

TECHNOLOGY IN PEDAGOGY

Series



The Lunchtime Guide to Student Blogging: By Anand Ramchand

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Anand Ramchand, an Instructor from the Department of Information Systems shared his experience in getting his students to use blogs. He started the session with a brief introduction to blogs, explaining how blogs are a special instance of a website with a log of regular updates listed in reverse chronology, and the ease with which they can be published and accessed. He indicated the interaction in the form of comments differentiated blogs from other platforms.



Blogs for Reflective Learning

In the year 2010, Anand used blogs as a tool to foster reflective learning in his students taking the freshmen module titled “Computing & Society”. The module’s primary focus was on the ethical, social and legal implications in the use of information technology. The objectives of this module were to get students (who are being educated in computing) to be sensitized to and evaluate the ethical issues involved in technology design, development and use, and to get them to explore the world of IT as technology professionals rather than users.

Based on feedback from previous semesters, he understood that though students learn and become aware of issues related to ethics, they did not form deep and meaningful opinions about the issues. Hence to help his students get actively engaged in deeper thought processes, Anand identified the need for student reflection. He believed that would facilitate his students to draw out personal experiences and assumptions in evaluating ethical dilemmas.

He narrowed down to using blogs, in particular the **Blog.NUS** platform, after considering a range of tools that were available – concept maps, essays, discussion forums, and wikis. This NUS platform provided an official environment, setting clear boundaries within which students could blog and operate based on NUS IT policies.

His class had 170 students, and hence he resorted to group blogging with 3 to 4 students per group (a total of 44 groups). Each student in a group was required to make 4 posts at regular intervals during the semester. He assigned 10% of the grade to the group blog, and students’ contributions of comments on other blog posts were a component of their class participation score (which accounted for another 10% of their grades). Some groups’ posts spanned a wide umbrella of topics while other groups were more focused in their blogging. To jockey for visibility, groups also got creative, controversial and used various forms of multimedia in their blogs.

Pedagogical Advantages that Blogs Offer

Anand highlighted the following features that prompted him to use blogs for his module:

1. Knowledge construction is aided with social interaction

For students to develop knowledge, they need social interaction. Blogs permit collaboration, and allow students to debate and discuss issues positively, facilitating the social construction of knowledge. In case of forums, students tend to write their opinions and comments briefly, and sometimes only when prompted, while blogging allows students to create a more comprehensive commentary on a regular basis. The action of writing this commentary and subsequent interaction around it foster sense making and knowledge construction in students.

2. Personal ownership over thoughts and understanding promotes better effort

Blogs document students' thought processes on how ideas connect and evolve over time and also facilitate the organisation of information into meaningful personal narratives. They give students the flexibility of deciding and forming their own writing style – on how information can be presented with images, pictures, and videos. Thus, students have ownership over their blog entries making it their intellectual property and this again differentiates blogging from other tools like discussion forum which enables students to develop a sense of responsibility over the information they upload.

3. Informality in blogs encourages engagement

Blogging has some form of informality to it, unlike essays, and this informality allows students to comment on each other's blogs, create their posts at their own time and pace. This gives students the opportunity to develop enough understanding of a concept before articulating it into text. Students become engaged not only in their writing, but also in their peers' writing.

4. Enhance writing and communication skills

Making blog entries helped students to hone their writing and communication skills.

Thus, blogging can build a structure for reflective learning through knowledge creation and sharing and influences students to respond to thought provoking questions, reactions to photos and images, give opinions, discuss and debate on issues.

Take-home Lessons from the Blogging exercise

- **Keep up the momentum** to encourage students to make better posts. This would require the instructors and tutors to read and comment regularly to provide the necessary feedback.
- **Provide students with easy access** to the class blogs so they will read them. For example, provide:
 - a single list containing links to each individual student blog
 - an aggregated list of all blog posts made by all students (blog aggregate sites like NetVibes.com are helpful in achieving this)

- an OPML file (a file containing a structured list of blogs) containing all the class blogs. If students are using blog readers (e.g. Google Reader), the OPML file allows them to 'subscribe' to all the class blogs in their reader quickly and easily.
- **Use face-to-face (F2F) lecture time** to highlight exemplar blog entries, discuss good and bad posts, and provide guidelines and pointers to improve subsequent posts.
- **Use blogs as a source of student feedback**, allowing them to guide the selection of discussion topics for class, and also to observe how students understand and apply concepts. Topics and examples that students blog on can be used in F2F classroom discussions, and this serves to further engage and encourage students.
- **Set up a good grading criteria**

To get students to reflect appropriately when writing their blog posts, guidelines need to be provided. This is dependent on the course and its objectives. Here is an example from Anand's course on how students' posts were categorised:

- **Relevant** – a post containing information relevant to the course is the bare minimum;
 - **Descriptive** – the post describes a state of affairs well and is useful for other students to read;
 - **Analytical** – the post provides some analysis on a state of affairs and draws a logical, sound conclusion
 - **Normative** – a student is able to identify ethical principles, phenomena and values being affected by a state of affairs, evaluates the effects, and provides claims of good/bad and ethical justification;
 - **Multi-Perspective** – a student considers different/multiple perspectives involved before making ethical claims;
 - **Engaged** – a student is able to engage other students through subsequent discussions and demonstrate thorough involvement in the topic discussed
- **Use checkpoints** to make sure that students do a progressive submission of blog entries at regular intervals during the semester.
 - Get students to use appropriate **user identities** (e.g. matriculation numbers or official email IDs, instead of nicknames) to help in identifying blog authors and commentators for grading.
 - **Legal/copyright issues** need to be explained to students.
 - **Instructors to lead by example** by writing blog entries that are exemplary and also start discussions on students' blog entries.



In summary, Anand acknowledged that the exercise was a success as he was able to get his students to explore and engage in the world of IT more deeply than before. He also indicated that his students were involved in a more reflective thought processes. He was also happy that some of his students were continuing to engage their peers on their blogs even after the course ended.

Summary of the Discussion

A lively discussion followed the presentation, with participants offering suggestions on how they used blogs:

- One participant suggested providing guidelines and word limits for the blog entries and comments, and to get students to provide both a 'for' and 'against' stance when commenting.
- Another participant elaborated on how she and her team required each student to make a blog post as part of their CA assignment. Students were given ample preparation time with specific set of guidelines laid out. Her team assigned one tutor to grade all the blog posts made by the students of that class to account for fair grading and that was made easy with the set of guidelines. Other tutors/TAs posted constructive comments on each of the students' blogs to encourage student discussion on the blog posts.
- Few participants wondered if Facebook would be a more comfortable platform rather than blogs, while there were others who argued that they would not use Facebook. Those who wanted to use Facebook felt its proximity with students would be a plus factor. Those who objected felt that Facebook had particular drawbacks, being a third party application governed under US laws and with frequently changing privacy terms. Others added that material posted on Facebook by students was legally Facebook's property and that one cannot be sure if materials deleted from Facebook are actually removed completely.

Q & A Session

Following the presentation, a lively discussion ensued and listed below are some questions from the subsequent Q & A session.

Q: Normally when someone makes changes to a blog post, they normally just strikethrough. How do you deal with it? Do you have to save the previous version to check the changes made?

AR: For my class, my students did not use the strikethrough method but instead made changes in the Comments field. When the posts were edited, students marked the edited parts e.g. with a word 'Edit' or coloured in red font.

Q: I use blogs to make status updates for a language class on German to improve their language skills. But sometimes some students make a number of updates (of bad quality) while others resort to the minimum requirement. How would you manage this?

AR: For our case, we use blogs to for students to give essay posts while your purpose was to use the German language more. Yes, I have students who are familiar with blogs that keep posting while those who are not familiar will stop at the minimum requirement. For a start, we gave suggestions on topics and comments on how entries could be improved by highlighting the good and bad posts.

Some suggestions by other lecturers were to ask students to peer-review their classmates' blog, or to get students to recommend a chosen post to be graded instead of grading all their writing. To help students in making quality posts, we should make sure the instructors and tutors are trained in providing consistent feedback to the students.

Q: Do you give any guidelines on how to comments?

AR: No. We didn't expect many students to comment on others' posts, but they did. We thought the ones commenting will be tutors. To start, we highlighted good blog posts in lecture, and students would read them and begin commenting. The subsequent blog entries got better and better, as students commented on each other's thoughts.

Q: Last week, we had a workshop on Facebook. I think Facebook is similar but better. What are your views?

AR: The younger generation feels blogging is not so much in fashion. But they "blog" on Facebook often. We wanted this exercise to have a little more security and control, and to be within NUS's official walls (rather than using an external blogging platform). NUS's blogging platform inherently requires students to adhere to NUS's IT policies, so they know there are already common guidelines in place for acceptable behavior and etiquette.