

Blogs, reflective practice and autonomous learning in Graphic Design Communication.

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Abstract

Since their inception in 2004 Blogs have become a major contributor to the development of the social networking phenomenon.

This paper reports on a small qualitative research project utilising case studies of the use of blogs by Level2 BA Graphic Design Communication students. In the project particular emphasis is given to the capacity of the Blog to assist in the development of reflective behaviour.

Reflection is consistently emphasised as a desirable graduate capability, and is an expectation in programmes in the general field of Art and Design. Whilst students in Graphic Design are used to handling sophisticated hardware and software in the fulfilment of design briefs, it is less common for them to draw on the power of ICT to support metacognitive activity such as reflection. The report discusses the tool in comparison to sketchbooks and reflective journals in terms of collating and organising information and reflecting on action and questions how this implementation can further foster an autonomous approach to learning.

The increasingly fragmented and often remote nature of current university education experience means there is a necessity for a re-introduction of community through a blended learning approach. To what extent can Blogs not only satisfy this need to engender community and promote peer learning but also offer new paradigms for the pedagogic practice of the teacher? The present study has particular value in that it bridges a number of aspects of level 2 student learning such as placements, student exchanges and electives.

The presentation will exemplify student practices and will demonstrate the flexibility of the tool in a range of learning and teaching activities. It will seek to situate this research project in the wider application of blended learning technology and discuss issues surrounding the use of third party software applications within learning and teaching practices at this level.

Keywords:

Blogs, Reflective Practice, Peer Learning, Graphic Design. Autonomous Learning.

Introduction

This research seeks to find innovative ways to incorporate and utilise technologies associated with the social networking generation to help with the challenges presented by the rapidly changing situation in learning and teaching in higher education, namely:

- the requirement to (re)build networks and community through a blended learning approach
- the increasing diversity of the University population and the need for these diverse needs to be met through flexible and innovative student-centred curriculum delivery.
- the need to expand the student-led approach to learning through encouraging metacognitive activities such as reflection and to promote life long learning.

Before describing the research context, I will briefly introduce the local context for this research. The Second Year of BA Graphic Design Communication at Chelsea College of Art has between 40-50 students. During the year they undertake 6-8 practical design briefs, (including live projects and international competitions), contextual theory, as well as electives, the possibility of an international exchange and work based learning - a busy and challenging year for both students and staff.

In the curriculum there is a strong emphasis on the development of critical awareness as learners seek to develop a personal visual language and process in response to design briefs. Experimentation is encouraged, as is the ability to situate learning within contemporary practice and the professional context.

We continually aim to encourage reflective practice in as many learners as possible. Many strategies are in place to facilitate this, including the use of sketchbooks and learning journals, self and peer feedback and review, but through reflection on my practice I had become aware that further interventions were required for the following reasons;

- Reflective activity and peer learning was not happening outside of timetabled sessions.
- Reflective activity that was seen and discussed sometimes felt strategic or discontinuous and failed to clearly explain practical developments towards the generation of outcomes.
- As a result of reduced face-to-face activity some students voiced a need for more dialogue and increased sense of community outside of timetabled contact.

Because of these issues there was a need for a seamless, integrated and continuous means to facilitate and evaluate reflective activity in learners in what could be quite a fragmented and discontinuous year while also helping to promote student autonomy and community outside of college. It is these needs that prompted the research and is the focus of this paper.

Before describing the form of the intervention and the findings, it is first important to discuss reflection as a method in learning and teaching. I will also briefly discuss the use of social networking software as a tool in learning and teaching.

What is reflective practice?

Significant work done by Schön and Kolb identified the nature of reflection and its importance in improving practice. Schön (1983) identified the concept of the reflective practitioner while Kolb (1984) presented the cycle of reflection describing an ongoing process of experience, reflection, generalisation (also called theorisation or thinking) and further planning. This initial work has been developed through pedagogic research for use in improving learning and teaching, in particular in encouraging a student-centred, active learning approach.

Race (2002) describes the act of reflection as:

“one which causes us to make sense of what we have learned, why we have learned it and how that particular increment of learning took place. [...] Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-known pitfalls.”

He also offers valuable reasoning for evidencing reflection, by reminding us that:

“ even the best reflection is volatile – it evaporates away unless we stop in our tracks to make one or other kind of crystallisation of it – some evidence.”

Towards reflective dialogue

The original Kolb cycle presents reflection as a private activity, and centred on the individual. Later propositions outlined by Cowan (2006), Brockbank and McGill (1998) and also Race (2002), suggest that reflection is not carried out in isolation but in fact is social and demands involvement from others. Cowan (2006) describes a socio-constructivist view of the Kolb cycle which allows for *planned interaction with peers*. He uses a quote from Pavlica and Colleagues (1998:301) to justify this:

“Kolb tends to over-emphasise the unit of account in learning by concentrating on the individual and portrays them as a kind of ‘intellectual Robinson Crusoe’, someone cast away and isolated from their fellow beings. While we feel it is important that learners should be self-directed, we also feel that the social processes involved in learning should not be ignored. [...] The means by which we experience the world are developed through social contact and our actions and experiences are normally shaped through the contact with others.”

Brockbank and McGill (1998) describe the important move from the personal activity of reflection towards *reflective dialogue* with others. They emphasise the particular importance of the process of triangulation that occurs between the learner, their peers and the tutor/facilitator in helping to consolidate reflection.

This social aspect to reflection through *reflective dialogue* is important in this research. There is a direct relationship between the nature of activity required for reflective dialogue and the intrinsic capabilities afforded by social networking software.

Social Networking and Blogging

A quick review of the intentions for Social networking software or Social Media tells us that by its very nature it:

- facilitates communities of shared interest,
- promotes collaboration and sharing of content (knowledge, opinions, insights, experiences)
- encourages the development of unique cultures and communities of shared interest

They are often described as being part of a new paradigm for the web (WEB 2.0) within which the user is a participant, an active node in the network rather than a passive consumer, receiver or end-user. In particular, blogs present themselves as being of value for this research because they are:

- flexible, active and participatory.

- free, easy to set up and require little or no programming knowledge
- a chronological record of activity that can be edited and archived.
- online and 'in the world' and so can be viewed and commented on by others
- a repository for various media such as text, image, moving image and audio.
- customisable and so can be personalised and increase ownership of content.

The Research Project

The blogs were integrated in to the learning and teaching strategy of the course in order to provide a seamless, integrated and continuous means to facilitate and evaluate reflective activity in learners through a blended learning approach.

At the beginning of term a short workshop was held to discuss the nature of reflective practice and its value in learning and teaching. We discussed a number of ways in which reflective practice could occur and how it could be evidenced and used to promote a critical awareness of practice. The learners were introduced to tools to facilitate reflection such as sketchbooks and learning journals (with which most learners were already familiar).

Learners were informed that it was a requirement to evidence reflective activity at each assessment point to gauge learning and offer insight to how project outcomes were arrived at (this is stipulated in the assessment evidence in the handbook) Learners were asked to use a blog as the final vehicle to record this reflection. With the agreement of all learners the blog addresses were placed on Blackboard to facilitate peer review and peer learning on a continuous and ongoing basis.

There was little specific direction on how the blog should be used and we did not specify that the blog should replace sketchbooks or learning journals. Brockbank and McGill (1998) discuss the possibility of learner autonomy being compromised if the learner is not free to choose the vehicle for the reflective activity to take place. The fact however that blogs are customisable and able to contain a variety of media means there is endless possibility for personalised and individual approaches and ownership. Comments from learners in feedback describe a variety of individual approaches to using the blog to develop their reflective activity in parallel with other tools such as reflective diaries, journals and sketchbooks.

The blogs quickly became integrated into a blended learning approach. One day each week the blogs were used in face-to-face progress-review sessions. The blogs were projected up onto an interactive whiteboard and learners described their activity in a short verbal presentation to small groups. The group and tutor/s would then feedback to the presenter in a question and answer session (with someone taking notes). This approach was so successful in revealing the ongoing thinking processes associated with design decisions that for the Research Methods project, the blog was used as the means for organising verbal presentations at assessment.

The following section offers student comments on the research project, with regard to their views on the blog as a reflective tool and its relationship to other tools used for this purpose. Following this there are further comments describing outcomes from the research related to knowledge sharing and peer learning.

Student feedback on the project

A multiple-choice questionnaire with 11 questions was devised and emailed to the learners with a section for the inclusion of further comments. From a cohort of 46, there were 23 responses.

On blogs facilitating reflective practice

13 of the respondents considered that the blogs helped with reflection on coursework. In some examples of reflective activity, students had taken screenshots of work in progress on the computer and uploaded them to the blog – an innovative approach to what Cowan (2006) defines as **reflection in action**. 11 stated that it had helped them organise coursework while 19 thought it helped with presenting their work. This act of organising and presenting work is itself evidence of **reflection on action**. One example of **reflection for action** is described in the section regarding widening participation.

Represented here is a selection of learner comments on blogs and reflective practice and the relationships between them and other tools for reflection:

'I treat the blog exactly the same as a personal portfolio website. In fact it's better as it's much easier to add, delete and comment on work'

"The use of blogs really helped me and gave me the freedom to upload other work as well as coursework and also keep a reflective diary on the work that I produced during the year."

"I don't think it should be essential to keep a blog. I felt as though I was simply repeating what I had researched and developed in my sketchbook etc. I did have a look at some other blogs, which were at times interesting, but I'd prefer to work in the way that I was working before blogging."

"I write in a notebook most days and then transpose that to the blog and upload images. This can be time-consuming but it does make me think about my work, which helps me to generate new ideas. It's very useful that a tutor can look at work and give feedback outside of tutorials."

"When on work experience it meant that I could quickly show the work I produced from the project's development to final outcome. Blogs are also a great reflective journal and I find words a useful way of reflecting back on design decisions."

"At critique sessions at college it has become increasingly easy to present work to the group due to the accessible way in which it is shown. In addition, because of the increased interaction, tutors/students are able to provide better feedback due to my intentions being addressed through my blog."

"I have found the blog valuable in keeping the tutors up to date on my progress and self directed work. I think the most successful element of the blogs being used in this way is it eradicates wasting time travelling and waiting just to ask for a brief opinion on something."

"I think the research, process and development of a project is really important and interesting and blogs encourage both reflection and justification of an idea."

While some of the examples could be said to evidence a dependence on tutor feedback, it was clear in written evidence on the blogs themselves that, in fact, feedback from the groups were taken very seriously, for example;

"I showed these to some people in college and they said that they preferred the original visuals, and to be fair they were right, the

reworked ones looked boring in comparison, but then I wanted them to look simple and so that they were easy to 'read and write'. In all fairness I did not explain to them properly why I had designed this new typeface so that is my fault."

Knowledge sharing and peer learning

When asked whom they were addressing when they updated the blog, 11 thought 'myself', 9 for 'tutor', 8 for 'peers' and 12 for 'the outside world'. This fairly even spread suggests that learners consider the blog to be a shared space, viewed by others both internal and external to the college. All respondents to the questionnaire had looked at the blogs of other students. 14 Found this activity inspiring, 7 gained help with coursework, 8 found out more about graphic design as a result, and one didn't find it helpful. These are some of the comments left that evidence peer learning aspects of the use of blogs:

"I believe the use of the blog has encouraged interaction on the course. It has allowed us to understand and appreciate each other's working methods."

"I like looking at other people's blogs to see how they are doing, have even checked out the rest of the students blogs to perk up my enthusiasm for my own project! Sometimes the technical aspect of them prevents people from using them, which is a shame."

"Keeps a really good link between the students constantly open."

It gives the students, their processes and their outcomes a constant presence, depending on who they want to see it; friends family, peers, tutors or industry. They take ownership and responsibility for their learning and how it is packaged."

"As with everything I think people migrate to feeling a part of something, particularly when a common interest is involved, the sharing of knowledge can inspire fresh ideas and concepts."

17 respondents had spoken to others about the work on their blog. 12 had asked a tutor about work on their blog and 15 said a tutor had contacted them about work on their blog. In most cases discussion about the blogs was face-to-face, with only 7 students saying they had either received or left a message on the blogs. While it is pleasing that the dialogue is taking place, the fact it is predominantly face-to-face, suggests it may go unrecorded.

One example from the events of this year clearly demonstrates the potential for blogs to support student autonomy. Towards the end of the final term we held two extra-curricula workshops by professional practitioners, one in filmmaking and another in bookbinding. There was not room for everyone to attend these. At the end of year review one student who had been on the filmmaking workshop arrived with a range of hand made books. He revealed that he had used a blog set up by a member of the bookbinding workshop to share the skills learned.

Supporting widening participation and learning differences.

The need to consider widening participation in university teaching is described succinctly by Race (2002) thus:

The widening agenda includes that of widening participation in higher education, where there are many more students from diverse cultures and educational backgrounds in the system than was formerly the case. This makes it all the more necessary to

legitimate student reflection, and for teaching staff to have close encounters with the range of student reflection which can be uncovered, so as to enable them to tune in better to the 'widened' student community.

As previously discussed in this paper, blogs offer a range of ways to document and discuss activity, the advantage of written explanation is provided by the student comment below;

"As an international student, it really helps me to communicate because of the written form rather than speaking."

There is also however a high rate of dyslexia amongst Art and Design students and potentially the written nature of reflection could cause a problem. On one of the blogs I noticed that a learner had posted a video from Youtube of herself talking into the camera, doing what Cowan(2006) might describe as reflection *for* action. She was on the way to a performance for a project outcome and was using spoken dialogue into the camera to plan for the activity in advance.

Conclusions

Did reflective learning occur?

Based on the evidence of student feedback and tutor observation of the blogs, the private and personal nature of reflection commonly found in learning journals did occur to a large extent, which is surprising considering that the addresses were shared amongst the group.

Equally as interesting is the evidence that supports the existence of peer learning and the move towards student autonomy. This evidence would suggest that Social media with its intrinsic ability to facilitate knowledge sharing, encourage participation and generate online communities of interest are successful tools to encouraging the socio-constructivist reflection described by Cowan (2006), Brockbank and McGill (1984) et al, i.e. *reflective dialogue*.

When students were asked to describe who they write for when they updated their blogs there was a fairly even spread between 'self', 'tutor', 'peers' and 'the outside world'. There is evidence then that the triangulation sought by Brockbank and McGill (1984) to consolidate reflective activity is at least being anticipated in the making of the blogs.

Did all students reflect?

No, and this was clear in the observation of the blogs. On occasion, even though learners kept and updated blogs there was no evidence of any kind of reflection on activity. There are many reasons for this but quite often it is simply that some don't know how to do it and some don't want to do it (it can be considered uncool or unnecessary to reflect). Those that offered no evidence of reflection were often lost with projects and sometimes found it more difficult to accept or act on feedback. One learner wrote in the blog;

"I really hate to think about my work. I just work on instinct... I do stuff, then take a step back, if I like it visually, I leave it, if I don't, I change it... and so on... I was asked to explain my work, and really, I know what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, but the whole concept is not explainable. I think visual work should be self explanatory. I think, from the different feedback I got, that my stuff looks good, but I need to make it clearer. How? don't know yet, and that's why I'm just gonna fiddle around, play with some more images..."

In future implementations of this intervention I will attempt to notice this kind of un-critical or reflective approach sooner and seek to encourage learners to reflect more often and earlier, even if initial attempts are basic, this is really about planting seeds, with the rewards coming much later. Many of the students commented positively on the research and confessed to becoming "pro-blog converts" or vowing to continue to keep blogs into their final year on the course.

Encouraging Personal and professional development

There were several unanticipated outcomes from the research, students planning and designing educational tools for themselves was one and others presented opportunities in Personal and professional development. Moon (2004) writes extensively on the role reflection can play in this area. We were impressed how the students began to develop and design their blogs to act as highly presentable personal portfolios. In one case we were able to send a learners blog address to a designer seeking to take on a paid summer placement. One associate lecturer (a graphic design professional) was excited about this possibility and stated indicated that this increasingly echoed professional practice where jobs were increasingly given to designers purely on the strength of their online portfolio.

How has the research changed my approach to teaching and learning

- I found I was able to react more quickly to issues and problems, as they were often made explicit through the blogs when they happened.
- I was able to track learners progress while they were out of college, while on placements or exchanges (as well as gain insights as to how learners felt about college activity!) for example one learner stated:

I have been on a placement for a week now and I feel that I have experienced what it is like to work in the real design world. I have been working effectively 9-5 and it is knackered, but I am really enjoying it. Today, we had a briefing for a new project; it was really interesting to be in a briefing with the guys at M. It is just pretty much just what we do at college in the 1st week of a project except at Mook they do it in 20 minutes. We paired off and discussed ideas and then came together again to share them. It is also nice to work as part of a unit...but a unit that ACTUALLY works, rather than the bitchy mess that college groups sometimes, (not always) turn into.

- Pastoral issues can be flagged by inactivity on blogs and acted on promptly.
- In reaching one of the aims of the project, there is now a continuous record of reflective activity on the blogs and this is integrated into a blended approach to learning and teaching.
- My role has shifted further towards that of facilitator as the students become more self directed and autonomous.

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