



Developing Writing Skills Through Weblogs Emer Connolly

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Abstract

Many students struggle with writing at one time or another and find academic writing “daunting” (Carlse, 2019, p. 183) and the difficulties associated with it can cause students to disengage. One strategy I have used while lecturing in the media in two universities was to implement blogging into relevant writing-related modules. Lasica (2003) argues that weblogs (blog is short for weblog) provide an innovative way for people to express opinions and promote two-way communication. Many students complain that they have writer’s block and cannot complete a particular writing assignment as they face a mammoth task getting started. Freewriting or looping (Edwards, 2021) are useful ways of getting the writing started and when the topic is of interest to the writer as in the form of a blog it is more likely that the writing will continue. Blogging is very different to academic writing and adopts a more relaxed style. Nevertheless there are similarities across both forms of writing: the discipline, planning and development of ideas is consistent. First Year students were tasked with setting up a blog on a topic of their choice and to post one entry every week. They received prompt feedback on each entry so that they could apply it to subsequent entries. Marks were not awarded for blogs. Overall student engagement was excellent. There were many benefits to this strategy, three in particular: 1. Students’ writing skills developed and this benefited all of their writing tasks. Their motivation increased and engagement was enhanced. 2. It led to the creation of a more positive attitude towards writing, among most of the participants. Students stated that their ability to generate ideas for writing tasks improved and overall they stated that negative attitudes towards writing reduced. 3. It helped students to transition from second-level to third-level, in terms of their writing. Many students struggle to move from essay writing in second-level to a more formal academic writing style in third-level (Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni, 2019) and writing blogs helped with this transition, particularly helping students to gain more confidence in their writing.

Keywords *Weblogs, blogging, academic writing*

Introduction

Academic writing is, for many third level students, a daunting challenge (Carlse, 2019; Foss, 2015). In fact, the difficulties experienced can cause learners to disengage from their studies. Many students find it difficult to develop ideas and get started with their writing projects, others struggle making progress, referencing is a difficulty for some, while developing an argument and getting a flow in the writing is a challenge for other learners.

I have found, through teaching media in two universities, that the more formal nature of academic writing can prove to be a barrier for learners and overcoming that is a challenge. Having worked as a journalist in the media for several years, I engaged in blogging – which has become an integral part of the media industry – and found this to be a great way of generating ideas, getting started writing and also to ensure the flow was developing. In professional media, “people view blogs for information, convenience, entertainment, political and social surveillance, and interacting with others” (Burlison Mackay & Lowrey, 2011, p.42). Blogs take many different forms and include a wide subject range including health, fashion, lifestyle, food, entertainment, music, politics and sport. Blogs provide an innovative way for people to express opinions and promote two-way communication (Lasica, 2003).

And while blogs are a superb way of providing a wide range of information for the public – and in reality several of the students I taught will have careers in the media



and blogging will be part of their work – the goal in my project was not to focus on engagement as a priority, but rather concentrate on the writing discipline.

Blogging, in many ways, is very different to academic writing and the style is less formal and more relaxed. There are similarities across both forms of writing including the discipline, planning and development and goal to get a piece of writing completed to a high standard.

Through my work as a lecturer, I implemented blogging into writing-related modules for first year students over three years (a different cohort of students each year). A clear set of guidelines was circulated to all participants. Students were required to set up a blog on a topic of their choice and post one entry (500 – 1000 words) every week. Importantly, in line with academic writing, they were required to carry out research for each blog, so while the style was less formal than an academic writing essay, the skills required to carry out research were an important component of the task.

All students were required to complete the task, but marks were not awarded. Students were not required to publish their blogs or interact with audiences; over the course of three years a small number of students chose to publish their blogs but most did not. The emphasis was on generating ideas, structuring a piece of writing, carrying out small pieces of research, building an argument, ensuring there was flow in copy and meeting regular deadlines. Planning was key as students were required to compile a list of sub-themes, as part of one overall topic, and all were linked. For example, if a student chose a blog on sport, a different sport could be included each week, but this took careful organisation at the outset.

Feedback from lecturer

Overall, students responded well to this project. One of the most important elements was the provision of timely and ongoing constructive feedback from me, as their lecturer. Doan (2013) argued that students are receptive to feedback and apply feedback to future work. I argue that when feedback is provided to students at the end of a project there is less likelihood that they will respond to it but if it is given while the project is ongoing, it is far more likely to have an impact. Feedback was provided within 24 hours and it was important that this feedback was applied to the following week's post. Feedback was provided in an "appropriate and timely" manner (O'Farrell, n.d., p.9) and enabled students to see where they had made progress and also to establish areas where they could improve (O'Farrell, n.d.). This included a focus on structure, grammar and punctuation, ensuring content was relevant, referencing and word counts. This was key in enhancing the learning experience: any issues with one week's blog post were addressed in the following week's entry. This was particularly important in the early stages of the project as some students had difficulty meeting the required word counts and guidance regarding structure, developing ideas and sourcing relevant literature was important.

Students' experiences

Feedback from students was gathered through class discussions during and at the end of each project, while each student was invited to provide feedback, anonymously, through an online forum. While there were initial challenges in ensuring students were enthusiastic about the project, overall, the response was positive. Several students, each year, said they were reluctant, initially, to engage



with the project as it was a different type of task to the other assignments and projects they were required to work on in their courses. Providing students with the opportunity to choose their own subject areas worked very well both in terms of planning the sub-themes and also in terms of ensuring the task was completed on a weekly basis. Many students stated that while they were hesitant to write a formal academic writing piece, writing a blog post was easier, particularly when the topic was of interest. Approximately one-third of students were not happy to include personal information in their blogs initially, but as the projects progressed most learners changed their views on this. When asked if they felt that they could transfer the skills learned to a piece of academic writing, most students felt they could, as they developed the habit of engaging in techniques like freewriting (writing continuously for a set period of time) or looping (freewriting and then repeating the process) (Edwards, 2021). Overall students' confidence in their writing improved and writing, overall, became less daunting and there was general agreement that their ability to build an argument and support it through academic resources was enhanced (Rush, 2021). Students were supportive of the idea of including small amounts of research and referencing into their blog posts as this is an area where many learners struggle: sourcing material, choosing relevant quotations and including them in a piece of writing.

Project benefits

There were three main benefits of this project:

1. Students' writing skills developed and this benefited all of their writing tasks. Their motivation increased and engagement was enhanced. In the first year of the project, in particular, some students were reluctant to engage with the project, but working in small groups, in the classroom, increased motivation as this led to guidance from me, as their lecturer, allied to peer support from each other. Overall most students were reluctant to publish their blogs and invite comments, but this was not a requirement for this project. From liaising with lecturers in students' other modules, it was clear that the fluidity developed through blogs transferred to their other writing assignments which was hugely beneficial. Overall, students flourished in subject areas that suited them personally and for many students this project helped them to overcome writer's block and as a result of their experience in this project participants were no longer overwhelmed by any form of writing including academic writing.
2. It led to the creation of a more positive attitude towards writing, among most of the participants. Students stated that their ability to generate ideas for writing tasks improved and overall they stated that negative attitudes towards writing reduced.
Many of the learners enjoyed writing blog posts and generated a wide range of ideas. For many it greatly enhanced their research skills. When students provided feedback, among the comments made included 'inspiring', 'variety was great', 'leeway to choose topic was great' and the task was 'thought-provoking'.
3. It helped students to transition from second-level to third-level, in terms of their writing. Sefalane-Nkohla & Mtonjeni (2019) argue that many students struggle to advance from essay writing in second-level education to a more formal academic writing style in third-level. This project was ideal for first year



students in a university as it helped them to become more confident in their writing and in some ways helped to bridge the gap between writing in second level and third level education.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall this project was a success and greatly enhanced students' writing skills. It was disappointing that while excellent blogs were written, most students didn't continue with them after the task was completed, particularly as the students were studying media and blogging is part of the media industry. For future projects of this nature I would recommend including more team work and providing students with the opportunity to work in small groups, with those working on similar themes placed in the same group. Peer feedback would be an invaluable component of this: it would encourage interaction and also increase collaboration which is so important in the learning experience.

An essential element is prompt feedback: it is really important that students receive timely feedback on each post and the learning is enhanced if they apply the feedback from one blog entry to strengthen the next entry. From my experience of this project, the vast majority of students who engaged with blogging were positive in their evaluations. It would be difficult to see similar levels of engagement going forward if there are no marks attached. I would recommend allocating marks for this project on writing-related modules i.e. on media and journalism programmes, notably in later years of programmes. In addition to enhancing learners' writing skills, it would also assist in preparing learners for working in the industry.

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