

Pedagogical Blogging: Implementation in a Tertiary-level Professional Communication Course

by [Brad Blackstone](#)

National University of Singapore (Singapore)

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Abstract

This paper presents a pedagogical blogging process that was implemented in a tertiary-level professional communication course. It describes blogging and its key components, provides a rationale for pedagogical blogging, and summarizes the course blogging activities and two novel elements, the *blogging buddy* and the *blogging group*. It also provides a description of how student blogging was evaluated, discusses student impressions of the blogging activity and provides links to student blogs.

Introduction

In the early years of the Internet, Warschauer (1996) anticipated how Computer Mediated Communication would enable learners “to share not only brief messages, but also lengthy (formatted or unformatted) documents – thus facilitating collaborative writing – and also graphics, sounds, and video” and that it would allow them “to publish their texts or multimedia materials to share with partner classes or with the general public.”

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), I teach a 48-hour per semester course entitled “Professional Communication: Principles and Practice” (ES2007S), offered as an elective to upper-level science and engineering students. ES2007S has the stated goal of enabling the students to become more effective communicators within various social settings, but most especially, in the workplace. By the end of the course, they are supposed to be able to (a) know and apply the principles of communication to develop strategies for a successful exchange of ideas with others, and (b) plan, construct and express spoken and written messages clearly, convincingly and professionally, which are fitting to audience, context, and purpose. Each of these proposed learning outcomes is in line with the communication skills

described as essential in a survey of 104 Silicon Valley employers who were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with newly hired employees (Stevens, 2005).

To achieve the relevant communication skills objectives in ES2007S, the students read about the fundamentals of interpersonal, intercultural, nonverbal, business communication and associated communication theories, review strategies for active listening, effective writing, speaking, presenting, and conducting survey-based research, and work through related class activities and skill builders. Using these processes as a foundation, they then practice effective communication through several series of tasks:

- ▶ Going through an application process, including writing an application letter and a resume and doing a mock interview;
- ▶ Evaluating faulty business letters and writing effective ones; and
- ▶ Doing a survey-based research project within a small group, which involves conducting a formal meeting in order to reach consensus on a research topic, writing meeting minutes, developing an online survey instrument and interview questions for original research, conducting secondary research, describing the research in a written report, and finally, presenting the research project orally.

After teaching this course for Academic Year (AY) 2007-8, I felt that student engagement with two course elements, discussions of the course content and effective writing practice, could be better supported by a more comprehensive writing/discussion regime. Having used pedagogical blogging in an English for Academic Purposes course for first-year engineering students at the same university to my own and students' satisfaction (Blackstone & Wilkinson, forthcoming), I asked this question: might blogging serve learners in ES2007S equally well?

It was within this context that I decided to implement a term-length series of blogging activities with the goal of providing each student with more opportunities to share ideas with classmates and the teacher on the course content, to reflect on what was being learned, and to practice and refine written communication skills. After being used for two semesters in AY 2008-9, the blogging activity seems to have fulfilled these goals and provided students with a meaningful collaborative learning experience.

This paper

- ▶ describes blogging and its key elements;
- ▶ provides a rationale for pedagogical blogging as it was used with 20 tutorial groups of 336 students conducted by six teachers during two semesters at NUS;
- ▶ describes two novel components, the *blogging buddy* and the *blogging group*;
- ▶ summarizes the ES2007S blogging process and content topics;
- ▶ provides a brief description of how my own students' blogs were evaluated;
- ▶ relates impressions of the blogging activity from various viewpoints, including those filtered from a term-end anonymous attitudinal survey of all ES2007S students; and
- ▶ concludes with a call for further research.

Links to several student blogs are also provided.

Bloggging and its key elements: The *blog*, the *blog post* and *reader comments*

Bloggging is the act of bloggers communicating on weblogs, or blogs. A *blog*, as it is commonly known, resembles a personal website, but differs mainly in two ways: (a) with respect to the ease of its set up, management and maintenance, and (b) in the fact that blogs include an interactive function, which allows readers of a particular piece of writing, called the *blog post*, to leave a written response, or *reader comment*.

After a writer has set up a blog, using one of any number of freely available blog sites – www.blogger.com and www.wordpress.com are among the most well-known – she or he can then write and upload the post, and if need be, attach other files. Posts are archived in reverse chronological order, with the most recent post listed at the top of the main blog page. With each post, the writer can also receive comments from anyone with an Internet connection. When writing is being shared within a particular group of bloggers, such as a class of students who have common goals and who are working through similar writing tasks, the individual is given an opportunity to see how others have written on the same theme, articulate a critical response, and while reflecting on both the process and the various products, return to her or his own post and, if so inclined, reshape it. This can be instructional and highly motivating. To summarize, the individual student's blog becomes a place where she or he can

- ▶ post and archive blog entries, whether written discussions on various topics, responses to questions, free writing and/or draft assignments;
- ▶ include photographs, songs and video clips, and accessible web-links;
- ▶ receive critical feedback, not just from the teacher, but from anyone in a class and from other interested online parties; and
- ▶ read, analyze, evaluate and comment on the writing of others.

In this way, blogging serves the teacher as a means of having a group of students interact with each other in a highly meaningful context via regularly posted assignments on course-related themes. Additionally, it functions as a platform for monitoring each student's authentic communication with that Internet-connected audience. The audience in my classes was generally classmates and the teacher, and on occasion, other Internet readers. For a representative example of one of my students' blogs, see [ES2007S Student Blog Example #1](#).

Pedagogical blogging in ES2007S: A rationale

Recently, blogs and associated blogging activities have been used effectively for pedagogical purposes in a variety of post-secondary instructional contexts. For many reasons, blogging has proven attractive to educators and learners alike ([Blackstone, Spiri & Naganuma, 2007](#); Blackstone & Wilkinson, forthcoming; Jones, 2006), but mainly because it

- ▶ encourages course content-based discussions out of the physical classroom and beyond class time (Stanley, 2006; Williams & Jacobs, 2004);
- ▶ supports both individualized and broadly interactive communication (Cottle, 2009; Pinkman, 2005; Shifflet, 2008);
- ▶ facilitates student collaboration within a "community of learners" (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Nelson & Fernheimer, 2003; Stanley, 2006); and
- ▶ motivates students to engage positively in the writing process (Barrios, 2003; Cottle, 2009; Shifflet, 2008; Trammel & Ferdig, 2004).

Blogging was used in ES2007S as a way of having the students further explore in more detailed discussion the communication principles they had been learning, apply these principles to authentic communication situations, and reflect on their learning. For this reason, the blogging activity was listed in the course syllabus as an "e-portfolio." What differentiated

the blogging activity from a paper portfolio, however, was the fact that reader commentary was regularly provided by, first, each student's personal editor, or *blogging buddy*, then by members of a subgroup of the class, the *blogging group*, and eventually by other classmates and the course instructor. Another value-added difference in the blogging was that each student's posts could be accessed by anyone with the student's blog address. For an example of this, see [ES2007S Student Blog Example #2](#).

The blogging buddy and the blogging group

Previous pedagogical blogging experiences have shown that when students are free to make comments on posts by anyone in a given class, the most popular or well known students receive many comments while others receive few or none (Blackstone et al., 2007; Cottle, 2009). Assigning each student in a class *ablogging buddy* and a *blogging group*, which is a subset of the class at large, is an effective means of guaranteeing that each member regularly receives comments on her posts. By creating such groups, say, of five to six students in a class of 15 to 18 and then requiring each group member to comment on at least two or more of the group members' posts, a teacher can create conducive conditions for all students to gain meaningful feedback. At the same time, this system does not restrict a student's post commentary to being made *only* on the posts of blogging group members. In fact, in my experience, students typically make comments on nearly as many non-blogging group members' posts as they do on group members' posts.

For my ES2007S classes, from within the assigned blogging group, each student selected her or his blogging buddy. The impetus for requiring a blogging buddy was the belief that when each student in a class has someone acting as a first-draft editor, the "published" posts are of higher quality. "The blogging buddy is the initial peer reviewer, the first or final-draft reader, the one who acts both as the writer's good conscience – useful for motivational purposes – and as his/her proof-reader – in that way, also a surrogate teacher" (Blackstone et al., 2007, p. 9). The value that such editing practice has in the context of helping students develop better written communication skills goes beyond the blogging exercise itself. In reference to her findings from the survey of Silicon Valley employers, Stevens (2005, p. 5) states that the employer feedback she gathered makes the case "for more rigorous writing and editing standards in college courses. Establishing strong editing skills can make students more

responsible for accuracy in the quantitative business subjects and help them develop into stronger writers.”

Such editing need not be a laborious process. I explain to students that the blogging buddy can make a quick read of the classmate’s pre-post writing as long as he offers clear, concise suggestions for changes in content, organization and/or language use, if they are needed. The value of having such an editor was clearly recognized by ES2007S students. On an end-of-term anonymous survey evaluation of blogging in ES2007S for Semesters 1 and 2 2008-9, 87.9% of the 108 students who responded to this item, a four-point Likert-type scaling statement (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree), indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that “Receiving feedback from a blogging buddy is a positive learning experience.”



Figure 1. Students collaborating in ES2007S.

The ES2007S blogging process and content topics

The process for the blogging component of ES2007S proceeds as follows:

- Each student creates his or her own blog site.

- Each gives his or her blog address to the teacher and classmates, who can include a hyperlink to that address in a list of classmate names on their own blog sites.
- Each is assigned a blogging group.
- From within that group, each chooses a blogging buddy.
- Within the first week of classes, each writes a post, which is expected to be a multi-paragraph response of 250 to 300 words to an assigned topic related to the course content.
- Before posting, each has his or her first-draft read by the blogging buddy.
- After making any necessary changes, each posts his or her edited writing on the blog.
- Finally, within one week of the assigned due date for the post, each student is required to read and make comments on the blog posts of at least three classmates.

In my classes I stipulated that two of the classmates' posts read had to be from the assigned blogging group, while the third read could be from the class at large. Seven post assignments were required for each of the two semesters, but students were told they could make additional posts if they desired. At least 50% of my students made more than the required seven posts. Nearly all of my students made more than the required number of comments on their classmates' posts.

Blog post topics during AY 2008-9 included the value of effective communication skills, an interpersonal communication problem, an intercultural observation scenario, a critique of a business communication, an autobiographical/personal statement for use in a job or graduate school application, an open topic related to any communication issue, and reflective posts, one on the course research project or the oral presentation and another on overall learning throughout the course. For relevant examples see [ES2007S Student Blog Example #3](#) and/or [ES2007S Student Blog Example #4](#).

Assessing blogging

Paraphrasing Kennedy (2003), Jones (2006, p. 82) states that “blogs combine the best elements of portfolio-driven courses where student work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing to a virtual audience.” In ES2007S, because the blogging activity, which constituted 20% of the course grade, was categorized as the “e-portfolio,” students understood that their blog work – both posting and commenting – would be evaluated *in total* at the end of the term. At the start of each term a rubric was distributed to

students (and other course teachers) describing ideal blogging behavior in terms of appropriate content, good organization and language use, and other variables such as the frequency of posting and the nature of effective comments on a classmate's post (See Appendix #1).

In my approach for evaluating the blogging, for each assignment I read through every student's blog post during the week after the post was put online, usually allowing sufficient time for the student's classmates to make comments first. In addition to leaving brief qualitative comments on the posts regarding content, organization and/or language use, I scored each one "holistically," along a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being "exceptional," 3 "very good," 2 "adequate," and 1 "mediocre." My focus was on how clearly and completely the content responded to the assignment and how accurate the language use was. These marks were entered into a database but *not* shown to students because I did not want them to obsess about their points. At various times during the term, however, I did discuss selected blog posts during class, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of each. In addition to that, I distributed a self-evaluation form to all students at the start of the term and requested that they assess each of their own posts using the same 4-level scale. On that same form, I requested that they estimate the number of comments they had made on their classmates' posts for each assignment and the number of comments others had made on their own. I collected this form at the end of the term (See Appendix #2). Throughout the term I also noted down how well each student commented on her or his classmates' posts. In the end, I took account of these various factors in allotting points for the blogging component.

Impressions of the use of blogs

This paper describes a pedagogical blogging process implemented with 20 groups of students in a tertiary-level professional communication course during two semesters of AY 2008-9 at NUS. As with any newly instituted teaching measure, various problems appeared. These included the fact that some of the course teachers asked to utilize this activity as part of their course had never worked with blogging earlier and had difficulty in knowing how to best integrate it into their lessons. Some of them also were not sure to what extent they needed to give students feedback. Another problem for teachers was determining the best means of evaluating the students' blogging while not becoming overburdened. Related to this was the

fact that since ES2007S already included five marked assignments, students and teachers alike expressed some concern at the demands of having to do the bi-weekly blogging tasks.

Still, considering the scope of the blogging exercise and the obvious benefits in light of the initial objectives, these problems seemed manageable. The core issue was this: Had the blogging component achieved the goals of giving students more opportunities for sharing ideas on the course content, reflecting on what was being learned, and practicing and refining written communication skills? The general answer, voiced in the students' blogs and in their opinions expressed on the end-of-term anonymous survey, seemed affirmative.

The aforementioned survey was set up on surveymonkey.com, an online site, and sent to all ES2007S students after the last tutorial session. Survey items were of various types. For the purposes of this paper, only student responses to a selection of the Likert-type scaling statements of agreement/disagreement have been considered. Key areas surveyed included those that are described below.

Because one teaching focus of ES2007S is to give students an opportunity to put into practice within a real world context those communication principles read about and discussed, it was natural to address "communication" as a survey item in the context of the blogging regime. To this end, for the statement "Blogging is a good way to communicate with classmates and the teacher," 85% of the 120 respondents who completed the survey over two semesters indicated that they strongly agreed/agreed. It is important to note that the affirmative ratings increased from 75% in Semester 1 to 96.4% in Semester 2. One possible explanation of this change lies in the extent to which teacher feedback was given on student posts. In the case where teachers neglected to give feedback to students, as was true in Semester 1, there was widespread student criticism. That practice changed in Semester 2. For this reason, I would attribute the 21.4 point increase in the percentage of favorable opinions to the fact that as teachers developed more familiarity with blogging, they recognized that students *expected* their feedback.

Assessing student perception of the influence that blogging might have had on written communication skills development also seemed relevant. When asked to rate their agreement/disagreement with the statement "Blogging helped me improve my written

communication skills,” 81.6% of the 120 respondents answered in the affirmative. This increased from 75% in Semester 1 to 89.3% in Semester 2.

Because the blogging work entailed peer editing a blogging buddy’s post and giving constructive feedback on the blog posts themselves, it seemed pertinent to include an item on collaboration. For the statement “Blogging is an effective means of my collaborating with others in learning,” 77.5% of the 120 respondents strongly agreed/agreed. This increased from 68.7% in Semester 1 to 87.5% in Semester 2.

In an effort to determine how students might view the commentary added to their posts, they was asked to rate their agreement with a statement related to the positive value of receiving feedback. A convincing 96% of the 120 respondents – 95.3% in Semester 1 and 96.4% in Semester 2 – expressed agreement.

Clearly, judging an activity by a limited number of students’ perceptions is not a sufficient means of evaluating its efficacy. However, for a course in communication skills, impressions as evidenced by this quote from one student’s final reflective post do offer a substantial testament to the power of blogging:

What I enjoyed about this module was that I had the chance to present myself to an audience through physical interactions (e.g. the oral presentation) and... cyber interactions. Blogging, I feel, lessens many of the restrictions we impose on ourselves during face-to-face interactions. As I read the entries of my other classmates, I start to see the many facets of their individual characters. On my part, I loved the blogging activity even though I was rushed for time at certain times. It seems like blogging for ES2007S is the only time I start prodding my brain and truly reflect all kinds of issues. The challenge was to put all those reflections and thoughts into the most appropriate words and of course, in good grammar. (Suzuki, 2009)

Conclusion

For me and the many other teachers who have seen success in our courses as students engage in pedagogical blogging, the question is no longer whether this is an effective approach but how to best implement it. To this end, further research needs to address implementation as

well as the challenges that teachers face in areas such as assessing student blogging work; a more detailed study could be done on the nature of feedback given by a blogging buddy; and ultimately, research must be conducted on the relationship between blogging activities and specific skills development. With further work done in these areas and more reports published by others with experience using pedagogical blogging, the potential that this technology has for enhancing student motivation, supporting student collaboration, facilitating language *and* communication skills development, and transforming the boundaries of any given learning environment should finally receive its due recognition.

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Appendix #1: ES 2007S E-Portfolio Rubric

Your e-portfolio will be evaluated *holistically* according to the characteristics listed below. The areas of importance are the categories of content/organization and language use, as well as your blog's overall appearance and the timeliness of your posts and commentary.

Content / Organization

	Knowledgeable response to each blog assignment
	Main idea of each post is <i>explicit</i> and well-defined
	Background information that contextualizes each topic clearly and concisely
	Attention to supporting details, whether examples, illustrations or explanations
	Connection made to relevant communication concept(s) when appropriate
	Creativity and originality in each post
	Citing of relevant course material when appropriate
	Substantive and constructive feedback on at least 3 posts (and more) posts by classmates per assignment
	Overall organization appropriate to each assigned blog topic
	Themes of each post clearly presented
	Clear use of appropriate mode (description, problem/solving, analysis) for each post
	Ideas clearly stated, well supported and logically presented
	Clear coherence/cohesion of ideas in each post
	Each comment response to other posts substantive, insightful, instructional, and clearly stated and well organized

Language

	The 7Cs: Clear (ideas), concise (expression), correct (grammar), courteous (tone), coherent/cohesive (expression), concrete (descriptions) and complete
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	writing
	Vocabulary that connects with topic and expresses meaning well
	Appropriate for an Internet audience with an academic and/or creative, content-specific focus

Logistics

	Clear and creative blog design
	Appropriate placement and use of written text, visuals, audio, hyperlinks, etc.
	<i>Timely</i> blog site set up
	<i>Timely</i> blog posting for each assignment
	<i>Timely</i> comments on classmates' posts

Appendix #2

Directions: Part 1. This is an opportunity for you to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your own blogging. First, for each of your own blog posts, you should assess the *quality* of your entry using the rubric that has been given for the e-portfolio. Make a *holistic* judgment of *each particular post* based on the criteria spelled out for the categories of content, organization, language use and logistics. Then, fill in the associated box for each respective post , using one of the following numbers to represent the quality of that response to the blog assignment:

- 4 = exceptional post 3 = very good post 2 = satisfactory post
 1 = mediocre post 0 = no post

Second, *estimate* the total number of comments (cmts) *that you have made* on your various classmates' posts for each assignment and put that number in the appropriate box.

Post	cmts	Post	8	cmts	Total	Total												
1		2		3		4		5		6		7					Posts	cmts

Directions: Part 2. First, for each post assignment, please record the number of comments *others have made* on each of your individual assigned posts; do so in the box labelled “Post # cmts.”

Second, give the number of comments *you have made in return* to your commentators on a particular post within your own comment area; do so in the box labelled “# my cmts.” (This shows the interaction taking place within a particular post.)

Post #1	Post #2	Post #3	Post #4	Post #5	Post #6	Post #7	Post #8	Total	Total#
#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	Posts	my
cmts	cmts	returning							
									cmts

Thank you for the tremendous effort!

About the Author

Brad Blackstone has taught university-level EAP, composition and communication skills courses for over 25 years in Portugal, the US, Malaysia, Japan, and now in Singapore. Aside from being an active blogger, he has published poetry, songs and articles on culture and language teaching. Among other interests, he is currently writing “cellphone fiction,” participating in a communication materials development project and experimenting with the use of wikis for student project work. Visit him at daddypeet.blogspot.com