was overwhelmingly positive (Table 1), particularly in regards to the opportunity to exchange ideas and insights with other students, thereby ultimately widening students' 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."
"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 actualy blogginf (sic) skills as well. [...]."

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 their physical distance:
"Being essentially an external unit, i found that the 393 blogs allowed me to see what otehr (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."
62% of respondents found that the blog provided them with an international perspective of the PR industry, maximising the opportunities provided by running a unit across different campuses. However, due to the majority of students being based in Perth, with international students only slowly phasing in, the benefit of internationalisation was predominantly felt by offshore students: *"Knowing the experiences of international perspective has given me new insights into the 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 kinda (sic) made me feel I'm 'there' with them."*

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 and commenting on their 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."

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 wasnt 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 priories at undergraduate and postgraduate 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 across the School of Marketing. 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 Coordinator 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.

Lessons learnt | the future of blogs in teaching & learning

The results from this study provide strong support to continue the use of blogs as part of placement units, particularly in order to support the internationalisation of the curriculum and encourage student exchange as well as to combat isolation as a side effect of individual tuition units. The blog provided students who may be shy in the classroom 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), effectively supporting the shift away from mainstream textbook-based teaching, to more interactive, 'offbeat' learning opportunities.

However, this project highlighted that students may not be as familiar with new media as widely assumed. Particularly weaker students required guidance, illustrating that information and web2.0 literacy may have been neglected as part of the current curriculum. Interactive tools such as blogs are increasingly used in the industry. Consequently, this knowledge gap will need to be addressed in order to equip graduates adequately. 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. Monitoring and administration tasks developed into huge burden on the Unit Controller. It is recommended to recruit additional administrative help in order to maximise in-house resources. Research into the level of involvement of the instructor 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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