

# **GUIDELINES ON THE USE OF BLOGS IN LEARNING AND TEACHING AT NTU**

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### **Purpose of this guide**

This guide gives an overview of blogging: the things to consider, be aware of and take into account when setting up and running a blog. It also has links to other useful resources.

### **What is a blog?**

The term 'blog' is an abbreviation of 'weblog'. It is a form of online journal where the person keeping the blog (a blogger) records their thoughts (blogging). Blogs are updated on a regular basis, with entries in chronological order.

The Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>) entry describes a blog as a type of website where entries are made (such as a journal/diary, a commentary on news or information on a particular subject), and displayed in reverse chronological order (most recent entries first). They can incorporate text, images and links, and while they are usually text-based, they can also be made up of photographs, videos and audio.

### **Characteristics of a blog**

Blogs are shareable and operate in a public space.

They use existing web technology, using html in the way that any website does. But one of the key differences between blogs and websites is that blogs are much easier to set up and publish, requiring no knowledge of web publishing software and minimal expertise on the part of the blogger.

A consequence of this is that the level of features available to a blogger may be more restricted than those available to a web designer.

So, in broad terms, anyone who can use email and surf the web has the basic skills needed to create their own blog.

### *Technical features*

In technical terms, principle features include:

- the ease with which they can be set up and updated,
- the use of links to other blogs or websites,
- the ability for visitors to comment on particular blog entries, and
- is a knowledge management tool, in that there is a record of contributions – including both date and time of posting – and these 'postings' can be archived for future use/ reference.

### *Usability features*

The defining feature of blogs is that they are 'owned' by the blogger. Where a website might be a corporate / communal effort, and a discussion group is open to all group members on an equal basis (subject to moderation), a blog is the online property of the blogger, giving them the opportunity to give their views as they see fit.

Some key features that reinforce 'ownership' of a blog are:

- the comments posted in a blog are controlled by the blogger, who can edit, delete or reply to comments as they want
- blogs can be set up by the individual without any technical support or bureaucratic restriction, encouraging spontaneity and freedom of expression
- a blogger can automatically add an entry without the need for another person (such as a web administrator) to publish or manage the pages and links that form their blog.

### **Blogs in learning and teaching**

While some people have described blogs, somewhat dismissively, as 'internet graffiti', there is a growing body of literature that discusses the use of blogs in education as learning and teaching tools.

Writers such as Downes (2004), Trafford (2006), Williams and Jacobs (2004), Barton (2006) and Earle (2005) have researched, and published extensively on, the use of blogs in educational contexts, drawing attention to their role in:

- information sharing
- issuing news
- encouraging the process of ideas development
- personal reflection
- creating potential content that can be shared and is available for discussion
- recording events and capturing activity.

Some of the perceived strengths of blogs in an educational context are that they can promote:

- higher-order learning
- constructivist learning
- collaborative work.

### *Plagiarism*

Given the potential for plagiarism, care needs to be taken when using blogs in learning and teaching, especially where collaboration between student bloggers is required. This perhaps makes blogging more suitable to work which is either not directly assessed, or group work where the cumulative effort of all members of a group is considered, where the ability of bloggers to feed off each others ideas is an advantage rather than a problem.

### *Higher-order learning*

Blogs encourage the learner to develop analytical and critical skills. By taking responsibility for their own publishing output, learners need to be able to criticise material they cite or link to, and justify positions that they take. This process promotes reflection, and is reinforced by the commenting system available on most blogs, allowing feedback from others to provide the blogger with further reflective material and insight (see Williams and Jacobs, 2004, in 'Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector').

### *Constructivist learning*

Blogging can support constructivist learning. The processes of publishing and receiving comments allow learners to view their knowledge, opinions and the whole learning experience in a new light. This gives new meaning and context to the learning experience, and allowing consolidation to occur (see Ferdig and Trammell, 2004, in 'Content delivery in the "Blogosphere"').

### *Collaborative work*

The interlinked nature of blogging lends itself to collaborative work. While blogs encourage a group of students to work together, they also give each group member their own space, as well as fostering a sense of community. 'Blogging about each other's blogs' can encourage students to form communal constructs that allow ideas to develop.

A good summary of the uses of blogging in education, along with a list of the advantages and disadvantages of using blogs as educational tools, is provided by Trimarco (2005).

### *Blogs for research*

Blogs can also be useful sources of information for research. The same rules that apply to using websites as sources of information apply to blogs – namely authenticity, accuracy, objectivity, currency and coverage (see Beck 1997). Owing to

their highly personal nature, blogs are more about giving opinion than factual information. That said, however, they do have particular strengths as:

- sources of current information
- chronological record of events
- use by credible commentators.

#### *Sources of current information*

Because they are easy to set up and update, blogs are a good source of current information. This is particularly the case with regard to current events, where blogs can be used by people involved in the event, as a kind of 'community journalism' to disseminate information and share opinion quickly and easily (such as happened during Hurricane Katrina in the USA in August 2005, see 'Media involvement' at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina)).

#### *Chronological record of events*

As events occur and are recorded by a blogger, the software automatically archives these blog entries, providing a database that can be searched chronologically by visitors.

#### *Use by credible commentators*

Blogs are also used by well-known commentators, media outlets and politicians to put forward their latest views and news, making some blogs very influential and credible sources of information. Well-known individual bloggers include George Monbiot (<http://www.monbiot.com/>) and Noam Chomsky (<http://blog.zmag.org/ttt/>).

Other bloggers gain currency purely on the strength of their blogging, a good example being the Baghdad Blogger ([http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com/](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/)), featured regularly on BBC Newsnight.

#### *When to use blogs instead of discussions*

Within the current VLP, discussion forums (or boards) can be created in WebBoard and these enable students to work collaboratively: either contributing to a discussion, or by working on joint documents.

Whereas blogs can be used where the:

- purpose requires a clear, individual, 'personal voice' and where a sense of ownership over what is written is important;

- availability of published material can be limited or customised by the author and include public, private and/or invited bloggers;
- clear chronological presentation of postings benefits learning and understanding.

With blogs, too, peers can comment on the contributions made by an author, but they do not engage in group work or edit the contributions of the author.

As well, networks of blogs that link to postings in other blogs can create learning communities based on shared interests and knowledge.

For more discussion of this see Farmer (2004) 'Communication dynamics: Discussion boards, weblogs and the development of communities of inquiry in online learning environments'.

#### *Issues to consider in setting up and running a successful blog*

When considering the use of blogs, it's important to assess:

- the suitability of this medium for your purpose,
- the ease with which this technology can be integrated with existing practice,
- the expenditure of time that can be dedicated to its implementation; and
- how the ongoing running of the blog will be supported.

#### *Sustainability*

The sustainability of a blog basically relies on the author (either a student or tutor) making regular contributions.

Blogs will inevitably have a shelf-life and either become redundant or be superseded after a period of time. This life-span will depend on the original aim and purpose of the blog.

#### *Engagement*

The level of engagement of students with this technology may also vary and this leads to several questions:

- will all students want to use the blog, as it suits particular learning styles? and
- can the use of a blog be made mandatory or should it be optional?

How successfully students engage and interact with blogs will depend on both the structure that describes how tutors and staff use it, as well as the style of writing that the tutor adopts initially: it should be journalistic, conversational and informal, rather



than academic and full of 'jargon'. There is still a need, however, for good spelling, punctuation, syntax and structure.

#### *Tracking and accountability*

In an educational context, it's necessary to consider the ability to track and have accountability over the content of a blog for both legal and assessment reasons. The use of closed blogs with the ability to moderate content will provide tutor control over potential misuse and should be backed up with a clear policy that outlines the appropriate behaviour of users.

Blogging can be controversial. Bloggers have sometimes opened themselves up to legal action because of things they have said in their blogs. In addition, it is important for personal security to be considered when including personal details. It is strongly advisable that blogs in educational environments should always be managed.

#### *Involving students*

The involvement of students in the process to agree a framework of regulations for the use of the blog is recommended.

This enables issues to do with copyright and the inclusion of 3rd-party material, privacy and confidentiality and misuse (including defamation), to be highlighted and discussed. What is agreed will be dictated, to some extent, by institutional policy, but can vary across groups, depending on the audience, aims and community.

#### **Blogging @ NTU**

There are a number of people across NTU who have set up and are using blogs in their modules: in Arts and Humanities, Education, Art and Design, among others. At the time of writing, NTU does not have blogging software installed and staff members are using a variety of proprietary products.

This also means that the only way staff can find out about the Special Interest Group is by word-of-mouth: there is no central point, say on Staff Net, where blogs can be accessed.

#### *Special Interest Group in Blogging*

A Special Interest Group (SIG) in Blogging was set up in June 2006 as a forum to allow staff interested in exploring the uses of blogging in an educational environment, to discuss their experiences, share practice and offer advice. This group has also contributed to the development of these guidelines on the purpose and application of blogs as an educational tool. The group has also contributed to drawing up a

functionality list for Information Services (IS) to consider in their purchase of University-wide blogging software.

The Special Interest Group is using two blogs as the means of communicating their thoughts and ideas within the group:

- **Blogging in Higher Ed**

This is a public blog using Google's free Blogger service. It is designed for the discussion of general educational issues and anyone can view and comment on the messages in this blog at <http://ntublogblog.blogspot.com>

At the time of writing, NTU's StaffNet cannot host this blog, or advertise the URL, so you need to know about it to find it.

- **Blogging @ NTU**

This is a private (i.e. ) internal University blog using WebBoard discussion software and is accessed through a module on the VLP. This blog is designed for the discussion of NTU specific blogging issues. Again, at the time of writing, there is no way of making this blog prominent so that staff can find it easily. But it is easy to be added to either blog, if you contact the Educational Development Unit.

#### **Contact**

So if you would like to find out more, or join the Blogging group, please contact Alison Littler, Senior Educational Developer, The Educational Development Unit; email [alison.littler@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:alison.littler@ntu.ac.uk).

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#### *General resources*

- About Weblogs: introductory information for people starting a blog, website from The New York Times Company, available at <http://weblogs.about.com/od/weblogsbasics/> (accessed on 9 January 2007).
- Barton, K. (2006), 'Guide to good blogging' The UK Centre for Legal Education (HEA), available at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk:9180/ukcle/associates/digital-directions/categories/blogging> (accessed 22 January 2007).
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Learning Technology Support Service, Bristol University Resources, good link to lots of information on blogs, available at <http://www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/php/res/default.php?st=1&cat=68> (accessed 9 January 2007).

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Downes, S. 'Stephen's Web', available at <http://www.downes.ca/> (accessed 22 January 2007).

The Teaching, Learning and Technology (TLT) Group, 'Exploration Guide: Educational Uses of Blogs, Wikis, RSS Feeds, etc.', available at <http://www.tltgroup.org/blogs.htm> (accessed 9 January 2007).

## Appendix 2

### External developments influencing the recommendations

NTU is not alone in considering use of Web 2.0 technologies to support learning, teaching and research. JISC is providing funding for research projects relating to the use of Web 2.0, such is the interest and potential impact on current activities.

I refer to some recent publications that indicate the seriousness of the debate about Web 2.0:

JISC: What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/services/services\\_techwatch/techwatch/techwatch\\_ic\\_reports2005\\_published.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/services/services_techwatch/techwatch/techwatch_ic_reports2005_published.aspx)

JISC 2007 Conference presentation - The learners' experience of e-Learning: Perception and reality (stimulating presentation of how students used wikis and blogs in teacher education placements, and how they are now continuing the use of these tools in their teaching practice)

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/events/2007/03/perception\\_or\\_reality.ppt](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/events/2007/03/perception_or_reality.ppt)

University of Edinburgh report on using Web 2.0

[http://www.is.ed.ac.uk/projects/Web\\_2.0\\_Initiative](http://www.is.ed.ac.uk/projects/Web_2.0_Initiative)

*JISC LEX: learner experiences of e-learning Project*

[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning\\_pedagogy/elp\\_lex.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_lex.aspx) *(The learner experience of e-learning (LEX) project aims to put learner voices at the centre of the research study. The study is part of the pedagogy strand of the eLearning programme. Questions examined by the study include for example:*

- what does it feel like to a learner to experience various pedagogies?
- what makes them successful (or unsuccessful) learners?
- did they experience a breakthrough in their use of learning technology? what made the difference?
- how does the communications technology they use in life condition their expectations of learning technology?

JISC Learner XP Project

[http://www.jisc.org.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning\\_pedagogy/elp\\_learnerxp.aspx](http://www.jisc.org.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning_pedagogy/elp_learnerxp.aspx) (The main research theme of this project is to collect learner stories on their experiences with e-learning. Knowledge of how learners use and experience e-learning/technology in their learning activities is crucial for the development of tools, pedagogy and teaching practices. This project focuses on context and background of the e-learner. Main research questions addressed in this project are:

- How do learners engage with and experience e-learning?
- What is their perception of e-learning?
- What do e-learners do when they are learning with technology?
- What strategies do e-learners use and what is effective?
- How does e-learning relate to and contribute to the whole learning experience?
- How do learners manage to fit e-learning around their traditional learning activities?

Findings of the Learner XP and LEX projects indicate that students:

- Engage in integrative, pervasive technology use

- Have high expectations (based on Google and Internet use)
- Have a sophisticated understanding of technology affordability (when to text message; when to phone; when to email; when to use IM)
- Regard text messaging and Instant Messaging as part of their informal learning
- Expect to be able to collaborate with peers and integrate learning with their own personal technologies.

Results of the 'Online Tool Use Survey' undertaken by the JISC funded SPIRE project (University of Oxford)

[http://tallblog.conted.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/jisc\\_spire\\_surveyresults.pdf](http://tallblog.conted.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/jisc_spire_surveyresults.pdf)

'The web is us' (4 minute video clip from Kansas State University)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIGopyXT\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLIGopyXT_g)