

Chapter 5: Blogging for Summative Assessment in Postgraduate Education

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Summary

Blogging is widely regarded as a useful tool for reflection, articulation of ideas and learning from peers – activities that support the formation of knowledge. Hence, blogging is often used in the formative stage of a module. Entries normally address curriculum topics for a particular week, so peer or tutor feedback works best with quick response times, before the curriculum journey moves on to new topics.

Such a body of writing of course only develops with regular and consistent engagement. While engagement can be enforced by making a blogging activity mandatory, students would be better motivated if they received a more tangible return for their efforts. High quality formative feedback would provide such return, but at the cost of a heavier tutor workload. Embedding the blogging activity into the summative module assessment would provide an alternative motivation without overloading tutors.

Over the course of a module, students can accumulate a significant body of writing in their blogs, though this writing may be too raw and unfocused for summative purposes. Nevertheless, it can act as valuable evidence for a student's learning journey, which can be moulded into a piece of writing more suitable for summative purposes.

This case study reports on how a blogging activity can be used to accumulate evidence for the purposes of summative assessment by getting students to blog regularly and use their writing to critically self-assess their learning progress.

Implementation

The activity runs in a fully online MA module on Education and Technology with annual cohorts of between 30 and 60 students. Students are asked to post regular blog entries in response to weekly prompts that are linked to each week's curriculum topic. Students have the choice to post their entries either in private journals that are only visible to them and the module tutors, or they can post to class blogs, which are visible to all module participants, who can then comment. While the private journal loses the peer feedback element, it provides students with an option to record their thoughts privately, which is sometimes appropriate for a variety of reasons.

Technically, Campus Pack, which is an embedded component of the UCL Moodle installation, was used for both the private and the class-wide blog. Compared to other blog systems, Campus Pack features fewer design options and functions, but as the focus of the blog entries was the actual writing, Campus Pack was found to be very suitable.

Module tutors do not formally monitor any blog entries, but can do so if they wish and find time. For the summative submission, students do not directly submit their complete set of contributions, but a

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1,000-word reflection of their learning journey within the module, with the requirement to use excerpts from their blog entries and, if relevant, discussion forum posts. This means that students must construct an academic argument using their own contributions as evidence.

The 1,000-word reflection counts 20% towards the overall module grade. Students submit a draft at the end of the module's teaching phase and get formative comments on their writing before the final summative submission. The blog itself is not marked directly.

Evaluation

This activity has run for over five years, and is not evaluated separately beyond the standard evaluation mechanisms, such as end-of-module questionnaires and participation monitoring via the blog's usage statistics.

The reflection submissions themselves often contain comments about the usefulness of this activity, as it helps students realise and articulate how their understanding has developed over the module period of ten weeks.

Statistics show that the private blog option is roughly twice as popular as the more open class blog. Unsurprisingly, the class blog produces more comments, although with a post-to-comment ratio of 3:1, the class blog does not create a high level of genuine discussion.

While weekly blog posts were originally declared as mandatory and required to pass the module, the statistics have shown that only seven in ten students produced or exceeded the required minimum number of blog posts. The mandatory status was therefore adjusted mid-module. However, as it is in the students' interest to write blog entries in order to be able to complete the summative reflection piece, every student has contributed something to the blog.

The average number of views per public blog entry was just above 23, which suggests that the entries were read by a number of students, so at least a passive idea exchange appears to take place.

Benefits and Challenges

Tutor feedback on every individual blog post would be difficult to evaluate. Therefore, in this activity, the tutor only comments on the final drafts of a reflection piece constructed with evidence from blog entries, followed by summative marking of a final submission. Consequently, this activity can run with a higher number of students, while retaining the benefits of blog posting in terms of regular articulation of developing knowledge and the exchange of ideas.

By using blog posts as evidence, students learn how to work with text as data, and they develop their academic writing skills by creating arguments. Students tend to choose a theme around which they organise their reflections, and the final submissions are as much documents of a knowledge development process as investigations of a curriculum topic, in particular as students are also encouraged to supplement their own observations with existing literature.

The activity is not without challenges though. Even though weekly blog entries are mandatory and excerpts from the posts are supposed to be part of the summative assessment, students need prompting beyond the pre-prepared weekly instructions. Many students still fall behind or simply do not complete the required number of posts, which tends to have direct consequences on their marks, as they only have a limited amount of data to work with. The conscientious students who post regularly on the other hand are aware that their weekly posts are already contributions to the overall module assessment, and they tend to achieve much better results.

The separation between a private and a class-wide blog is artificial. It would be desirable to just have a single blog that allowed students to set the viewing permissions for each post individually. Blogging platforms such as Wordpress have this functionality; however, a dedicated advantage of Campus Pack is its deep integration in the virtual learning environment, so students do not need to switch platforms.

Take-Aways

It is important to use the right tool for this activity. A limited functionality is beneficial in this case, as this reduces potential distractions; however, a setting to control visibility for each post would be highly desirable.

Access to the blog needs to be as easy as possible. It is already a challenge to encourage students to contribute on a weekly basis, and any technical barrier, such as switching platforms or even having to log on elsewhere, would exacerbate this issue.

A mandatory requirement for the weekly blog post is a must, although tutors should be prepared for concessions to prevent outright failure based on not keeping up. While this activity has some embedded incentives, including preparing elements for the summative assessment during the taught phase of the module, these are not enough to ensure regular contributions. Tutors must remind students of the importance of regular contributions throughout.

Splitting up final module assessment into multiple components can be a challenge, but as students produce a coherent piece of academic writing, the standard grading criteria that are used for similar pieces of writing (e.g. essays) can be applied. If assessment is based on contributions other than longer pieces of writing, grading criteria need to be considered.