Integrating Blog Writing into the Essay Writing Process

by Lee Ming Cherk
National University of Singapore (Singapore)

Abstract
This paper discusses how blogs can enhance the academic writing process and develop students into better writers. The background of this study is an English for Academic Purpose course designed for undergraduates in a Singapore university. The study investigates students’ views about blog writing as a platform for responding to journal articles, and for reviewing peers’ work. It also evaluates the efficacy of online peer feedback.

Introduction
Since its inception, blog writing has quickly expanded from simply disseminating information and sharing journal entries, to generating new ideas and stimulating discussions. As Murray and Hourigan (2008) point out, web users are not only ‘consumers’ of information but ‘creators’ of information as well. In higher education, the blog has been extolled as a credible platform for discussion, collaboration and development of higher order thinking. In the idealized English as Second Language (ESL) process writing, blogging enables students to interact, construct meaning, scaffold knowledge and solve problems. Through this, students reflect, rehearse and refine the ideas they want to communicate. At the same time, teachers are better able to monitor their students’ progress and to intervene and guide students more efficiently.

There are two types of constructs underlying blogging in ESL process writing: the “private world” of reflection and the “shared world” of discourse (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). “Private world” activities such as reading and reflecting relate to the notion of constructivism situated within the Piaget school of thought which sees the individual as central to the learning process and information that is absorbed and knowledge being constructed by the learner himself. “Shared world” activities such as responding and engaging in discourse are reminiscent of Vygotsky’s social constructivism which contends that learning and development is a collaborative activity.
The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of blogging within the process writing approach and to evaluate its efficacy in enhancing ESL writing.

Specifically, the research questions are:

1. In what way has blogging enhanced the process of writing?
2. Did blogging help students produce better pieces of writing?

**Background**

The study is based on an undergraduate English for Academic Purposes course run in a Singapore university. This was a 48-hour course taught twice a week over a 12-week period. An integral part of the course was to enable students to read and understand journal articles, draw ideas from these articles, synthesize them, and use these ideas to write an expository academic essay. The process writing approach, involving multiple drafting, peer reviews and conferencing with the tutor, was adopted. Two essays were written during the course and each process writing cycle lasted five to six weeks. Since students were new to the process writing approach, the first essay was used to familiarize students with the requirements of an academic essay (encapsulated in Appendix 1) and the practice of multiple drafting and peer reviews. Therefore, no blogging was introduced at this stage. Instead, blogging was introduced into the writing process only during the second essay after students had become familiar with the necessary procedure.

**Table 1. Process of writing Essay 2.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Process writing for Essay 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Read 4 journal articles, <strong>respond to blog posts</strong>, teacher participates in blog discussion, discuss in class, make notes and synthesize ideas according to answer essay question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting</td>
<td>Draft essay, <strong>peer review through blogging</strong>, revise first draft, hand in second draft of essay, conferencing with teacher (including discussion of peer review on first draft) based on second draft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows how blogging was integrated into the writing process for Essay 2. This is indicated in bold and large print. The purpose of blogging at this stage was to help students familiarize themselves with their reading materials, discuss and generate new ideas, hone written expression and increase self-awareness. Also in this process, the teacher facilitated sporadically to shape discussions and to provide feedback.

A total of five posts were put up: Four relating to each one of the assigned journal readings, and one being an online peer review.

**Procedure**

**Essay topic**

For Essay 2, students were to choose to write on one of these topics:

1. *Globalization has had arguably positive effects on developed and developing countries. This phenomenon, which has often been associated with interdependence, interconnectedness, integration and the flattening of the world has been viewed from different perspectives, both favorable and pernicious. Compare and contrast these two perspectives.*

2. *The phenomenon of globalization has been viewed from different perspectives: (1) an inclusive view which underscores the positive effects of globalization on developed and developing countries and a marginalist view which maintains the globalizing processes benefit some countries but marginalizes others, or (2) favorable and pernicious. Compare and contrast these two perspectives in light of two aspects, e.g., economic outcomes and changes in business firms or societies.*

*(ES1102 English for Academic Purposes, National University of Singapore)*

**Reading and blogging assignments**

In preparation for their essay writing, students were assigned four journal articles to read. They were also required to post a comment in response to a tutor-generated blog post on each of the articles, in addition to participating in class discussion. Students were generally
expected to write no more than 150 words for each post. There was no stipulation on the number of comments which they had to make and no word limit was imposed on the comments. The wordings of the four blog posts were as below:

Assignment 1:
In his book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas L. Friedman says that “the flat world empowers the forces of darkness as well as the forces of light” (p.482). Indeed, globalization brings with it both advantages and disadvantages. Do you think that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages or vice versa? Who do you think benefits more: developed countries or developing ones? In less than 150 words, share your views and respond to the views of others on this blog.

Assignment 2:
In his article, “Why the World Isn’t Flat,” Pankaj Ghemawat refutes Thomas L. Friedman’s claim that globalization is creating a massive impact on the world. What are the bases for his argument? What examples does he use to support his views?

Assignment 3:
In the article, “The Globalization Index,” globalization is measured by how much or how little a country is opening itself up and connecting with the rest of the world. In measuring the extent of globalization in a country, these categories are taken into account: economic integration, personal contact, technological connectivity and political engagement. In your opinion, why are some countries more globalized than others?

Assignment 4:
In his book, *Making Globalization Work*, Joseph Stiglitz discusses the problems and limitations of globalization. Do you see the same problems and limitations in your own country?

A class blog was set up for each of the three classes involved in the study. Each class consisted of 13-16 students. One reading assignment was given per week over a four-week period. Students were required to post a comment in response to a tutor-generated blog post on each of the given articles.
Peer review
After reading the articles and producing the first draft, students were asked to review each other’s work through blogging, with the same criteria as the one they had used with Essay 1 (see Appendix 1). A copy of the checklist is found in Appendix 1. The online peer review was conducted in a computer laboratory. Students were organized in groups of three for this purpose. They were asked to upload their essays on their assigned blogs for their group members to read. At the end of the 1 hour 20 minute session, each student had read and given written comments on the essays of the other two members of their group, and received comments on their own essays from the same. The purpose was to compel students to reflect more, work on expressing their ideas more clearly, and collaborate on improving each other’s writing. The fact that students had to express themselves in open cyberspace compelled them to pay more attention to the quality of their content and the accuracy of their language.

Participants
The subjects of this study were undergraduates from three classes (totalling 43) taking an English for Academic Purposes course (ES1102). They were from a variety of national and linguistic backgrounds. Details of the student composition are given in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Linguistic background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>16 (37.2%)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2 (4.7%)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>6 (14.0%)</td>
<td>Chinese and Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
<td>Burmese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>17 (39.5%)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typically, the Chinese students (16 in total) among this group had started learning English as a foreign language from the age of 12. The Malaysian students (6 in total) were from Chinese or Malay medium schools where English was taught as a second language from primary school upwards. The Indonesian student (1 only) and Myanmar student (1 only) were taught English as a foreign language from secondary school. Only the Indian students (2 in total) and Singaporean students (17 in total) had gone through a school system where English was
the medium of instruction throughout their school years. All students were observed to be technically competent enough to carry out blogging activities independently.

**Research methodology**

An eclectic approach was adopted to answer the research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to provide triangulation.

**Quantitative methods**

**Content Analyses**

Open coding was adopted to identify recurring types of activities. Four categories were identified through this process. While “regurgitating,” “reflecting” and to some extent, “relating” fall within the domain of cognitive constructivism, “responding” is found within the realm of social constructivism. The list of codes and their corresponding descriptions is given in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regurgitating</td>
<td>Summarizing, quoting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting</td>
<td>Inferring, concluding, evaluating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating</td>
<td>Discussing personal experiences, citing real-life examples, using concrete supporting data drawn from personal knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding</td>
<td>Acknowledge, agreeing, refuting, complimenting, engaging in discussion on earlier comments made by self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Questionnaire survey**

A short survey was carried out to find out more about students’ blogging experience. The responses were made on a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (4 = strongly agree; 3 = agree; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree). They were then counted and presented in percentages. The results (see Appendix 2) were then corroborated with the qualitative analysis of student comments to derive a fuller understanding of their experience of blog writing on this course.
**T-test**

A T-test was run to compare the essay marks obtained by students who commented on the blogs more frequently (≥4 times) with those of students who commented on the blogs less frequently (≤ 3 times).

**Qualitative method**

Comments given at the end of the questionnaire survey were analyzed.

As the online peer review through blogging did not lend itself to the coding pattern established for the reading assignments, it was analyzed qualitatively, with focus on the content and type of discourse found during the online discussion.

Collectively, Table 4 below shows the methods used to answer the research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Method(s) employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. In what ways has blogging enhanced the process of writing?</td>
<td>Content Analysis, Qualitative analysis of peer review through blogging, Qualitative analysis of comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did blogging help students to produce better pieces of writing?</td>
<td>T-test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results and discussion**

**Research question 1: In what ways has blogging enhanced the process of writing?**

*Content Analyses of Online Discourse on Reading Assignments*

The results for the first research questions showed that the online discourse in the blogs were mainly cognitive constructivist in nature. In other words, students tended to write more for their personal consumption than to engage an audience.

A content analysis was carried out using the sentence as the unit of analysis. The percentages of occurrence in each of the categories are given in the table below.
Table 5. Percentages of occurrence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Regurgitating</th>
<th>Reflecting</th>
<th>Relating</th>
<th>Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The World is Flat</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>42.03</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why isn’t the World Flat?</td>
<td>69.60</td>
<td>20.25</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization Index</td>
<td>71.40</td>
<td>18.80</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Globalization Work</td>
<td>24.08</td>
<td>19.10</td>
<td>56.80</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures show that although student blog comments were mainly individualist and cognitive constructivist in nature, there was no consistent preference for either regurgitating, reflecting or relating. One possible reason was that the way students commented on the blogs was dictated by the content of the article they were reading, the difficulty of the article and the questions posed to them on the blog. However, it was evident through online writing, students were compelled to grapple with the content in the journal articles, compare ideas across articles, reformulate the ideas, and even extend them. On the other hand, it was also clear that there was a much lesser tendency to engage fellow students in online discussions during this stage of the essay writing process. It was likely that students’ unfamiliarity with the topic made it difficult for them to comment much on it or engage fully in a discussion.

It cannot be assumed that the blog by itself would automatically bring about higher levels of interactivity. Karagiogi and Symeou (2005) warn that social constructivism, or collaborative learning, is a learning philosophy and not a learning strategy or system, and so it poses great challenges when adopted in real classroom situations. Not all learners are able to competently take control of their own learning. Some of them may not benefit as much as intended. In addition, blogging per se does not necessarily move discussion towards higher order thinking. One must note that the level of engagement is largely dictated by the topic of discussion and the nature of the assignment given in each blog post. In general, most discussions tend to remain at the information sharing and brainstorming stage (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). As such, many studies have suggested the need for appropriate task design, teacher facilitation.
and direction as there seems to be a close link between teaching and cognitive processing. (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Murphy, 2004). Critical reflection also has to rely on the teacher’s moderation because students may not be skilled enough to clearly articulate different points of view (Lee, 2011).

Nonetheless, the tendency to be more individualistic in blog responses should not be viewed negatively as regurgitating, reflecting and responding are valuable activities that allow students to explore and synthesize ideas, and rehearse their writing for their essays.

As shown in the questionnaire, the students were generally positive about their blogging experiences. In the first part of the questionnaire survey (entitled “writing about assigned readings”), all the respondents (100%) agreed that blogging had helped them understand their assigned readings better. Also, the vast majority (97%) incorporated the ideas which they wrote on the blogs into their essays. From this, we can deduce that blogging has helped students gain a better grasp of their essay topic.

A student reported thus,

In this English class, I tried my best in completing every single reading that are given and as a result, I found that ideas accumulate in my brain before I notice them. Writing an outline therefore, no longer is considered as a tough job. (Loh Pei She) [sic]

However, a noticeable minority (21.2%) did not read what others had written in the class blogs. Also, slightly more than half (54.4%) reported that they did not respond to what other people had written on the blogs. Despite the fairly low level of interactivity among users, most of them (87.9%) still felt that participating on the blogs had helped them write a good essay. This sentiment is well expressed by a student who thought that the blogging helped him to understand, reflect and refine ideas for his essay:

I feel that the compulsory readings provided me with the background knowledge that I required to write the essay. The blogging assignment ‘forced’ me to process and group the information that I have read from the articles and they tested my understanding of the readings. The multiple drafts, writing assignments and the blogging assignments allowed
me to read and re-read whatever that I have written and check whether they sound logical. (Koh Rui Yang) [sic]

**Analyses of Online Peer Review**

Given the nature of the peer review, it was impractical to analyze the online discourse with the same categories developed for the online discourse on the reading assignments. The discourse was therefore analyzed qualitatively. Interestingly and unlike the types of comments on the assigned readings, the online peer reviews reflected much higher levels of interactivity. The types of turns taken by reviewer to reviewee included giving complements, asking for clarifications, making comments, suggesting changing and even developing an argument further for the reviewee to consider. The types of turns taken by the reviewee to the reviewer included agreeing or disagreeing, clarifying questions raised by the reviewer, explaining and defending a point, and attempting to make changes suggested by the reviewer. Also, as seen in the nature of their comments, the students did not deviate too far from the checklist (see Appendix 1), provided by the teacher. Table 6 shows the type of online discussion that took place:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of content discussed during peer review</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay Content</td>
<td>correctness of information; logical development; thesis and topic sentences; format of citations; critical analysis vs. regurgitation of information; relevance of supporting details; balance of arguments; relevance of conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>focus of theme; ordering of ideas; linkage of ideas; use of transition; paragraphing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>clarity of expression; phrasing; vocabulary; syntax; discrete point grammar items</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to a student, this was what had happened:
Peer reviewing allows interaction and discussion among friends and classmates, and this might be more relaxed for students. By openly discussing and pointing out each other’s mistakes and good points, students are able to support one another and also learn from each other’s mistakes. (Ke Wei En) [sic]

Also, according to the questionnaire survey (question 7), most students (75.1%) felt that the feedback which they had received on the blog helped them to revise their essays. This is confirmed by written comments such as the following:

Peer review allows me to look through and comment on other people’s essays, hence looking at potential mistakes that I myself may also make. This serves to inoculate me thus preventing me from making the same mistake. (Ke Wei En) [sic]

Similarly, most students (72.8%) felt that they had learned more about essay writing through giving feedback to their peers (question 8). Student benefitted by having their essays read through fresh pairs of eyes:

Peer reviews also give me the chances to view my essay with perspectives of my peers. It is interesting and useful. (Hou Nanjun) [sic]

Clarifications sought by peers and suggestions made by them helped writers hone meaning:

The peer reviews helped as they help me to get my message out more clearly. (Koh Ruiting) [sic]

However, despite the many positive features of peer reviews, the majority of students (63.7%) still preferred face-to-face tutor feedback to online peer reviews:

No doubt my peers are helpful in identifying my mistakes but certain errors are best explained by the tutor. (Benjamin Khew) [sic]

On the whole, blogging as an additional activity in the writing process was viewed positively, as revealed in the questionnaire survey results where 72.7% of students either agreed or
strongly agreed that they did not mind blogging over and above attending classes and writing assignments.

Research question 2: Did blogging help students produce better pieces of writing?

A T-test was run to find out whether the frequency in blogging correlated significantly with the marks achieved for essay writing. To this end, a comparison was made between the marks of students who had posted comments 3 or fewer (≤3) times with students who had posted comments 4 or more (≥4) times.

On a 95% confidence Interval of the difference (two-tailed), it was found that there was no significant difference (equal variances assumed; lower: -3.36302; upper: 1.80746).

Given that this was students’ first attempt in using computer mediated communication to enhance essay writing, the results were predictably unreliable. Several repeats of the same process would have yielded more robust information. Also, the comparison between students who commented frequently (i.e. ≥ 4 times) with students who commented less frequently (i.e. ≤3 times) was an arbitrary one. A clearer comparison would have been drawn between students who had not blogged at all with students who had.

Conclusion

The research has shown that despite the less-than-convincing statistical results, blogging does enhance the writing process. Qualitative findings have revealed many cognitive activities taking place during online discourse. Through reiterating, reflecting and relating, students were inadvertently rehearsing what they would eventually include in their essays much more than they would do in a conventional class. Finally, the blog allowed all students an equal opportunity to be heard. Even the most reticent pupil in class could still make his or her views known.

Unlike the earlier blog discussions on the assigned readings, the peer reviews done through blogging were more successful in engaging students in discussions and problem solving. Having the asynchronous discussion recorded in writing, students could go back to it and better evaluate each other’s work, make suggestions, defend their choices of writing style, content and organization, and decide either to take on or ignore suggestions given by peers.
The different levels of interactivity found in blog commenting on reading assignments and that found in the online review is a powerful indication that task design, students’ familiarity with task and content are important factors determining the nature of student engagement and learning outcomes.

Throughout the blog writing processes, the tutor was able to monitor the discussions closely and step in at appropriate times either through the blog or during follow-up class discussions. She also had the opportunity to evaluate the validity of the comments posted and discuss them in addition to the essays per se during the one-on-one conferencing sessions. This helped to build up students’ metacognitive awareness and move them on to becoming more independent writers. In other words, blogging facilitated closer monitoring and more follow-up work than what would have been possible in traditional classrooms.

In all, blogging adds value to the learning process. Not only can it achieve what conventional pedagogies do, but it also allows students to become more engaged, and enables teachers to monitor their progress more effectively.

Acknowledgements
The author wishes to acknowledge the originators of the two essay prompts used in this research, Dr. Luisa Sadorra (Senior Lecturer, CELC) and Ms. Fong Yoke Sim (Lecturer, CELC), coordinators of the English for Academic Purposes Module (ES1102) in the 2011-2012 academic year.

References


**Appendix 1: Student checklist for reviewing essays**

**Content**
- □ content is informative and reflects critical thinking
- □ content addresses the essay question in an in-depth manner
- □ information is relevant (no digressions)
- □ topic sentences are clear
- □ topic sentences relate to the thesis
- □ supporting details relate to the topic sentences
- □ supporting details are specific and logical
- □ in-text and end-text citations are excellently used

**Organization**
- □ introduction: background information is well connected and flows logically
- □ introduction: thesis statement is clearly stated and not merely rehashed from the essay prompt
- □ body: ideas are logically connected
- □ body: ideas are appropriately connected with transition markers
- □ conclusion: summarizes information mentioned in the body paragraphs
- □ conclusion: restates the thesis
- □ conclusion: ends appropriately

**Language**
- □ a variety of sentence structures (simple, compound and complex) are used
sentence structures are correct

grammar is correct; grammar items to note are: word form, noun, pronoun, article/determiners, preposition, modal, verb form, verb tense, subject-verb agreement, parallel structures, sentence fragment, connector & transition, run-on sentence and comma splice

a sophisticated range of vocabulary and expressions is used

excellent use of reporting verbs for citing sources

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Appendix 2: Results of questionnaire survey on blogging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responding to assigned readings on the blog</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I have posted responses to the assigned readings on the blog at least once during this term.</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Writing my responses to the assigned readings on the blog has helped me understand the main ideas in the articles better.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have used the ideas which I summarized and posted on the blog to write my essays.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. On the blog, I read other people’s responses to the assigned readings.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. On the blog, I respond to what other people write about assigned readings.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Generally speaking, participating on the blog has helped me write a good essay.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer Review</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The peer feedback which I received on the blog from my classmates was very useful in helping me revise my essay.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I have learned more about essay writing through giving feedback to my peers.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. I prefer getting peer feedback on my writing on the blog to face-to-face feedback from my tutor.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall

10. I do not mind blogging IN ADDITION to attention classes and writing assignments.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About the author

Lee Ming Cherk is a full-time lecturer at the Centre for English Communication, NUS. Prior to that, she was teaching in tertiary institutions both in Singapore and in Hong Kong. Her academic interests include second language writing, raising grammar awareness through writing, language policy, quality and change management, peer conferencing and more recently, the social media.