

Blogging: The Postgraduate Research Student Experience



Research journals and research blogs

Learning journals encourage reflection and to make students more metacognitively aware of their writing process. Postgraduates are often required to keep personal research journals as records, as memoranda and as vehicles for reflection.

Blogging has the potential to make the research journal interpersonal rather than intrapersonal. A research blog can be a catalyst which stimulates critical thinking and allows interested parties to articulate critical voices. Such blogs offer much to the research students, but they also have drawbacks. This poster examines their effect on the postgraduate research student experience.

Data collection

In November 2005, a collaborative blog with three authors was set up at the Open University by the authors while in the first year of their PhDs researching educational technology. This blog was to be a place where students could share information and the authors also planned to analyse its contents. Whilst it had three authors, access was not limited to that group. Additionally, each author had an individual research blog.

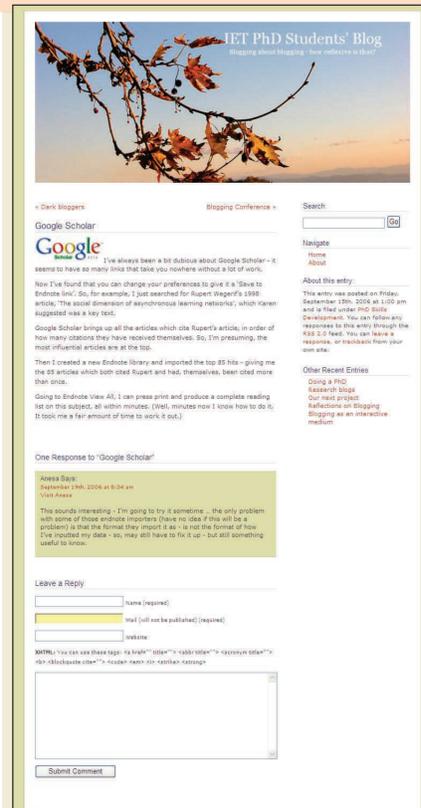
At the end of the academic year, when the group blog had existed for 11 months, the authors began to analyse their data to investigate how the different blogs had affected their research experience.

Positive

- Offer opportunity to share thoughts, ideas and opinions and to work together.
- Create an environment in which to observe, articulate and refine practices.
- Provide tools to develop research ideas, share and locate information, access a worldwide community, obtain feedback & support.
- Serve as a collective resource.

Negative

- Provide a displacement activity.
- Can suffer from technical problems which limit either use or access.
- Are impermanent if hosted on a university server.
- May not be valued by students or tutors.
- Are public documents, so cannot be used to hold confidential information.



What is a blog?
An online notebook or diary, usually updated frequently and presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs bring together text, images and hyperlinks to other web pages and blogs. An important feature is the facility for readers to contribute comments.



Group memory

One of the most common types of post in both the individual blogs and the group blog was the filter post, that is, posts containing links to external websites or references that the author thought would be of use or recommendations of good blogs to monitor through RSS feeds. In this sense, the research blogs were used as a place to store useful links as well as a place in which to share knowledge.

Community of practice

When one author found interesting information in another academic's blog, she linked to it in her own without being clear how it related to her research at that point. Another student then commented that she had followed up the link.

Two months later the author returned to the subject, and went on to make theoretical links between the subject and her research. She noted that she had discussed the subject with fellow academics and, the following year, incorporated it within a presentation to her faculty.

Supporting progression

The blogs were more than information repositories. They also acted as an online agent supporting the students' progression within the academic community. Through the blogs, the students were able to:

- Develop research skills
- Reflect on student experience
- Learn from other students
- Learn from experts.

Categories and a comprehensive search facility provide efficient information retrieval of postings throughout the lifetime of the blog.

Posts relating to a single topic can be sorted and displayed in a coherent list by selecting a particular category, and entering a search keyword will display all posts containing that term.

The search facility enables quick and efficient data retrieval.

Blogrolls (lists of blogs that an author reads regularly) reveal sources which influence a blogger's thinking and writing.

The blogroll, RSS feeds, trackbacks and permalinks connect blogs to each other creating a collaborative web in which each author is immediately aware of new posts made by other blog authors.

Some blogs offer users an optional calendar function. All blogs will date stamp both postings and comments.



The 30 headings on the left represent the authors' data analysis categories, and the automatically generated figures in brackets show how many postings were coded in each category. As the group blog was set up for research purposes, its category facility was adapted to support data analysis.

Postings can be categorised and recategorised as different themes become evident.

Hyperlinks allow students to link their research blogs to information sources they find useful, creating a knowledge network with the student blog at its centre.

Authors can choose the style of their blog, either using a prepared template or customising the blog in their own way. The features of a blog can be arranged and rearranged. The layout of a blog is not static, it can be changed as often as necessary according to the needs of the user.

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