

Chapter 7

Using ‘Formally’ Informal Blogs to Create Learning Communities for Students on a Teaching and Learning Programme: Peer Mentoring and Reflective Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details the use of informal blogs as part of teaching induction programme and their role in creating small online learning communities. The chapter explores the informal appropriation of a seemingly formal tool within a virtual learning environment to create a student-owned space for discussion, reflection and online peer mentoring. The blogs were analysed and combined with feedback from the students themselves on this process with the results indicating that the students used the online spaces for a number of interactions, both learning and socially orientated.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of blogs for reflection is a wide spread and frequently occurring incidence in higher education. Evidence and research regarding the benefits and potential to enhance student learning by using such a tool reflectively is widely reported (Hall, 2007; Wright & Lund, 2012; Yang, 2009). There are various iterations of the set-up of such a method with the tool taking on a number of forms both internally, hosted within the virtual learning environment (VLE), and externally located. In the practice of externally located blogs, the responsibility for establishing, setting up and maintaining their own blogs is devolved to the students. This is commonly termed an informal learning environment (Häkkinen & Hämäläinen, 2012). The practice of establishing blogs within a virtual learning environment, in contrast, has frequently been cited as a formal means of interaction and engagement (Trinder et al., 2008). As if to highlight the use of blogs in formal practice, they are now an increasingly common form of assessment (Tess, 2013). This chapter explores the blurred boundaries between formal and informal and considers how blogs hosted within a VLE can serve as informal online learning environments.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Durham University Learning and Teaching Award (DULTA) provides an opportunity for professional development for early career researchers (predominantly PhD students) engaged in teaching and supporting learning. The award is accredited by the UK Higher Education Academy and successful participants gain Associateship of the Higher Education Academy. Participants are typically at the beginning of their teaching careers, commonly only having just met the prerequisite thirty hours of teaching experience.

The programme is comprised of eight half-day face-to-face sessions and group blogs hosted within the VLE. Assessment is via a 5000 word reflective portfolio, normally submitted within six months of the start of the programme. Participants are based in academic departments where the majority are doctoral students. They are self-selecting in that they enroll voluntarily onto the programme and join the discipline area group to which they feel most aligned.

Programme participants are a hybrid of research student or staff and teacher, holding multiple identities within their departments and/or the institution. Skelton (2012) describes such teaching identities as being in development and in a state of flux, observing that “Teacher identities are also influenced, however by the wider social context and structures operating at the macro level. These will have significant impact on how an individual understands, practices and evaluates their teaching” (p. 27).

An important part of ‘learning on the job’ is the formation of closed groups of individuals within similar circumstances and contexts, who share practice and exchange ideas and knowledge (Trowler & Cooper, 2002). The value of enabling the formation and development of such communities of practice was recognized in the planning stage of the DULTA programme and resulted in the inclusion of blogs intended to facilitate the informal activity already happening within departments. In-line with Kerawalla et al. (2009), a blog was created for each group. Although the blogs are located within the proverbial ‘walled garden’ of the VLE, it is made explicit at the beginning and throughout the programme that they are participant owned spaces intended to foster peer mentoring and informal exchange between members. Membership of each of the blogs is on an equal basis. In each faculty specific group, the participants form sub-groups, usually triads, and it is at this level that the division of roles and responsibilities is negotiated by the group on a weekly basis. Informal activity among mem-

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