How and why students blog:

a case study exploring the take up of blogging within a Child Studies programme

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Declaration

This work has not previously been submitted for a PhD at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Abstract

This thesis has analysed the use of blogging within a classroom based '2+2' Early Childhood Studies course. As such the research involved 'non-traditional' learners in that they were mainly women returning to education, initially based in a further education (FE) context. This was an intervention, which aimed to provide practical support for learners as well as an opportunity to explore the value of networking through the production of blogs. A feature of the intervention was that while students were encouraged to use unrestricted blogs they were free to write what they liked and when they liked.

The study took place over three years and involved three cohorts of learners (Cohort A n=18; Cohort B n=21; Cohort C n=13; Total n =52). It can be described as a case study on blogging in that the study was concerned to understand a phenomenon in a specific and bounded context. The consistency of findings across the three cohorts meant that the study was considered as a single case albeit differences between cohorts were signalled as and when they came up. The study used a mixed methods approach and reported data on participation rates, content analysis of blogs and the perception of learners through interviews (n=17) and questionnaire responses (total n=32).

The key findings were that there were differentiated levels of participation. Within the population 'Non Contributors' (n= 23); 'Uncertain Contributors' (n=5) and 'Contributors' (n=16) were identified. The pattern of differentiated blogging activity could be observed across cohorts, albeit with small variations. However, it is important to add that while nearly half of the students in Cohorts B and C did

not contribute entries to their blogs, all students became followers of other blogs. Furthermore, all who created a blog succeeded in attracting followers, in some cases quite large numbers of followers.

Those who became bloggers were not especially skilled with technology or necessarily more academically able. Rather they tended to be people who saw the point of blogging and got satisfaction from blogging. Through their resilience they gained readers and received feedback on their blogs in ways in which uncertain bloggers did not. As for the reading of the blogs; students accessed blogs because they valued the content for throwing light on course material, extending the curriculum and offering multi-media formats. Gaining a sense of community was a big motivator for students to take the time to look at the blogs. Those who contributed the most (the Contributors) appeared to take on a special role within the group. They felt a particular concern for other people's learning in some cases taking on a kind of mentoring role.

There were several explanations as to why students were constrained in their blogging or why they did not blog at all: pressure of time, difficulties in access, uncertain online literacy skills, a perceived lack of value, a feeling of being vulnerable or exposed. It was clear that there were both technical and literacy barriers to participation.

The implications of the study are that there is a value to blogging and students and practitioners are recommended to introduce blogging (or other online networking) in order to enhance and extend teaching and learning. However there is no simple solution to the organising of blogs. For example there remains

a tension between providing bloggers with high-direction, perhaps resulting in broader take up, against low-direction, perhaps resulting in narrower but more autonomous use. The asynchronous nature of blogs provides an opportunity for extended reflection, but also an opportunity to avoid responding and the anxiety of leaving permanent records of contributions. The study is carefully positioned as offering both encouragement and realism about blogging.

CHAPTER 1. Introduction to this thesis

This thesis presents a case study of blogging on an Early Years degree course to find out why and how learners blog. The introduction sets the scene by explaining how this research emerged; what this research is about; the methodology used; and the structure of the reporting.

How and why this study developed

This study came about due to my concerns about the support offered for students on a 2+2 Early Childhood degree course. A 2+2 degree is one in which the first two years take place at a FE college and the latter two at university. Feedback showed learners felt they had not got to grips with the course expectations and some students started their third year being unable to write in an academic style or reference their work. In addition, learners had reported feeling isolated and ill-prepared for the university. Communication between learners and teachers in the two institutions was very irregular and students often felt a lack of connection with other students following the same programme. This was mirrored in the lack of communication between the three FE staff that taught on the course; each having little idea what was being taught by the other staff.

At college, learners attended morning sessions three times a week, each day with a different tutor. The first years never formally met (either online or physically) with the second year students, because they attended on different days, and the third and fourth year students attended university. It was thought that if

students could make their own connections outside college and communicate both formally and informally this might go some way to addressing a sense of isolation. However meetings were logistically challenging to organize as students lived in different locations. The majority of the students worked and had young families, which resulted in most of their home study occurring in the evenings after 9pm. The idea of an experimental intervention using online resources to support learners therefore appeared a useful one. It was considered that writing blogs could support learners in ways that were not offered beforehand. However, there also appeared to be obvious constraints, particularly that of time.

Looking at this intervention in my career biography, I became aware of a link between my interest in blogging and my commitment to pedagogy as inclusive practice. My work has been rooted in my social and community work background and a concern to enable children, and their families, to be included in society. In my work as a manager in social services, in an area of high deprivation, I was concerned about the exclusion of people from mainstream services such as education and could see how this narrowed their life chances. I wanted to take some of these concerns into my work in supporting adult learners who had not succeeded in their past education and now were returning to a degree course. A further influence for this study derived from my own experience. Having had a diagnosis of dyslexia at the age of 43 I realized that feedback to students can be insensitive and tutors can miss underlying needs. The ethical stance of this thesis is that there is a prevalence of adults in education who are returning to study, often with undiagnosed learning

differences, and they may be struggling to manage their new learner identity and perceive themselves as worthy of being on a degree course.

I have, through my own career, a strong belief in personal agency and can see how agency is supported by group work. I believe that social situations are important to support individuals in life and this can be seen in my interest in online networks. This project was stimulated by the idea that creating online spaces could give an opportunity for learners to share the diversity and richness of their everyday lives in ways that are not possible in a more constrained environment. Moreover, I have also seen how a blog and connectivity to an online course has helped me to organize and remember knowledge, giving me greater confidence in my professional life.

I have not been a computer enthusiast in the past but my interest was stimulated when I started working at the college, in which this study is set, in 2000. There was one computer in the staff room and a free Information and Communications Technology (ICT) course was on offer, called 'The European Driving License in computing' (EDLC). I painfully learnt about applications and wanted to teach the students how to use a computer for their work. I worked alongside the librarian to create wikis for Level 3 classes. I worked with digital cameras to help Level 2 students to produce mini films for revision purposes. I developed more technical skills by recording and filming role-play, presentation and tutorials. In addition, during 2004 I was tasked to add content to a Moodle VLE for my courses and I managed to attach all sorts of media, using the VLE as a repository of materials for the students. At this time a personal friend of mine showed me an Apple

computer and taught me how to make websites, and create wikis and search online. This friend sent me an invitation to join a large online e-learning course called 'Connectivism' run by Stephen Downes and George Siemans (2008).

For a year (2008-09) I ran a blog, joined in Moodle based discussions about teaching and learning and sent personal messages to many educators across the world. This was a catalyst for a change in my way of working. Newer theories about teaching and learning such as connectivism and constructivism were influencing the way I was designing courses and I was thinking about collaboration with students in learning. Reflecting on these experiences gave me an understanding of the time needed to develop practice, of the, at times, serendipitous nature of CPD, and a belief in computers as a support for curriculum change.

The research

This thesis concerns how adult learners on a degree level course used blogging in this case under the title of 'Early Childhood Studies' - later renamed BA (Hons) Childhood Education and Society (2+2 pathway). In particular it aims to discover how blogging affected the non-traditional adult learner returning to education and to explore the value of blogging more generally.

Within these overarching goals the study aims to address three more precise sub-questions:

- Who amongst these learners blog?
- Why do students blog?

- What encourages or discourages students to blog?

The findings will be of value to other course leaders in similar circumstances and for example by enabling them to examine the roles they could play when introducing blogging. The thesis also contributes to the research literature by offering a case study in an under-reported area and by exploring frameworks for discussing innovation in teaching.

What is blogging and why study it?

Blogging was a relatively new communications phenomenon when this research started. According to Blood (2002), the phrase 'web log' was introduced by Barger in 1997. The word 'blog' is a contracted word of the term 'web log' and Merlholz first used this shortened version in 1999 (Jacobs, 2003). Blog entries are usually in reverse chronological order, producing a type of 'online diary', but one that is in public view, albeit the blog owner has control over who views their posts. In addition, blogs provide an option for readers to post comments, making the blog interactive. Williams (2004) suggests 'blogging' is a form of micropublishing and a firmly established web-based communications tool. Blogging can of course support a wide range of communication though it has become associated with publication of simple online personal diaries and in education with reflective learning. A paper by Williams and Jacobs (2004) that explored the potential of blogs as learning spaces in Higher Education (HE) concluded blogging had the potential for transforming teaching and learning. Jackson (2011) had a view that blogs are a tool that can be shared by the whole class, or a personal place where other learners are invited to join as a reader and

commentator. Thus blogs could be used for coursework and as an opportunity for readers to enter personal responses to articles in an unstructured and quite organic way.

The term blogging has gone through major transformation in recent years in terms of the content, the media and the technology used. For instance there are 'mblogs', which refer to blogging via mobile phones, and 'photo blogs', which refer to blog content mostly consisting of photos. The fastest growing form of blogging in recent years has been micro-blogging on tools such as Twitter. Blogs have evolved along similar lines to other forms of communication – they have been used because they are convenient to use and serve particular purposes. Group blogs, family blogs, community blogs and corporate blogs are defined by their content and by their audiences. Library blogs and 'edublogs' have begun to emerge in educational circles.

Blogs for teaching and learning can be shared by the whole class, or can belong to a single individual where other learners are invited to join as a reader or a commentator. Blogs can be structured or directed by tutors and can be used for academic purposes but can also be used for non-academic content for example documenting personal life (see table 1). Many blogs can be a hybrid of these three dimensions.

Table 1. Dimensions of blogs

Author	Degree of direction	Content
Individual blog	Directed	Academic
Whole class blog	Undirected	Non-academic

Affordances of the blog, forum/diaries are discussed in a later literature review but it is worth noting here that the study of blogs is in a state of flux; Dhakal's view is understandably that 'practices and expectations with blogs grow as the idea of adding cultural tools to classroom designs grow' (Dhakal, 2007 P1). There are recurring debates about the value of blogs; these are covered in-depth in the literature review. There is also a debate about whether blogs generate new forms of literacy. Jacobsen (2002) argues that cyber-cultural practices have given rise to new discursive norms that distinguish blogging from both literate and oral practices. However he warns about the complexity of keeping up with the demands of networking; he sees blogs not as essays, but a discussion about context of the lives of learners. This suggests an informal way of learning or at least an invitation to make learning personal. However, Oblinger and Oblinger (2005), in discussing the attitudes and skills of the so called 'digital generation' or 'net generation', argues that young learners may be able to operate a computer technically but are less able to create, contextualize and analyse blogging practice. Young people may be 'digitally literate' but not information literate or communicatively adept. In contrast, Madden and Hitlin (2005) are

more positive and argue that young people can transfer their ICT skills and experience and can be creative and competent when experimenting with digital media. The emergence of 'web 2.0' technologies has led writers such as Williams and Jacobs (2004) to suggest that educational practices can be restructured to better afford learners' control over their own learning and a blog is seen as offering more collaborative modes of learning (Williams and Jacobs, 2004).

Crook and Harrison see national policy in most of Europe moving away from educational thinking as a mass-production of skills, on the grounds that new jobs need critical thinking and the ability to create new knowledge through problem solving (Crook and Harrison 2008). The perception among some is that we have a generation of web 2.0 digital natives (Prensky 2001) who engage in an advanced way in their own knowledge creation. However, if the use of technology is motivated by recreational and vocational purposes, users may well draw on habits of passive interaction not the fully developed and advanced learning capabilities for which Clark et al. (2009) and others call. There is a 'digital dissonance' between the potential of web 2.0 as envisioned by researchers and practitioners as a tool for online creative and critical co-production of learning artefacts. Clark writes that the institutions have been slow to realize the potential for collaborative learning 'beyond the classroom walls' (Clark et al. 2009:68). However almost as soon as they have been introduced some writers are calling for us to move on. As recently as December 2013, Kottke has suggested the blog is on the wane socially and that it is difficult to ignore the blog's diminished place in our informational diet as new and more suitable apps become available (Found at kottke.org posts about Jason Kottke

December 2013).

Blogging is discussed in the literature review in great depth but it would be useful to share here a few questions or musings to contextualize this study. A big idea taken seriously in this thesis is that classroom education does not fit today's learner; one who might want to pursue networking opportunities to be able to create their own knowledge using new technology. Traditional HE course design is often based on learning outcomes and emphasizes the teacher and the content as the central elements of education. It is often assumed that all learners acquire knowledge of the subject content in the same way. The course is written before the learners even enrol. The outcomes are on the module booklet and decided by the faculty. The design is handed down year-on-year with a few 'tweaks' to fit the tutor. Communication on such courses is generally between the individual student and the tutor during the lecture if there is time, and sometimes brief conversations afterwards. Learner-learner interaction is very low in most part–time courses at the case study college due to college days in that all classes are held back-to-back on one day of the week.

Due to new online technologies and free blogging software a new paradigm is available; course design could facilitate learner-centred activities. Within this more networked environment, students may develop new understanding through drawing on their previous experiences and engaging in discussion of concepts with their peers. A critical thinking community is an important aspiration for course designers in this type of education. Thus, this study addresses a wider debate about teaching and learning by asking what happens

when learners are introduced to an unrestricted approach to the use of technology through blogging, in their Early Years studies programme. An unrestricted approach is one in which students are asked to develop blogs on their initiative, and with little oversight or input by a tutor during students' discussions. Students are responsible for deciding when and how they will interact. The thinking behind the approach is that this will push students into becoming active learners and through online discussion able to organise and process information.

Where this study took place

This study took place in an FE college in Warwickshire. It has two main campuses and operates across two further, smaller, learning venues. It provides academic and vocational courses to approximately 20,000 learners, of which more than 2,500 are full-time (Ofsted, 2009). Three staff supported the course that was the focus for this thesis in 2008; two of the staff left by 2009, two new staff replaced them.

Since 2004 the teaching room had a computer with a projector allowing access to the Internet. Next to the teaching room, a computer suite was set up and all learners could gain access to the web and any online services. The college offered technology support, a week-long study skills module that tended to cover an introduction to the computer suite and paper-based exercises. The level of the technology and development of e-learning in the college at the start of the project in 2008 was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted. This was   due to various ICT innovations that were being introduced, such as interactive games for the

Moodle site, 'hot potatoes' and quizzes. This Ofsted assessment needed to be seen in context. In particular, outstanding use of technology seemed to consist of student access to a VLE with a tutor's PowerPoint presentation on it. In fact this was a superficial assessment and did not consider how the tools for teaching and learning supported a course. Attitudes to teaching and learning with ICT had not fundamentally changed and this was evidenced when a colleague working in the college conducted a study of the college tutors' use of ICT. Casserley (2012) reported that the majority of tutors used ICT only to show PowerPoint presentation. On The Early Childhood Studies Moodle a few of the PowerPoint presentations had hyperlinks to multi-media, such as clips within 'YouTube'. However blogs were still perceived as something strange and fanciful.

In order to look at the use of ICT in more depth, and to help in designing the project, I carried out a survey with learners following child studies programmes (n= 74 students and n=3 tutors). It was found that the use of Moodle was very one-sided, with tutors spending more time on it than learners. Further questions in this survey found that even the poorest families were often a multi-computer family - exposing flaws in assumptions about the digital divide. Learners often reported younger family members used the technology but they personally were unable to use even widely used tools such as the texting facility on their own mobile phones. This survey demonstrated that ICT was not being used extensively in college or at home for teaching and learning.

Background of the participants

Participants within the study were from the 2007 to 2010 cohort of students;

these are labelled cohorts A, B and C respectively in the text. A new cohort (D 2011) was not formally included in the study but, as they had worked on their blogs in the first week of term, while the study was being carried out, some of their experiences were noted in my research diary. Cohort A had 18 learners; B had 21; C had 13, at the start of each programme. The full population for the study is 52, predominantly women (3 were men). Not all joined in the blogging and interviews. The modal age group was 21 to 30, with 25 learners out of 52 falling into this category. Literacy Entry Levels varied from Entry Level 3 (equivalent to around age 7 years) to Level 3 (see Chapter 2 for full break down of levels and ages). All learners were returning to education to obtain a degree to enable them to become teachers or childcare workers. The strength of this course was that it offered everyone the opportunity to study at HE level, as no previous qualifications were required. This of course resulted in a mixed ability classroom.

Distinct characteristics of the participants

There was a clear problem with the Early Years degree in terms of drop–out, with only 10 out of 20 (50%) left from the year 2006/7 Cohort by the time these students started the university component of the programme. A theme in tutorial sessions was that learners found it difficult to meet the demands made on them as they lacked support and felt isolated.

This sense of isolation is not surprising when considering the wider literature. Griffiths et al. (2005) reported on the idea of learning shock affecting adults returning to education after a protracted absence. Learning shock colours or

strongly affects what is learnt and how it is learned. Students who have previously managed their adult identities and lives suddenly become less confident and start to suffer emotional disturbance due to a radical reconstruction of identity, outlook on life and values as they begin study. The shock of being returned to education may inhibit learning by paralysing students' critical faculties; such a shock can shape the students' perceptions of their fellow-students, their teachers and the academic environment in which they study. The return to learning can by contrast have the potential to enhance and open new possibilities. According to Griffiths et al. (2005: p3) 'It may indeed be that learning shock is a feature of the most profound types of learning, learning which involves a radical reconstruction of identity, outlook on life and values. The emotional experience of the shock, while never pleasant, may become a milestone of an individual's life story, marking the moment of greatest crisis and despair but also the turning point of a new start; it may then mark the point where a trial turns into a triumph'.

Griffiths et al.'s research was based on adults returning to education as full-time MBA students (n=145) at Imperial College and showed that teaching and learning strategies may trigger anxiety and performance failure. One of the key strategies recommended in this study to help learners return to learning was to talk to one's peers as a coping mechanism.

The distinction between continuous learners going from school to adult education and returners to education at a higher level has been an area of research for some time. One early paper is from Lake (1999) who classified

students returning to HE as 'recyclers', 'deferrers' 'returners' and 'early school leavers'. Defining types within the adult returners helps to show that students are very diverse, even within the same course. The learners described in this thesis are, on the whole, early school leavers who left school with very low grades but were now at a stage of returning to complete their life ambition of becoming a teacher or social worker. They mostly had no qualifications or had obtained a D to B in English and an F to B in Mathematics GCSE. The majority of the students were focused on their family and children and a large proportion of the students were single parents. Learners were differentiated in terms of background, experience, raw literacy tests, ethnicity, age, gender, and strategies for participation in their course, confidence, and competence with technology.

Of course, students on any course do not form a homogenous group but good use of ICT seems to play an important part in managing and supporting the transition to HE. Research by Thema (2009) into the experiences of taught masters students at Oxford University suggested holding a positive attitude about technology will, more than any other single aspect of managing transitions to higher education, support the student's growth and stability. Students who adopt a flexible approach to their new environment appear more likely to succeed in making the adaption to being a degree student. Students' expectations and their reaction to the use of technology for teaching and learning is inevitably an important, but difficult to measure, variable in any study.

Creanor et al. (2006) interviewed learners from a range of post-16 educational contexts from across the country; their study aimed to elicit their views, not only

on technology enhanced learning but also on how students used technology in their everyday lives, and the impact this may have on their attitudes and approaches to learning. The findings were that negative emotional reactions to e-learning had a detrimental impact on attitudes and levels of motivation to study. They suggested the tutor should listen to students' voice in regard to technology and this itself can be facilitated using technology. It was further suggested that there were several under-researched aspects of e-learning which would merit further investigation including the ubiquitous use of social software, learner control issues and the emotional impact of technology use.

Academic difficulties of non-traditional students were also researched by McCabe (1998) who concluded the students in his study had inadequate learning skills or academic skills. This, then, is not a new problem. The 'at risk' students were identifiable throughout his sample and he surmised that there was insufficient input or help from tutors to address the problem of drop-out and transfer from year-one to year-two. McCabe (1998) commented that laying the basis for lifelong learning was going be a major task and needed to address not only how people learn but also for what they learn. Learning styles are relevant to some extent for adult learners, but their life experiences will also affect their return to education and new skills in technology.

Gender is of particular importance for my study because out of 52 learners only three were men. Gender is a socio-economic and cultural construct for differentiating between male and female roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs in a given context. Gender differences are the result of

learned roles, which change over time and vary widely within and across cultures. Gender is not fixed but evolves in response to other social, cultural, economic and political factors and is a key element in understanding many of the processes of social and economic change. Technology is often perceived as a male preserve while femininity is constructed in terms of technological incompetence leading to a situation in which technological products are outcomes of production processes, which are dominated by men and reflect their interests. This means that men are generally perceived as 'makers' and women as 'users' of modern technology (Clarke, 2002).

The participants' literacy skills

The tool 'Profiler' was used to assess all the respondents on this course and showed that many had low literacy and numeracy skills. The diagnostic reports are detailed in Chapter 3. All students gained extremely low scores in respect to ICT skills, many were new to computers. It is important to understand that within each cohort some students were at Entry Level 2 and Level 1 in literacy indicating a reading age of a seven year-old or even below. The majority of the ICT profiles were at Level 1 with a few fails showing skills were very limited, for example carrying out searches, changing fonts and cut and paste skills may have been beyond many students' expertise.

Methodology

The research used a case study method: an approach defined as 'a method for studying social phenomena through the analysis of an individual case. The case may be a person, a group, an episode, a community or any other unit of social

life' (Yin 1984). This approach frequently faces criticism: case study research has been considered as 'microscopic' because it lacks a 'sufficient number' of cases (Harnel et al., 1993) and its conclusions are therefore not generalizable. However the point of case studies is not their generalizability but the light they throw on processes and phenomena. In this way, even a single case could be considered acceptable, provided trends and themes could be identified and their relationship to each other explained.

The case study setting was selected on the grounds of access but is probably typical of many practitioner-led innovations taking place. The study follows three cohorts from 2007-08 to 2009-10. This is an exploratory rather than a hypothesis testing case, with a 'bottom up' approach, but not grounded theory as such. The research had an action research element, as the researcher is the instigator of the intervention and was evaluating her own practice. However, this was not 'pure' action research because it was as much concerned with a general exploration of blogging as addressing a problem of practice.

The structure of the thesis

The spine of this thesis is an exploration of the value of blogging based around the three research questions posed earlier. Chapter 1, this chapter, has introduced the core research problem and background to the study. It has given an overview to the thesis, explained the setting, described the characteristics of the participants and dealt with the positionality of the researcher.

Chapter 2 deals with the research literature on blogging in general but particularly blogging in HE. There are three key themes to the literature:

identity building, emotional support and instruction. There are also further questions about the role of the educator, the contribution of CPD and technology and change.

Chapter 3 discusses the methods used to collect data about the use of blogs and the participants. There is also a discussion of ethics. The study follows a mixed approach in that students' behaviour is described more or less objectively (addressing the question of *how they blog*) and discussed in the light of the meanings attached to blogging by the students themselves (*why they blog*).

Chapter 4 provides a tally of the number of blogs broken down by individual, by cohort, by responses and by followers. This gives an indication of the extent of blogging, the different types of media used in blogs and the strongly differentiated uptake of blogging among students.

Chapter 5 provides a content breakdown of the blogs around wider categories of **blogging itself**; **home**; **study**. Each of these categories is sub-divided, for example **home** covered sub-themes of *pets, celebrations, managing the home, leisure activities, part time employment* and *emotional well-being* while **study** covered sub themes of *educational theory, relevant sites, course activities, exams, analysis and reflection, book reviews, TV film links* and *tutors and assignments*. It was found that the majority of posts were study focused and many examples of the nature and scope of the posts are given. There was a marked similarity in findings across cohorts.

Chapter 6 deals with the questionnaires and interviews. A simple survey questionnaire (30 items) was given to all students to fill-in in class. Response

rate was high (61%) and the findings are described in this chapter. In addition, a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out (N= 17). Data were analysed around themes of control, comfort and safety, learning, nature of the medium and networking. The chapter shows the differentiated response of students in relation to these themes.

Chapter 7 explicitly addresses the three research questions and discusses the motivations of so-called Contributors (or 'champions' of blogs) as compared to Non-contributors. The chapter also draws out familiar constraints of time, organisation and direction and there is a high degree of overlap with these findings and the wider literature.

Chapter 8 summarises the research and draws out implications for different audiences. The thesis ends with the personal significance of the study.

The definition of terms is available after Chapter 8, just before the references, to describe the meaning of key terms used in this thesis.

Thus this introduction provides the setting for the study and the aims of the study; we turn now to the literature review.

CHAPTER 2. Review of Literature

This chapter reports on relevant literature in order to lay down the foundations for the research. The purpose is to bring together key concepts about blogs and users of blogs. The chapter has been divided into six sections: how the review was carried out; properties of blogs; blogging for emotional support; claims for blogging; learner differentiated response to blogging; the role of the educator.

How the review was carried out

A wide range of literature was consulted in order to get an overview of the field of teaching and learning with technology, this included some general literature on the use of ICT and some specific to the use of blogging. Whilst carrying out this research I came to see that the emphasis in many studies was very much on the practitioner's perspective, often reporting action research or design interventions, while , learners' own perspectives about their understanding of the roles and relationships within an online learning network were only discussed in depth in only a few cases (e.g. Jones et al. 2001; Timmis et al. 2004). A scoping study funded by JISC in 2005 to inform and shape its research strategy in this field, also revealed that the majority of studies on blogging have taken place in the HE sector and that learners from FE contexts are poorly represented (Sharpe et al. 2005). The learner's perspective became a key concern when my study began in 2008, as it seemed the reporting about blogs tended to be by tutors who felt their classroom blogs were useful for collaborative learning.

Indeed while much more could have been done to access the learner perspective, my study does succeed in addressing a gap in the literature.

Studies about the learner's voice (such as Entwistle et al. 2002 and Mason and Weller, 2000) show how complex the context of the learning can be given the nature of learners' lives, how they use technology and the external factors which are present but over which the tutor has no control. However, taken together the literature provides useful examples of practice in eLearning and offers recommendations that practitioners can adapt to their own context. For example Atak and Rankin (2002) provided a descriptive study of registered nurses using online-based nursing education programme in which structured blogs played a role in assessing learning. The findings demonstrated that eLearning provided both a 'satisfactory and effective' alternative learning medium. However the blogs were very much focused on learning outcomes rather than the practitioner's journey and there appeared to be very few peer reviewed papers about blogging by students following programmes within the early years sector.

As the study progressed, a growth of both academic and professional literature took place. In regard to the latter, web-sites have been set up for tutors to comment on teaching and learning and to share experiences of using a blog, for example Stephen Downes (2011). These sites often present blogs as wonderful, innovative happenings in education. Some impressions of these reported experiences are presented later in the review.

In regard to the academic literature, relevant search engines were used (including Google Scholar and the in-house University library tools) using the

keywords 'educational ICT'. This approach generated a wide range of papers, many of which were not seen as overly relevant to my context as they tended to cover particular types of software and hardware such as virtual learning environments, discussion boards and, more recently, mobile devices (for example Attewell, 2005, Browne et al, 2006 and Sorensen and Takle, 2002).

Some papers tended to be more general and, to the extent they covered blogs, they reported on teacher led innovations. However this wider literature did raise pedagogical questions that were relatable to my study. Indeed a key theme was the lack of disruption when technology is used. For example Selwyn (2007), who analysed the use of computer technology by tutors in HE, found limited, linear and rigid ways of working with the technology. The peripheral and limited use of ICT became a strong theme in analysing technology and teaching in Blin and Munro (2007) who reported in some depth on the introduction of a VLE to a university in Dublin, Ireland. They found little change to tutors' behaviour, in spite of the growth of tools such as blogs. There is some overlap here with studies dealing with the use of ICT by early years practitioners. For example Plowman and Stephen (2005) found early years educators supported technology in the nursery in principle, but did not use it very much and did not use it to undo existing classroom routines. At a wider level again, some writers (e.g. Gusetti 2010) have raised the wider question as to whether the rhetoric of eLearning matched the reality. Finally some papers were very useful for generating notions about adults returning to study. For example Creanor and Trinder (2006b) found, across FE and community-learning courses, that the main characteristics of good eLearning were not particularly associated with

learning about the technology but more on whether learners had the confidence in their ability to 'cope with life, learning and technology'. Learners needed to know how to network with others and manage their time so that they could balance learning with work and family commitments.

Literature searches were then carried out more systematically using the precise keywords 'educational blogs'. Typically the papers accessed in this way covered a mix of themes including the use of blogs for 'identity building' (for example Wang and Hsua, 2008); 'blogs to support learners emotionally' (for example YU-Chih Sun, 2010); and 'blogs as a tool for cognitive educational outcomes' (for example Bresica and Miller, 2006 and Oravec, 2002).

The literature review was challenging because the context is a changing one. For example, earlier studies were concerned with problems of early adoption (as in Borja, 2005; Instone, 2005) and technical issues, which became less significant later on. As blogging became more mainstream, the research tended to shift focus to educators' use and the contribution of technology to new innovative teaching. As the number of papers accessed accumulated, it became important to categorise them into themes. The studies came from different disciplines: languages, teacher education, business studies, engineering, healthcare and sciences but I was more interested in the commonalities within the use of blogs. Papers covered both younger learners in schools and the adult learners in FE and HE. Through much trial and error the review became focused on the educational purposes of blogs and in particular students' perspective of them. In terms of the papers, no fewer than ten contained a basic finding that students felt

class blogs improved their writing skills and learning (Chen and Bonk, 2008; Downes, 2004; Ellison and Wu, 2008; Leja, 2007; Tu, Blotcher and Roberts 2008). Blogs also were perceived as useful for students' communication and class interaction skills (Davi et al. 2007; Dickey, 2004); addressing and promoting learner reflection (Murry and Hourigan, 2005; Xie, Ke and Sharma, 2008) and developing a supportive community (Luehmann and Tinelli, 2008). A few studies reported some negative perceptions of, and reactions to, blogging - in particular worries over time constraint and concerns about privacy; see for example Freeman et al. (2006).

Recording of literature

Perhaps appropriately I took the approach of recording my reading using a blog to record what was read and why it might be a part of this review. The papers were also filed online in 'Drop box' folders. I noticed that my blog posts started-off as a record of an academic paper (Glenn, 2003):

> ### *Friday, 2 December 2011*
>
> *Blogs for teaching*
>
> *Glenn (2003) discusses at length some of the uses of blogs by academics and scholars. He comments that some of the arguments in favor of blogging, cited by academics, are the freedom of tone, opportunity to interact with diverse audiences, and the speed of feedback. Glenn's (2003) article provides numerous examples from academic blogs – the URL is cited in the References. Glenn, D. (2003*

Excerpts from research diary

http://linarmstrong.blogspot.co.uk/2011_05_01_archive.html

[Note the year of the entry is given here as 2011, this is because my original blog was closed down by the provider Prosperous.com. I cut and past entries to the new BlogSpot site but lost the original date of posting, albeit these dates were recorded separately.]

As time went on my blog became more reflective and, for example, showed better awareness of the implications of the literature for my study:

> *Most papers I have read about blogging have the tutor setting how much blogging is to be done. '... a set of instructions prescribing how students should perform in groups, how they should interact and collaborate and how they should solve the problem' (Dillenbourg, 2002, p. 63),*

> *My study with blogs will actually have no rules because this could lead to better more independent learners. Self-regulated learners take charge of their own learning by choosing and setting goals, using individual strategies in order to monitor, regulate and control the different aspects influencing the learning process and evaluating his or her actions. Eventually, they become less dependent on others and on the contextual features in a learning situation.*

Excerpts from research diary

http://linarmstrong.blogspot.co.uk/2011_05_01_archive.html

[There are more excerpts from my personal blog in Appendix 4.]

As my reading became I created a literature review grid in order to provide an easier means of comparing and contrasting articles. An excerpt is provided in table 2. To create a critical and comprehensive review of blogs the grid had to be updated and refined throughout this study. Overall many of the papers provided optimistic perspectives on blogging and found value in blogs for emotional and academic support.

Table 2. Excerpt from the literature review grid

Study	Participants	Context of blog	Types of data	Basic findings
Chen and Bonk (2008)	24 educators that had published work about blogs	Students use it as a knowledge log	Survey	Chen and Bonk (2008) concluded that blogs bring new possibilities for educational assessment. They argued that compared with other technology blogs provide a clearer track of the authentic progress learners have made. However, they found that if blogs were used as a group assessment tool then one of the problems instructors had was to locate and give feedback on posts relating to a similar topic by different students as all the posts were intertwined. They recommended that further changes were required and suggested that future studies might address personalisation of blogs for assessment purposes.
Coutinho (2007)	23 under-graduate students in Portugal	Students used the blog to reflect on learning and activities	Contents of blogs	Reflection is deep learning

Xie, Ke, and Sharma (2008)				Xie et al. suggest that to advance from surface to deep learning students need to make meaning of new information. Reflection is an important prerequisite for deep and meaningful learning recommended using strategies such as journal writing that would not only promote reflection but also deep thinking and learning. Therefore, the most interesting and significant use of blogs in education may be to use it to promote reflective learning.
Deng and Yuen (2009)				Deng and Yuen (2009) concluded that students are likely to shoulder more responsibility if self-reflection is stressed. Students can use blogs as a journal or portfolio, recording their own thoughts, reflections and discussions on a subject.
Davi et al. (2007)	98 business students USA	Class blog to reflect and respond to others	Survey	73% said it increased interaction in class. 76% agreed blogging helped their learning females felt intimidated by the use of a blog as compared to male students.

Properties and affordances of blogs

Blogs were seen as online journals for a particular person or for a whole class or community (Coutinho; 2007). However blogs meant many things to different people, ranging from 'online journals' to 'easily updated personal websites' (Williams and Jacobs; 2004). Beyond being a simple homepage or an online diary, blogs allow comments on the entries thereby creating a discussion forum (Hain and Back, 2008). Murry and Hourigan (2005) considered the swift rise in popularity of blogging in education, alongside other content-producing tools such as Twitter and Facebook, was moving communication back to a more engaging and interactive literacy.

Conole et al., (2008) similarly argued that a blog should assist self-expression and creativity. Blogs are very flexible and can be structured in different ways. Research papers gave two types of tasks set by the practitioners: 1) multi-authored collaborative group blogging (Bloch, 2007; Efimova and de Moor, 2005; Richardson, 2006) and 2) single authored reflective blogging (Murry, Hourigan and Jeanneau, 2007 and Raith, 2009). The affordances of the blog exist in the opportunities which teachers and students perceive. Selwyn (2007) and Downes (2004) take this further and say that there is a wider context, for example the way assessment and teaching is carried out, which will influence these perceptions.

The natural sciences have developed taxonomies and described the properties of animals, minerals and plants over hundreds of years. Blogging can be likened to a new genus of communication for which a body of work and a consensus of opinion has yet to be established. Researchers are carrying out work to find out about the properties of blogs, or more accurately, their affordances - a desirable property of a user interface.Blogs can be a learning repository, a feedback tool (Dipplod, 2009), an assessment tool or a language development tool. Blogging allows the sharing of personal ideas but because they are public these ideas can be subject to questioning and discussion (Bressica et al. 2004). Central to this wide range of literature, however, is the idea that blogs can support identity building, support learners emotionally, and serve as a cognitive tool to promote learning outcomes.

Blogs for identity building

According to Cameron and Anderson (2006), blogs can support students in constructing a social identity appropriate for participation within an academic programme. A sense of identity is a more difficult concept than at first perceived. Lave and Wenger (1991) are more concerned with the idea of social identity i.e., 'the process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities' (Wenger 1998: p4). From this perspective learning can be considered as something the individual does by interacting and joining in shared activity with others rather than the more traditional notion of learning as individual, brain activity. But, whatever the ideas associated with participation and identity, communicating with others within a class blog involves and requires social presence. It is believed that social presence affects participation and for Tu (2002) without a sense of presence of 'being in a community' and having people respond to one's presence, participation is unlikely. Some of the barriers to presence concern lack of ego management, inappropriate patterns of communication, a sense of a large, overwhelming community and most obviously time constraints (Wasko and Faraj, 2000).

A further issue in respect to presence is that contributors can choose to be anonymous. Anonymity may provide a safe environment and allow for playful exploration of identity (Brescia and Miller, 2006). However, Instone (2005) was concerned that anonymous posting could lead to posting without responsibility and have a negative effect particularly through unwelcome feedback. A different view from Armstrong, Berry and Lamshed, (2004) suggests students do not perceive course blogs as private so are not concerned if their identity is made

public. However it is often stated that students can present an online self, which is very different to the self that colleagues and peers 'know'. This may extend to a level of 'deception'. For example in the case of academic blogging postings may be plagiarised from other sources to present a better image to peers and tutors. Constructing and maintaining 'false' identities is time consuming and difficult for the reader. Hine's made the point at the end of her ethnographic study of blogging. 'I set out, not to investigate who people really were, but to interact with the features of their identities with which I came into contact. Identities [in this study] have been treated as situated performances, and as resources for the undermining of accounts' Hine (2000, p1). Identity is a key issue for returners to study. According to Robinson (2010), who completed research on students' emotional and relational experiences whilst collaborating online, participation and learning is intricately interrelated. Robinson's findings indicate learners who are adult returners might have an internal conflict between family identity and those of being a learner. Blogging can ease this transition even if it cannot address the practical demands of undertaking part-time study.

Ward (2006) suggested bloggers generally feel a sense of ownership of their blogs. Ward completed ethnographic research with PhD students in Sydney and argued that 'I hope that my participants will enact their own personal performances... I used blogging with the purpose of creating a community of PhD candidates in order to get some insight on the process of becoming a scholar, the making of a doctor.' For her, undertaking blogging within a community of scholars was essential to developing a sense of professional identity.

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The claims for blogging as a useful tool that merges the professional and the personal attributes of the individual is found in later papers, such as Yu-Chih Sun (2010) who studied a HE teacher education programme in Taiwan. The participants were 12 pre-service teachers undertaking master's degrees in teaching 'English to Speakers of Other Languages'. Sun's research was grouped around several issues; professional development on the blogs, difficulties, ways of problem solving and the students' perceptions of blogging. It was reported that knowledge sharing, knowledge generation and knowledge transformation were apparently encouraged by the use of blogs. It was argued that pre-service teachers held positive attitudes about blogging; in particular the respondents stated that blogs helped their professional development and identity as a teacher. The participants said they tended to select and respond to blog content deemed interesting and useful to their audience, so were very aware of the professional face of themselves as a teacher on their blog.

Facer and Selwyn (2010) raised the question why is identity important in education. The response appears to be that being a student is related to issues of (re) presentation of self and maintenance of learner identities. Selwyn suggested there was a 'role conflict' when balancing relationships with teaching staff with personal life. Blogging can make the learner journey visible, from being a new student to being a student to a self–authoring student. A more integrated learning experience can support risk-taking, something that is crucial to personal and professional development.

Blogs for emotional support

In terms of blogging for emotional support, there seems to be a common view that by expressing concerns and receiving practical and emotional responses learners are able to gain a sense of efficacy and motivation.

Baggetun and Wasson (2006) suggest that individual ownership is one of the most important features of a blog. Their study was on peer feedback within blogs in an advanced German course for adult learners. They argued 'a weblog is not only a trace showing that students are aware of their struggles (meta-cognitive knowledge), it also gives insight into what others are thinking and what they struggle with. This reflection on both one's own learning and other's reflections on their learning is a powerful tool for collectively developing a conceptual understanding of a topic; we could call this collective self-regulation.'

The social and educational aspects of a student have been seen as blurred and research reflects this blending. For example a study by Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) of 23 social blogs maintained by university students, graduates and post-graduate students found that their social dimension made blogs much more than personal online diaries. The researchers classified the motivations that bloggers had to continue their blogging activities as: to update others on activities and whereabouts, express opinions to influence others, seek others' opinions and feedback, and 'think by writing' and to release emotional tension. Summing up the relationships between bloggers the authors suggested that 'blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog'.

A later study by Xie et al. (2008) looked at blogging carried out by 27 undergraduate students taking a political science programme in the USA. Xie

raised the point that it is important for students to receive feedback on their posts to continue with use of blogs. The feedback acted as a kind of emotional support and further acted as a behavioural conditioning tool. For instance by receiving feedback on blog entries, learners were further committed to the blogging process as it had been confirmed that their own blogs were being read and of use. In Xie's study students were divided into control and treatment groups. The control group blogged with no feedback and the treatment group received peer feedback. The study found that those who were receiving feedback blogged more frequently the character of the blog changed over time. The blogs appeared to be more factual rather than reflective, their content being about course themes rather than the process of learning.

A study by Dickey (2004), concerning pre–service teachers in the USA, reported on a blog used to provide opportunities for students to socialise, recount personal events and to ask for help or feedback from peers. There was a course expectation to post reflections on readings and exemplars were provided, implying a quite high degree of directed activity. It was found through analysis of blog contents, course evaluations and interviews that student teachers valued their blogs not just for administrative and coursework purposes but also for expressing emotion; for example when they were finding the workload hard to cope with.

This was consistent with Farmer et al. (2008) who argued that students found that the most valuable aspect of blogging was to enable them to interact with their peers. Other papers, such as Ellison and Wu (2008), report that students

found reading others' blogs was helpful and the more informal voice used in the blogs encouraged ideas and getting feedback. Freeman et al. (2006) had a small group of nine graduate students in Canada who each were left in charge of their own individual blog. They were not given specific directions regarding how much or what to write. The data were the blog entries themselves within which student authors raised a fear of being public and lack of time as constraints on blogging. Nonetheless Freeman et al. found learners gained considerable emotional support through blogging.

Both Forte (2005) and Hine (2000) suggested that frequently updated weblogs gave their owners the power to make 'strong' statements about themselves, their feelings, beliefs and values. Both of these papers paid attention to networking; they felt that links between the class blogs helped in promoting a community and the blog archives carried the story of those in the learning community. Other research on blogging, such as Churchill (2009), Kerawalla et al. (2008) and Shama (2010), has indicated that students felt a need to belong to a community and gained emotional satisfaction from participation in peer communities.

More generally, researchers such as Salmon (1999) have suggested that through online participation learners can move towards an emotional involvement in the learning experience. It is this involvement of the emotional dimension that has been identified by Lee and Green (1998), by Johnson et al. (2000) and by Boud and Lee (2005) as the most under-theorised part of pedagogy. There is a long history to the idea that asynchronous written communication can build relationships - for example Salmon (1999; 2002) (among many others) has

discussed how asynchronicity can lead to deeper and more reflective discussion within an online community.

Of course emotional support is not guaranteed. There is a recurring paradox when considering blogging: if the tutor 'takes over' the blogosphere/space and makes demands on what the tool is used for this can limit its use as an emotional or self-directed space for learning. However without tutor involvement the blog may be underused and orphaned.

Blogging for instructional purposes

Minocha (2009) researched blogs, wikis and podcasts in order to examine the use of social software in the UK, in both FE and HE. They collected evidence of the effective use of social software in student learning and engagement. Their sample frame was wide concerning 26 UK initiatives. They found that social software supported a variety of ways of learning: sharing of resources; collaborative learning; problem-based and inquiry-based learning and reflective learning. Some of these claims are brought out in the case studies below.

An article by Oravec (2002) reflected on the potential of the blog as a tool for the promotion of deeper learning and described how blogs can be integrated with educational activity as resources both for students and teachers. Oravec claimed that blog development can 'empower students to become more analytical and critical' (p.618). However this claim seemed a more intuitive one, based on the idea that students who are aware that their classmates will read their postings and comments will be more careful before they post them. Oravec also commented on the value of using a blog as an online journal to encourage

personal reflection. The blog was also seen as a useful means of encouraging collaboration through the sharing of links to resources and up-to-date information. Oravec observed that the blog has many dimensions that are suited to students' 'unique voices', empowering them and encouraging them to become more critical and analytical in their thinking: 'the reason, simply, is that in order to develop and sustain a clear and confident voice of one's own, one has to carefully formulate and stand by one's opinions' (p614). Mortensen and Walker, (2002) agreed that writing a blog assisted students because it forced them to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others Interactivity implies an active process of thinking and learning, understanding and building knowledge (Cassidy et al., 2007). Blogs provide a forum for learning based on the expression and discussion of individual ideas (Williams and Jacobs 2004). Blog posting provides a record of the evolution of ideas as they unfold and can be used by the student and others to engage in thoughtful dialogues. In sum, blogs have the potential to support the construction of knowledge.

Blogging for instructional purposes was seen to be useful in a study of 24 educators who had published articles about blogs (Brescia and Miller, 2006). The findings indicated that all participants agreed that the blog could be student led and used as a 'knowledge log' to archive and allow reflection on learning.

Blogging was found to have a different use in a study by Chen and Bonk (2008), who carried out a survey and case study of 51 postgraduates in China. This highlighted the way in which blogs could be used as a peer assessment tool

throughout a course on an undergraduate language programme. Students reported that their writing skills had improved as they used their blogs to communicate with the tutor and other course members. Sharing feelings and marking each other's blogs helped to reflect on their learning processes and activity. However Chen and Bonk (2008) suggested a weakness was that the tutors in the study took over the blogs and there was a lack of students' voice in assessing the use of blogs.

Coutinho (2007) found, through a survey of 23 undergraduates studying education and communication technology, that learners not only reported that blogging helped with understanding knowledge and reorganizing thoughts, but also helped on the social side with classroom interactions. Cooperative learning was the central object of study: students worked together to develop their own and each other's learning. At the end of the semester, students filled a five-point Likert scale online questionnaire evaluating their experience and found the blog to be a tool to allow collaborative team learning. Zeng and Harris (2005) also found a collaborative function for blogs in an online health information management course. Using mainly survey as its methodology, 55% of students agreed that blogs aided their learning in class, 50% also thought that blogs increased the intellectual exchange between students and 63% agreed that blogs could serve as a medium for reflective thinking and writing. However, the methodology used could be criticized on the basis that the data were collected through use of one method (a qualitative approach) and the findings may not have gone any further than a belief that using blogs was a good idea.

One of the biggest claims for blogging as a pedagogic practice is that that it is in the nature of the blogging to lead to collaboration and a learning community (e.g. Armstrong et al. 2004). However, as seen earlier this is not an automatic outcome; the tutor must structure the experience and shape the class expectations and values towards online blogs. This would suggest a CPD element for tutors. Collaboration in itself is not a straightforward concept and while it can be defined as working towards a common goal Blau (2011) decided that most studies on blogging were really referring to 'knowledge sharing'. Deeper levels of collaboration can be seen for example in Miyazoe and Anderson (2012a) in which a digital workspace was provided to prompt group work writing and editing. Coyle (2007) reported on the wiki as a collaborative tool, a kind of joint blog, but found that students were uneasy editing others' work.

Downes (2004) and Edbauer et al. (2005) investigated the role of blogs in developing literacy. In this sense blogging represents 'value added' as, by writing, students are meeting learning objectives. However the quality of feedback on blogging is not assured. For example Duffy and Bruns (2006) would question the degree of reflection evidenced in students' blogs and reported that comments in their study were very superficial, perhaps showing students reluctance to 'teach' or correct others literacy or a simple acceptance of gaps in language skills.

Blogs have also been seen as a support for academic literacy (Bloch, 2007; Downes, 2004; Williams and Jacobs, 2004). By chronologically ordering the postings writing is accessible over time giving an opportunity to track

development and feedback.

Murry and Hourigan (2005) too suggested the structure of the bog is beneficial for learning because it chronologically orders the user's postings and, in doing so, allows the student to be accountable for their own assessment outcomes. This perhaps draws a pedagogical conclusion from a technological property. Dippold (2009) suggested that blogs are viewed as providing the opportunity for self-reflection and interactive learning and this view seemed to be supported by Williams and Jacobs (2004), who described blogs as having 'the capacity to engage people in collaborative activity, knowledge sharing, reflection and debate, where complex and expensive technology has failed' (p.232).

Kukkonen et al. (2011) studied blogging within a joint teacher and student initiative. The study focused on student teachers working in primary schools. Kukkonen stated the students needed help to scaffold their own learning and formulate their own problems. The blogs helped them to make personal meaning and to carry out inquiry-based practice whilst having access to their peers in other schools. In consequence, using the technology gave them a foundation on 'learning how to learn'. They reported increased confidence in accessing and applying information – key skills needed to develop as lifelong learners. Again there was added value in blogging itself because as new teachers they might be asked to incorporate ICT into teaching and learning.

The research of Ferdig and Trammel (2004) draws on Vygotsky (1978) to assess the educational value of blogs. They argue that because the blog is discursive it can support knowledge creation and naturally leads the blogger to be reflective

and analytical. By revisiting and hyper-linking material the learning experience is enriched. Compared to discussion forums such as newsgroups and bulletin boards, Ferdig and Trammel (2004) contend the blogs are more suited for academic purpose and might promote deep learning conversations.

Coutinho (2007) studied 23 undergraduate students of Educational Communication Technology in Portugal. In this study he asked students to blog their responses to selected topics and provide online information for the whole class. The key finding of this study was that students considered blogs as powerful tools for communication and the blogs helped them to better understand the topics and consolidate knowledge. This suggestion is that just posting and reading are not particularly good learning experiences in blogging but choosing and synthesizing information was more productive learning activity.

Writing blogs, and particularly sourcing material for blogs, can help students become subject-matter experts according to Blood (2002). However students have to learn that there is a three-step process involved in blogging: scouring, filtering and posting. The expectation is the blogger scours the Internet for relevant resources, then posts, re-posts and critiques the material. These steps all need support and instruction. Through this process, bloggers are exposed to vast amounts of information on their given topic, even if they do not comment on everything they find. Doing this regularly enables the blogger to develop an ever-growing knowledge base on their chosen topic. This is to stress the focus of blogs on knowledge rather than social presence and according to Baggetun and

Wasson (2006, pp.469) the case for the use of blogs rests on the idea that blogging can provide a more 'efficient' way of learning. Methodologically the study focused on analysis of content rather than context of the blog, i.e. what was being blogged rather than the experience of the learner. The implication being that content is important as evidence of knowledge gained by the students.

Constraints on learners and their differentiated response to blogging

While it is often argued that learners have a natural affinity to technology, use of blogs is often differentiated. Learner characteristics (demographic or personality) are a part of the picture when studying the reception of a tool such as a blog. Prensky's digital native/digital immigrant dualism set up a divide between older and younger users of technology. (Prensky, 2001) But this has been shown to be an inadequate explanation of young people's competence and effectiveness with digital media and services (Bayne and Ross, 2007; Bennett, Maton, and Kervin, 2008; Selwyn, 2009).

Prinsen et al. (2007) found that gender; socio-cultural background and ability all had an influence on participation in discussion forums. McGuigan and Normand (2011), working in Dundee on an innovative online professional teaching qualification for college lecturers, investigated the use of blogs as a collaborative tool. The findings highlighted the complexity of factors that impacted on if and when learners use the blog. The research context in their study was unusual as all bloggers were over 41 years of age and those who took part, as volunteers, were all postgraduates. The undergraduates who might be expected to see themselves as 'digital natives' did not want to participate. They concluded the

postgraduates are more confident about expressing their views. They also found, like Robinson (2010), that the relationship between being technically competent and actually joining-in was not straightforward. Highly technically competent people may not want to blog. The study also found 60% of learners did not find the blog useful and did not continue with it for very long into the first term. This, the researchers put-down to using 'Blackboard', which they felt lacked the functionality of other social media tools.

Subject discipline was an area for enquiry in McGuigan and Normand's (2011) work. This study investigated the efficacy of a new blog tool in promoting learning and enabling social interaction and collaboration among participants on an innovative online professional teaching qualification programme for college lecturers. It spanned six disciplines, following a CPD programme. Those that participated in the blogs were disproportionately (25%) design lecturers. An explanation may be that these lecturers may relate to the visual and aesthetic component of communicative blogging more so than, say, a teacher of maths.

Minocha (2009) reported positively on using blogs, wikis and social software in their literature review focusing on education and training. Students were reported to have gained transferable skills such as team working, negotiation, communication and managing digital identities. They also reported on different attitudes to blogging and that some students had concerns about usability, privacy and the public nature of social software tools for academic activities. For these reason some would not blog.

Further light is shed on differing attitudes towards blogging in Bartholomew et

al.'s (2012) study of 28 undergraduates on a course named, 'Introduction to Child Development'. The students showed distinct differences in both quantity and quality of blogging. The findings suggested there was a difficult threshold to cross for those who were unfamiliar with publicly expressing their ideas on a regular basis.

Andergassen et al. (2009) address the issue of why students choose not to blog. A university in Austria had offered free weblogs to all students and staff to use on an unstructured basis, for leisure or informal learning. Open interviews were carried out with 3 active bloggers, 2 non-bloggers and 3 former bloggers. The main reasons for students not to keep a blog included a preference for instant gratification online communication and concerns about privacy. The students who liked blogging said it was intrinsic motivation that kept them attending to their blog. As such it could be said the non-bloggers were affected by external factors and the bloggers were affected by internal factors.

Freeman et al. (2006) carried out a study of blogs in a HE setting in Canada. Here again pre-service teachers were not given directions as to what to blog. They studied nine graduate students' reflective accounts of blogging. Negative perceptions included time constraints and the fact that people might read the blog as it was in public view. This concurred with Hammond's (1999) work on online discussion within three case studies, which showed that non-participants were concerned by the removed audience for communication, what they said was permanent and posting could not be taken back in response to audience feedback. Freeman et al.'s study did not however run for very long and

potentially may not have given enough time for the students to settle into blogging; the students strategic focus may have been on finishing their assessed pieces of work. There was no feedback to their posts and this might have affected their commitment to posting.

Studies, such as the one by Rosanna et al. (2007) suggest that there may be personality predictors of blogging. They report 'people who are high in openness to new experience are likely to be bloggers' (Rosanna et al. 2007 p9). However Hughes et al. (2012), using a general population sample (N = 300) and the same personality inventories as Rosanna et al. (2007) - i.e.; Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness-to-Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Sociability and Need-for-Cognition - found that certain traits, such as openness, were related to online socializing and information seeking/exchange practice. However while important the findings were not as clear as Rosanna's research had suggested. The results reveal differential impact of personality traits in respect to Facebook and Twitter usage.

There is a large body of literature about the psychological aspects of blogs for leisure and 'hobby' purposes that might be useful in understanding why people blog. Postmes, Spears and Lea (2002) stated that when individuals perceive themselves to be anonymous they report information that is more revealing than they realise due to a sense of de-personalisation and de-individualisation. This is supported by Joinson (2001) who discussed how some bloggers have reduced awareness of the other individuals they are communicating with. Joinson talked about two types of self-awareness: public and private. Prentice-Dunn and Rogers

(1982) first spoke of this long before blogging became a popular hobby, or an educational intervention, and said people with high public self-awareness are concerned with how others see them in public; so manage appearance and self-expression for their audience.

John and Sriveastava (1999) suggested that individuals who are characterized by anxiety, worry and nervousness may blog to reduce loneliness and form social connections with others. Their findings about general blogging are that women in particular are more likely to maintain a blog to socialize with others. However this study was carried out in the context of early adopters and perhaps different findings may be expected as blogging or at least online exchange has become routine.

Park, Heo and Romee (2011) studied blogs in adult learning. They asked 70 adult bloggers in Korea about their blogging activity and their perspective on learning. They were asked about how far they identified with four particular perspectives on learning: learning as an acquisition process; a reflection process; a practice-based community process and an embodied co-emergent process. They found all of these perspectives were all well represented in the data and overall the authors decided that learning through a blog was a very different process from formal, instructional education. They felt blogging was self-directed, practical, situated, unlimited, accessible and self-regulated. The study implied blogs would bring meaningful learning to adults. It also suggested adults might accept blogs for informal learning but may have very different ideas about using blogs for formal learning as they had come to know it.

The role of the educator

Andrés (2012) suggests that technology changes teachers and learners alike: digital environments challenge the traditional educational establishment by blurring the boundaries between the recipient of knowledge and the knowledge provider. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) allows time and space outside the classroom, but the tutor needs to develop skills to use a blog and Andrés (2012) aimed to address this concern by discussing design and management of an online learning space for a face-to-face undergraduate Spanish course using proprietary technology. Focusing on specific features and designs for online learning interactions, this paper discusses practicalities of designing for effectiveness, both from a pedagogical perspective and from the user's interface standpoint.

The integration of blogging into educational processes can be a cause for anxiety but models to support tutors are offered by Kerwalla, Minocha, Kirkup and Conole (2008a). Their case study was a university MBA course supported by blogging. They used interviews to develop an empirically grounded framework for the introduction of blogging into HE coursework. Their five main factors for successful blogging were: 1) course integration of technology 2) clarification of the role the technology should play in the course 3) offering the students guidance on best practice on using the technology 4) making sure there are optimal chances for collaboration and socialization and 5) implementing activities that foster continual development of the learning community. However the models offered were largely tutor led and may be seen as limiting or teacher

centred.

Tutors need to make a decision as to the type of blogs they wish to promote. A study by Yang and Chang (2014) looked at two types of blogs: 1) solitary blogs as personal portfolio work and 2) blogs used interactively to facilitate peer interaction in which peers can comment on the content of the students' blogs. In that study, 154 graduates and undergraduate students blogged for two semesters and the results showed that the interactive blogs was seen as more engaging and motivational, though both were rated as useful to learn from.

Chu and Kwan and Warning (2012) suggest while blogging is useful its use in professional education is limited. The social nature of blogging can support communication and facilitate learning between students. Their study involved undergraduate information management students (N=53) who used three different blogging platforms. They used interview questionnaires to find the students' evaluation of the blogs. The results revealed that the students had positive perceptions of blogging as a tool for mutual support and to facilitate information management, self-reflection and communication, but that they were disappointed in their tutors' input into the blog. They perceived the tutors' communication and comments needed improvement to emulate a classroom situation by giving appropriate evaluation and feedback. This suggests the role of the educator should be made clear before the blogging starts and the type of assessment needs to be negotiated between the tutor and the awarding body and student. The researchers proposed a more constructivist approach to postgraduate pedagogy.

Maor (2003) found successful online learning is associated with constructivist pedagogies. The well-known and often-repeated advice to teachers going online is that they will have to move from their position as the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side'. This implies that students learning online are constructing their own knowledge from the available information, rather than accepting their knowledge whole from 'the master'. It is not enough however to leave the students free to paste what they will and guiding is only one role for the online tutor. The (often misunderstood) role of 'guide on the side' is crucial to the success of this kind of educational setting according to Salmon (1999; 2002).

Bartholomew et al. (2012) suggest that the integration of blogging into a collaborative course structure may create difficulties because traditional courses are content-led and linear. Promoting different ways of knowing and understanding information challenges the tutors and learners and can unsettle expectations. The course in Bartholomew's study was an introduction to child development programme. The instructors collected data for the research as participant observers. They looked at emails, meetings and classroom questions and experiences. Individual blogging was an assessed part of the course in the first section of the research and a community blog was assessed in second. Choosing the type of blog used was considered to be the most important decision of blog management. Individual blogs, where students post ideas independent of their classmates, may generate commentary that reinforces participation and offers a chance for self-reflection. This top down approach to information could limit potential for new and unexplored avenues of thought that detracts from group solving problems. The tutor needs to know how a community or individual

blog may enhance or limit what the learning outcome is for that situation. Previous research, for example, by Mazzolini and Masison (2003) has shown how tutors who dominate forums by frequent postings can put students off participating.

Blau et al. (2012) reported on a study, similar to the one reported in this thesis, in which blogging was carried out without active facilitation by instructors. There was a strong focus on sharing experiences and only a quarter of the posts focused on providing information. The authors suggested that the lack of a tutor role may have dampened participation but a more active role for tutors would have lost some of the creativity and learner control. In an earlier paper Blau (2011) goes as far as to say that students should facilitate blogs, otherwise the opportunity to change roles and learn how to be an independent learner will be lost. However such learner creativity should not be taken for granted. Ho, Chang and Sung (2009) explored the behaviour of teachers on an unstructured professional development blog. They found that postings mostly focused on providing information rather than seeking communication and knowledge exchange.

Another study using blogs in an unstructured environment was Paulus, Payne and Jahns (2009). They claimed, as with Blau et al. (2012), that when instructors do not rely on transmission strategies enhanced peer learning can occur. The experience of blogging can change pedagogical beliefs of the participants from receivers of information to constructors of meaning. Research is suggesting that technology can disrupt the way learning and teaching has been done. The

educational use of a blog has the potential of shifting the focus of learning. Blau (2011) recommended that tutors consider their role carefully and guide the students to focus on sharing experiences rather than information, explicitly asking them to provide feedback and promote dialogue. If the student's role changes to become more of a Contributor then the tutor's role will need to change also.

The effectiveness of student-centred teaching and learning is related in the literature to the pedagogical beliefs held by the instructors and learners. Previous experience and knowledge will shape pedagogical beliefs, not just those of the teacher but of the adults being taught. Beliefs are considered to be relatively stable and resistant to change. Lin and Chan (2007) say that, due to the resilient nature of the belief system, even well designed programs have little effect on pre-existing pedagogical beliefs. A paper by Fox (1983) described the different ideas that teachers have about teaching: for some it is about the transfer of knowledge as a commodity, so that learning materials deliver in a predetermined pattern, but for others teaching is a journey in which learners need to construct personal meaning. These comments were not, of course, made in the context of blogging but help remind us that metaphors or conceptions of teaching are important.

For some, blogging suggests a new pedagogy. However O' Donnell (2010) found that in practice teaching methods stay unchanged and that blogging is 'just' an extension of the old way of getting people to discuss. He compares networking theories of learning with surface models of learning, suggesting blogs can be

'just' vanity publishing or used to increase productivity of what we already do. In contrast, Jenkins (2006), discussing educational blogs, saw their use as being a tool for the participatory culture that is present in education, particularly in HE. Jenkins describes features of this culture as having relatively low barriers to civic engagement with students being able to create and share in an informal mentorship. Jenkins (2006), building on earlier work by Salmon and others, uses the phrase 'distributed cognition' to refer to tools that externalize and expand human intelligence.

A recent paper by Johannesen and Habib (2010) has a main message about the different influences in technology use and the community using it. They imply that the use of technology is influenced by a wider community and in particular a discipline culture. In their case study of HE in Norway, they looked at three different faculties or teaching areas. The tutors were interviewed and kept diaries of their own use of technology. Although the study was about the VLE, not a blog, it strongly suggests that designers and users shape technology. Tools are used according to tutors' pedagogical beliefs. Tools that are said to be designed for collaboration could be changed or 'translated' to become a tool that transmits the tutor's materials. The VLE for instance was disregarded as appropriate for learning in the Faculty of Education, yet useful in the Faculty of Engineering. Interestingly in a third faculty, the one of nursing, tutors had a more open mind to the VLE and used multiple assessments as a formative assessment tool. Students devised their own multiple-choice exercises - the power was given to the students to lead their own use of the tools. Straub (2009) too examined individuals' adoption of technology and theorized why one person would adopt

technology whilst another resisted. The conclusion was that individuals adopt unique ways of working with technology based on their social context and perceptions.

Continual professional development (CPD)

Throughout this study I have seen and followed many educational blogs. Some, such as Wendy Drexler (2010) highlight how to work the tools, or introduce new tools, such as Mind-Mapping software http://www.wendydrexler.com. The majority offer a critique of education; in particular they note educationalists' low use of technology. This is seen as innate conservatism on the part of learners, tutors, curriculum designers and institutions. At the time of this study, bloggers about blogging seem happy to take the role as innovators and crusaders; giving examples from their own curriculum area as to how they have used blogs to challenge educational thinking. Key themes include *the student as the producer* as in Downs' half hour: Downes (2007). Other blogs focus on the free and creative opportunities offered by open source material, for example 'CCK08' a course blog which has been widely accessed, http://teachweb2.blogspot.com/2008/11/cck08-connectivism-networked-studentthe.html. Technology champions argue for a redesign of teaching and learning around an organizing principle of student creation of new knowledge. The educator is no longer seen as a delivery vehicle. The changing role for educators is another theme from a well-cited blog by Siemens (2009).

The expansion of the technology in teaching and learning has been presented in more academic literature too as a solution to many teaching and learning

challenges. A major challenge remains however, in that staff developers themselves are often ill equipped for using ICTs in their own teaching and courses, let alone for assisting academic staff to follow suit (D'Andrea and Gosling, 2005). In response to these challenges, Unwin (2007) proposes a model of professional development that entails the establishment of professional learning communities as a way to counteract the sense of ontological insecurity. Following from the 'communities of practice' concept developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), such learning communities are important as they could contribute toward lecturers reconceptualising their professional identities.

In spite of huge investment in schools, FE and HE institutions, a common observation is that ICT is rarely used to the extent that it could be. Blin and Munro (2008) used activity theory to offer an analysis of teaching and learning with VLEs. They found tension between the university goal of making efficiencies and at the same time promoting pedagogical change. Students may feel the move towards multi-media labs and self-directed learning is not meeting their expectations of how learning is done. Blin and Munro collected evidence that technology has not actually disrupted teaching practice because there has been little change to behaviourist content-driven models.

Hemmi, Bayne and Land (2009) carried out a virtual ethnographic study on three HE courses, to examine the pedagogical use of wikis and web blogs in faculties of divinity and design engineering. The clear view was that the HE applications of web 2.0 technologies sit uncomfortably within existing HE

practice. Following Tim Berners-Lee (2000), the authors see the web as a democratic, personal and 'Do It Yourself' medium of communication, but this vision is often lost on educators. Selwyn (2007), using a critical theory perspective, agreed that the enthusiastic rhetoric about eLearning and the use of ICT does not match the reality. Laurillard (2006) found that technology is used to support traditional modes of teaching and does little more than improve the quality of presentations. So, although the rhetoric is that technology or eLearning can improve learning for students, transformation has not happened on the scale expected. Brill and Galloway (2007) suggest that tutors' administration, teaching and research duties mean they do not find it easy to be innovative and change teaching practices.

One reason for lack of change is that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers is not as effective as it could be. In the case study college there seems to be a tension between ensuring consistency of ICT on every course and individual teacher's enjoyment or ownership of their technology (Casserley 2012). At a policy level CPD is often competence driven and follow through focuses on technical actions.

Models of adoption include the problematic ideas that individuals can be grouped as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, sceptics and laggards (Rogers, 1995). The technical skills of making a computer work could be considered as a basic teaching activity, whilst the pedagogical skills of knowing what learning will take place, and using technology to address specific teaching issues, is more complex. The research points to what works: technical

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support, showcasing, cascading, surgeries, whole school training events, on-going evaluation and refinement. All of this should be done on a personalised basis considering the constraints and the strengths in the system and placing teachers' own practice and reflection at the head of CPD. Conversely what affects the tutor's use of technology negatively is lack of time to collaborate, being trained in a tool without considering pedagogy and being asked to replicate someone else's practice and 'top down' CPD that fails to help teachers to own their own ICT (Ofsted, 2004).

Researchers such as Klein, Nir-Gal and Daron (2000) suggest that mediating or expanding and encouraging behaviours would regulate learners' ICT activity while reactive strategies, would lead to less educational gain and greater learner disillusionment. Therefore successful innovations need to address cognitive, emotional and contextual concerns. . JISC (2010) offers a great deal of guidance and example through case studies. The pathways a tutor can take in using technology are set down as a hierarchy with 'simple to use' offering an entry point. Blogs are in a simple to use category. 'Assessed blogging helps to engage students in more challenging academic topics' claims JISC (2001: p8) who found that University tutors reported that blogs can provide a better insight into a student's academic level and assist in face-to-face tutorials. The undergraduate students' feedback about blogs was positive. They liked blogging; they found the tool easy to use and that it 'pump-primes' discussion in course tutorials. Group blogging helps to unite a diverse body of students indicating that blogs should be central, rather than peripheral, to the course.

Casserley (2012) argues in her study of the case study college, there was a shortage of practitioners skilled in using any technology. It was suggested that equipment was being bought in by technicians and managers in order to support a behaviourist model of teaching with tools will used to project or pass on information. All respondents in a survey reported the tutor controlled the ICT tools. Casserley's recommendations were to involve teachers in selecting equipment and software that would support collaborative learning.

ICT-literate teachers display both pedagogical awareness and confidence in using ICT – a point taken up in recent notions of the Technological, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) framework. This framework helped Mishra and Koehler (2006) to articulate a clear approach to teaching (learning technology by design), and also served as an analytical lens for studying the development of teacher knowledge about educational technology. Mostert and Quninn (2009) reported on their use of TPCK framework with HE practitioners in South Africa. They frown on the use of ICT without a pedagogical framework as does Laurillard (2001), Mishra and Koehler (2006) and Unwin (2007). There needs to be a clear answer to why and how the ICT contributes. In the case of blogging the claims are well themed but little theory is offered to provide effective ways of engaging blogs for learning.

The, now-abolished, British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) released several studies offering a framework to tutors working in this area – for example 'Harnessing Technology' (Becta 2005) highlights significant issues surrounding the uses of technology for people working in FE

and schools. A reported survey showed FE tutors are under skilled and do not use ICT to its best advantage due to time constraints. Learning from each other, having time to experiment, to learn privately or with colleagues, to have practice in using new technology were emphasised as a support for teacher development in the report. Tutors must be involved and have good attitudes to blogging as a practice in order for it to work in a blended course context.

Technology and change

Cuban (2001) amongst others, and later Somekh (2008) in particular, consider the adoption of technology in a school context, drawing attention to the lack of fit between technology and curriculum: affordances such as collaboration and project inquiries do not suit assessment practices or the 'grammar of schooling'. Blogs may become an add-on to the classroom experience.

Another issue about blogging is the equipment available to students and tutors. When considering the whole system of the tutor, computer rooms, organization of curriculum and student background. , ICT could be useful to raise the idea of the 'activity system', which Engestrom (1993) describes as the 'best kept secret in academia' (pg64). In the context of technology and tutor use, activity theory draws attention to a conflict between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices; there is no simple answer to the question of whether tutors are able to use technology for desirable goals, as the answer depends on all of the system.

If the tutor is seen as the route to successful activity in the classroom with technology, he or she may be unable to meet the challenge due to their own inadequate skill base, lack of time and poor attitudes to supporting technology

that could mirror adult learners' views about accepting blogs or tools online (Murphy et al., 2008).

Another paper that discusses teachers designing and changing HE is Andres (2012), who focuses on meta-cognition and learning strategies when using blogs. Other writers suggest the use of the blog will depend on the students, the environment and the way the innovation is perceived in terms of learning theory.

Summary and discussion

This review has considered the background of the study by engaging with research that explores the use of blogging and its consequences for teaching and learning. It has also discussed the complexities of the relationship between technology (in the form of blogs), the tutor, and the learner. When it comes to blogs, the literature shows that they are valued not just for their content, but for emotional support, helping to keep students focused on their course and to retain them through the difficulties of completion. It is also known from the research that many teachers will use a blog as an assessment of learning tool, but fewer will see the blog as a tool for students' meaning making and knowledge creation. The literature shows there is often a belief the tutor has to control and assess the blogs, so the power remains with the tutor to design the course.

Different rationales have been put forward as to why promoting blogging is useful in HE. Most researchers have given favourable reports of blogs, which raises the suspicion of a bias towards optimism. There is plenty of research to

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say that the use of blogging is problematic due to time and other constraints. What seems important in affecting take up is the tutor's role, though this is not a simple matter and there is case for the non-interventionist approach as used in this study. The hype surrounding technology in education is well discussed in Gousseti (2010) and there is a need to be cautious about the optimistic reporting of blogs use in HE. There is a kind of inevitability implied in the discussion of technology and a belief that pedagogy should change with technology. In reality the structure of the curriculum and assessment will determine whether blogging will become the new basis for pedagogy or just another fleeting whim.

CHAPTER 3. Methodology and methods

Chapter 2 described the literature related to blogging and issues of pedagogy, as well as the consequences of using ICT to support teaching and learning. Moving on, this chapter provides a detailed account of the overall methodology for the study: the context, methods, ethical issues and quality criteria.

Methodology

This is an interpretive and exploratory study, which investigates a particular case of blogging. In particular it aims to discover how the non-traditional adult learner, returning to education, participated or not in blogging. Within the overarching question the study aimed to address In particular it aims to address three more precise sub-questions:

- Who amongst these learners blog?

- Why do students blog?

- What encourages or discourages students to blog?

Case study

A case study is defined as a single instance of a bounded system, for example a class of 'real people in a real situation' (Cohen et al. 2000: p181). There is usually a resonance between case studies and interpretive methodologies. In recent years the term case study has become increasingly associated with in-depth exploration of a particular context, using largely qualitative methods within interpretive enquiry (Stake, 1995). Case studies are often, but not necessarily,

interpretive. Interpretivism seeks to understand the meaning, which cultural and institutional practices have for those taking part. Interpretivism is therefore contrasted with positivism, which sees the world, and the conceptual categories we use to describe the world, as 'real'. There is no single source for defining interpretivism, nor a single 'take' on it's meaning, but there are different sources of 'inspiration' and reference. The theoretical perspective of interpretivism suggests that human beings cannot have knowledge of the world independent of what is in their minds. Hammond and Wellington (2013) see the goal of interpretivist research being to understand the meaning, which cultural and institutional practices have for those taking part. Large-scale research gives you associations; small-scale research gives you processes. If the world of the 2+2 student is mediated through their ideas and concepts, the implication is that blogging cannot be understood solely, or even primarily, in terms of cause and effect relationships on a general scale.

Good case studies are difficult to carry out (Yin 1994: p11) as they are inherently 'messy' requiring at times opportunist strategies of data collection. Typically they involve flexibility, leave trails, which are not pursued and discover new avenues, which only open up late in the day. The case study strategy lacks methodological sophistication according to Atkinson and Delamont (1993) who critique case study research in an educational context (p210); they see the case study researchers as 'slapdash advocates' of a 'vaguely ethnographic approach' (p209). Case study research is often accused of being overly descriptive.

However, case study supporters argue that its flexibility and mix of methods are

its strengths. It reports in-depth, the context is clear and hence more relatable, it can adapt to what is important rather than look for phenomena with a pre-determined outlook.

There are several issues to consider in a case study, not least that of generalizability. Generalizability describes the extent to which research findings can be applied to settings other than that in which they were originally tested. Walker (1993), raised two critical questions: one, how can any one instance offer a generalized view of the field and two, even if it is valuable in its own terms what use can be made of the study? However, these criticisms may miss the point of case study, as its aim may be to test, or to develop, theory 'grounded' in the reality of the situation.

Bassey (1981) makes an important distinction between generalizability and relatability, and challenges much of traditional research as being unrelatable to the practitioner. Case studies, he argues, are relatable as other practitioners can see characteristics, which apply to their situation even if the situation as a whole does not match their workplace completely. The detailed description within a case study encourages relatability by, for example, providing a chronological narrative of events and reporting the wider context rather than the 'discrete variable'. Perhaps this approach is particularly valuable in the context of new practices such as blogging, which may appear esoteric and abstract without an in-depth case study approach.

Case studies approaches are more inclined to be of direct interest and benefit to practitioners. The case study is more likely to generate theories that are relevant

to educators across the world by offering them ways to understand practice and provide alternative approaches to carrying out their own teaching role. As Bassey (1981) put it 'I submit that an important criterion for judging the merit of a case study is the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study. The reliability of a case study is more important that the generalizability' (p85). The case study helps in understanding a very complex situation; in the words of Walker 1993 (p66) its aim is to put 'flesh and blood on the skeleton'.

Yin (1984) identifies several types of case study: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. Exploratory studies set out to investigate a phenomenon with an open mind as to what might be found. Exploratory studies might easily lead on to theory generation. Descriptive cases are much more structured and often contain vignettes or narratives. These however might be quite analytical descriptions, for example generated with a sense of the extent to which descriptions are typical/representative and are searched for as patterns. Explanatory cases are more concerned with the testing of theories to explain the phenomena. Descriptive case studies have a particular importance in the study of new technologies, as by definition not much is known about the ways that these new technologies are used. A point to stress here is that, in practice, case studies of technology in particular are likely to have a hybrid character. For example Tearle (2003), in a study of ICT use in a school, which seemed to make very good use of technology, describes this as exploratory but it is also quite heavily descriptive. An interesting feature of this, and many other studies, is that while it

is described as taking an interpretive approach it is very much concerned with cause and effect style explanation.

Although cases are often said to be chosen with a particular aim in mind, for example to present the typical case, the unusual case or the innovatory case, in practice most case studies come down to questions of access. The researcher must have access to the site and the subjects. For example in the Tearle (2003) study the researcher clearly chose an untypical case but, quite understandably, the particular school was chosen as it was one to which she could have access. In my case the study has already been described as insider research and one to which I had access in the normal course of everyday practice. In the introduction the site of the case study was described and it many respects this is a typical case of a college trying to develop ICT use in a context of competing demands and differentiated skills and attitudes among staff.

A distinction is usually made between multiple case study and single case study. The latter focuses on a single site, the former on one or more sites. In each the 'case' is a bounded system, for example a class or a school or a community. However the distinction is not as precise in practice; the same system, e.g. a school, can be a single case (the school) or a collection of multiple cases (the departments, the classes, the teachers). Later I explain that in this study there are multiple cases, i.e. three cohorts who were using the blogs, but in practice this was to a large extent established as single case as the similarities between cohorts outweighed the differences.

To sum up, this is an interpretive study in the sense that it understands

perceptions that participants have towards a phenomena (blogging) in their own social world. However, as described in the methods section, it is claiming that there are aspects of the phenomena that can be represented objectively, for example rates of participation, that can be represented and other aspects, such as content analysis, which are presented with a certain degree of objectivity. It is exploratory research in that it is looking at a new practice (blogging) in a new context and seeking to generate ways of understanding that practice. This approach can be contrasted to a hypothesis-testing, deductive approach. It has a strong descriptive element, as the nature of the context needs to be understood. In Yin's (1984) classification an exploratory study can be a precursor for other studies and it is hoped that this study will generate further research in the field of blogging. It is focused on the overarching phenomena of blogging and in this sense constitutes a single case. However within this case there are differentiated experiences and outcomes. It is an insider study though not an action research study or a study of my practice.

The case in more detail

Robson describes case study methodology as: 'A strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence' (Robson, 1994, P5). This fits my study in that the research is associated with real life, relies on multiple research methods and is of one particular case.

My case study concerns the introduction of blogging and the experiences of three cohorts of learners taking a child studies programme at a college in

Warwickshire, England. For my research blogs were introduced to students at the start of their academic years. For cohort A this was September 2008 when students were already starting their second year, for cohort B this was also September 2008, when students were starting their first year, and September 2009 when again students were starting their first year.

Blogs were introduced to students through a discussion about the usefulness of blogging, illustrated with examples from the literature. It was suggested that students might like to try to blog, and were encouraged to set one up though they were also told that they would not be pressured to do so and their blogging would not be graded.

The college librarian led this session by showing examples of blogs taken from the wider community of early childhood educators and given brief instructions on how to create a blog. The platform chosen was Blogger as it was felt that this was perhaps more intuitive than other platform we had investigated. Blogger was also free. Furthermore as Blogger belonged to users and not the college blogging could be used beyond the end of the programme quite easily. A drawback, as seen later, was that some authors were uncertain as to who had access to their blogs and some may have felt 'safer' using a college platform.

Following the session, most set up their own blogs. The librarian offered additional support for this but most students used peer support to set-up to trouble shoots any problems. Nearly all blogs were set up in the first two weeks of the programme, with a few students joining later. Students were encouraged to develop these blogs over the course of the programme. As tutor I viewed the

blogs occasionally wrote comments and monitored the blogs for inappropriate use. I prompted students to use the blogs but again stressed this was not compulsory. With permission I showed some examples of blogs and made references to what had been blogged fairly regularly. To monitor the growth between different cohorts' blogging networks, I kept a research diary (Appendix 4) and periodically looked at the blog followers. As an insider researcher, students also told me if they read or joined another blog.

This hands-off strategy was an unusual one to take in the research on blogging. In most studies blogs are integrated into course work more clearly and often asked to put up a minimum number of blog posts (e.g. Glass and Spiegelman, 2007 and Hain and Back, 2008). 'Instructors' often provide their own feedback using comment boxes; this was not something that I did. In my study students were allowed to develop as they saw fit. The aim was to allow authentic networks to grow, or not.

Access to the college as a case study site was made possible, as these were groups I taught and I gained permission from students to undertake a study of their blogging practice (ethical issues associated with the study are discussed in-depth later). Students were Early Years 2+2 BA honours students (later called Childhood, Education and Society BA). All students were included in the study which took place over three academic years. The three cohorts are described in more depth below and details of age distribution are given in table 3.

The cohorts

Cohort A

This was made up of 13 females aged between 21 and 56 years old. In terms of ethnicity 10 were white British women, two were black women educated in Africa, and one was an East Asian student with English as a second language (ESL). The two black women in Cohort A withdrew during the course.

Cohort B

This was a group of 13 women. The age range of this group was 21 to 51, similar to Cohort A. In terms of ethnicity there were two black students educated in Africa, the rest identified themselves as British. One of the black students had ESL. The two black women (B10 and 11) left so were not a part of the blogging study. B8 also withdrew for maternity leave; she was the only Level 3 student.

Cohort C

This was a group of 18 students, 15 women and 3 men. The age of this group ranged from 21 to 51. This was a similar range to cohorts A, and B. There was one black woman educated in Africa (with ESL); the rest of the group identified themselves as British. The black woman was absent for a majority of the course or came late or left early, so her class experiences were very solitary and although her blog was set up about she never posted.

Table 3. The age distribution of each cohort

Age in years	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
20-30	11	4	7
31-40	3	7	5
41-50	0	0	5
51-60	1	1	1

When applying, students wrote and talked at interview about why they wanted to join the programme. It turned out, not surprisingly, that all students had aspirations to be a teacher, social worker or lecturer. In terms of personal background, many had children and many were doing voluntary work or low paid jobs. Some could be described as having a stigmatized identity. Rightly or wrongly stigma may be affixed by the greater society to a person who differs from their cultural norms; such as a lone parent, early school leaver without qualifications, dyslexic learner. All these students had given themselves the title of 'technology illiterate'. Table 4 is an excerpt summarising statements on student application forms among one cohort (A).

Table 4. Initial course interview data

Work details	Career options	Ambitions	A bit about myself
Volunteer primary school for 2 hours a week. Dinner lady. Mother to 5 children	*Teaching or child advocacy or helping parents and families*	*Would like to travel*	*Hardworking ambitious need a job mixing with people*
Playgroup and local youth club once a week. Learning support in primary school as a volunteer	*Reception teacher*	*My degree my family*	*3 children, engaged since I was 19. My family are my priority.*
Cleaner in upper school. Voluntary day a week in primary school	*Primary school teacher*	*Home school my children when I have them and work with homeless families*	*I am a single Christian person who is passionate about life and education*

Mechanical engineer transport supervisor	*Working with SEN children speech therapist, primary teacher*	*My family. Live my dream.*	*Married no children (yet) like crafts reading camping photography*
Composite engineering –reading technical engineering drawings to produce components	*Social work child psychology lecturing researcher*	*Gain a higher qualification than this degree. Make a difference to those who need it.*	*I am a mother, a team player, like to be active in mind and body*
Volunteer at local school. Housing office. A voluntary and paid nursery nurse but out of work now.	*Unsure but want to teach somewhere.*	*None*	*I have a six year old. I have been married for 8 years. My family is my life.*
Glazing company. Book publishing company. Volunteer at a primary school for a day per week.	*Teach at a hospital school or be a guardian ad litem*	*Open a Shire Horse centre*	*Not over confidant. I think I am a perfectionist, which frustrates some people.*
Diet and fitness instructor 2 evenings a week. LSA at a primary school	*Social worker* *College lecturer*	*To visit China and India, tour America in a mobile home when my husband and I retire*	*A mother of 2 children. I want a job in social work, child protection or education would be a long held dream come true.*

Btec in caring services work in day nurseries	Teaching or social work	None	I am a lone parent with two children who are 9 and 5
Volunteer at victim support. Occasional volunteer at nursery class.	Primary school teacher	Travel when my children are older	I want to teach with all my heart and am determined to succeed.

The students defined themselves through their background experiences and education. The role of being a parent was used to talk about the child development theories they were learning about. Personality theorists such as Eric Erickson would refer to how a person did or did not integrate different parts or roles in their lives. If they were unable to manage these different roles, they would be classified as having an identity crisis according to Erickson's 1956 stage model of social identity. Role theory and symbolic interaction will encourage people to define themselves within a social world, a point we will come back to in the discussion about whether blogging did indeed affect students' identity.

Each new student took a 'Profiler' test at the beginning of their course – Profiler is a software program used to gauge and identify learning styles, areas for concern as well as reading, writing, numeracy and ICT 'educational ages'. Table 5 below describes the levels as rated against national curriculum progression. For example an E1 (entry level 1) matches at least notionally against the

achievement expected of a child at the end of key stage 1. Only L levels match against key stage qualification.

Table 5. Profiler tool and match against 'educational age' of learners

National Curriculum / Profiler code	Approximate educational age of the learners based on the National Curriculum	Is the learner high / medium / low risk
PE=pre entry	Below age 5	High
E1 (Entry level 1)	Age 5-7	High
E2 (Entry level 2)	Age 7-11	Medium
E3 (Entry level 3)	Age 11-14	Low
L1 (Level 1)	GCSE D-G	Low
L2 (Level 2)	GCSE A*-C	Low
L3 (Level 3)	AS	Low

Creating a profile involved about two-hours answering questions at a computer. The aim of using the software was to flag-up any students who might need additional support. Although this programme is used widely in my and other colleges, there are problems with the reliability or perhaps more so the validity

of the data. For example, there is only one opportunity to enter a response and once given response cannot be changed; this is not a natural context for writing. The test takes at least one hour to complete at a computer and many students are unsure about how to use a mouse and directional keys. The tests are completed at the beginning of the programme when students are possibly more anxious. However the tests do give some indication of 'base-line' levels. [It should here be noted that Profiler scores for Cohort A were already a year out of data when the blogs were set up as students in this cohort were in their second year of their programme]. Tables 6, 7 and 8 show the breakdown of Profiler scores in relation to the literacy tests that each learner took and, notwithstanding issues of reliability, the results indicate that the majority of the learners in every cohort were identified as having GCSE level or lower, and in some cases much lower, literacy scores. The ICT LL1 for ICT skills represents Lower Level 1, which shows a very weak skill level.

Table 6. Profile of Cohort A

Name	Age	Literacy	Numeracy	Dyslexia	Withdrew	Blogs	ICT
A1	20	E2	L1	Y	W	Y	LL1
A2	29	E2	L1	Y		Y	LL1
A3	29	L2	L2			Y	LL1
A4	28	L2	L1		W	N	LL1
A5	38	E2	L1	Y		N	LL1
A6	21	E2	L1	Y		N	LL1
A7	25	L2	L1			N	LL1
A8	38	L3	L2			Y	LL1
A9	27	E2	L2			N	LL1
A10	35	L2	L2	Y	W	N	LL1
A11	23	L2	L1	Y	W	N	LL1
A12	56	E2	L1	Y	W	N	LL1
A13	20	L2	L1			Y	LL1
A14	24	L2	L1			N	LL1
A15	27	L2	L2	Y		Y	LL1

Table 7. Profile of Cohort B

Name	Age	Literacy	Numeracy	Dyslexia	Withdrew	Blogs	ICT
B1	35	L3	L2			N	LL1
B2	32	L1	L2			Y	LL1
B3	30	L1	L2			Y	LL1
B4	34	L3	L2			Y	LL1
B5	31	L3	L3			Y	LL1
B6	28	L3	L2				L1
B7	34	L3	L3		W		Hl1
B8	21	L3	L2		W		Fail
B9	31	L3	L2				LL1
B10	51	E1	E1	Y	W		Fail
B11	38	E3	E3	Y	W		Fail
B12	22	L2	L1				HL1

Table 8. Profile of Cohort C

Name	Age	Literacy	Numeracy	Dyslexia	Status	Blogs	ICT
C1	27	L2	L1			Y	Ll1
C2	41	L1	L2	Y		Y	Ml2
C3	38	L1	L1			Y	Ml2
C4	23	L1	L1			Y	ML2
C5	22	L1	L1			N	ML2
C6	23	L1	L1		W	Y	LL1
C7	25	L1	L1			N	LL1
C8	38	L1	L3			Y	LL1
C9	48	E3	E3			N	LL1
C10	43	L1	L2		Y	Y	ML2
C11	42	L2	E2		Y	Y	LL1
C12	24	L1	L1			N	LL1
C13	31	L2	L2			N	ML2
C14	36	L1	E2			Y	HL1
C15	26	L1	L1			N	ML2
C16	51	L1	E3	Y		Y	LL1
C17	42	L1	E3			Y	HL1
C18	32	L3	L2		?	N	LL1

Notwithstanding issues of reliability the Profiler programme shows that the majority of the learners in every cohort were identified as having low literacy, IT and numeracy scores for commencing a degree course.

Table 9 shows the breakdown of Profiler scores in relation to the computer tests that each learner took for literacy.

Table 9. The Profiler scores for each cohort

Score level	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
Entry 1	0	1	0
Entry2	6	0	0
Entry3	0	1	1
Level 1	0	2	13
Level 2	8	1	3
Level 3	1	7	0

The figures show that all students lay in the range of Entry Level 1 to Level 3 from the lowest to highest category. The majority, 8 out of 15, in Cohort A were Level 2 GCSE grade A* to C. The majority in Cohort B were Level 1 and the majority in Cohort C were Level 1 GCSE grade D-G. It also shows the greatest

spread in Cohort B and lowest spread in Cohort A. Cohort C is more uniform with ten out of 15 (66%) at Level 1 (equivalent to GCSE grades D-G, according to the conversion table given with the Profiler software) and only five out of 15 (33%) at Level 2 (equivalent to GCSE grades A*-C).

My relationship to the case

As I am one of the course tutors in this study, I am undertaking an insider study. The choice of case is that of a college where I work and where I am well known and in which I have a status and history. My insider status is emphasised as I am the person developing the use of blogs within the college and taking a lead on promoting blogging with these students. My insider status gives me the advantage of understanding the context of the study, facilitating access and gaining a lot of incidental information about the behaviour of learners through participation in teaching, mentoring and occasionally socialising. However my insider status is a disadvantage as it introduces a close professional and at times personal connection with my research participants. In addition I might be so embedded in the organisation that I will miss things that someone looking from the outside would see. My participation may well alter student behaviour. In one sense this is only to be expected; I am promoting the use of blogs and this is a study of a case in which blogs have been promoted. However, student behaviour may be influenced by their relationship to myself as tutor, no matter how 'hands-off' I sought to be with blogging over the year. Cohen et al (2007) suggests the participant may display behaviour that they feel is required and this is an aspect of my study.

I can add here that I had little hands on experience of either the practice of blogging or the theoretical frameworks surrounding online activity at the start of this study. This was a study of emerging, not developed, tutor practice. The research was expected to acknowledge possible sources of bias and I would like to make clear this was not work carried out by a zealot in the cause of blogging, rather a busy practitioner with many, and competing, demands made on time and attention.

Methods

Researchers have, as here, used a range of methods in investigating blogging. These include participation tallies, content analysis; surveys and questionnaires; interviews and learning outcome data. The value of each method needs to be considered in relation to the research questions being asked. For example in trying to understand general issues of blogging a survey approach is valuable, in getting the in-depth picture interviews and reflective diaries provide useful evidence. The contents of blogs made by students were a major part of research carried out by Farmer et al. (2008), Glass and Spiegelman (2007) and Hain and Back (2008). Surveying is a well-accepted strategy employed by Coutinho (2007), Davi et al. (2007) and Ellison and Wu (2008). Focus groups, interviews and questionnaires were used by Dalgarno et al. (2013). Deng and Yuen (2013) adopted an exploratory case study approach with voluntary open-ended unstructured blogging activities that were monitored and recorded in research notes. In this study, the methods used were mixed and covered data about the blogs themselves as well as surveys and interviews. Data about blogs themselves

covered participation rates, followers and content analysis.

Participation rates

Data on participation rates were intended to provide an overall feel for the phenomenon, for example how extensive was it, how differentiated, were there any traces of networks being formed?

In looking at participation a question to consider here is whether some students kept other blogs apart from those provided by the college. This became an issue by the end of the programme as students were carrying out blog type activity within the Facebook platform. However for the most part of the study, consistent with prior research (e.g. Guadagnoet al. 2008), most bloggers in my study kept only one blog.

In order to measure participation, each student was coded by cohort (A, B and C) and by number (A1 to C18) with the number of posts per student recorded. The blog entries were counted first and then the number of words was counted and entered onto a table manually. The data were set out separately for the three cohorts and then in a further table combined the data. These data were later cross-referenced to Profiler tests were to see if there were associations between level of contribution and literacy level.

Followers

The fact that a blog has been made does not guarantee it will be read. However it was possible to see how many followers each blogger had. Students visiting a blog were able to become followers by clicking on the 'Join this site' button under

the 'Followers' widget. This had the advantage of enabling followers know of new posting (through RSS feeds) while bloggers themselves could get a sense of their audience and arguably an idea of social presence. It cannot always be assumed that followers read each blog. However, from first hand observation in classes I could see that followers did tend to read blogs, although of course their reading was not confined to the blogs to which they had signed up as followers.

Data on followers were first represented using 'Omnigraple' mapping tools and 'Excel' sheets in order to represent clearly the connections between bloggers and followers, but in the event it was clearer to represent the data in a simple word table. This example shows how the data were laid out.

Table 10. Extract showing an example of data about followers of blogs

A2	7 followers all own cohort.	A1
		A4
		A8
		A9
		A13
		A15

This extract shows that learner A2 had seven followers and these are named in the next column: A1, A4, A8, A9, A13 and A15. Recording followers can give some measure of the connectivity within and between cohorts.

Content analysis

Content analysis generally refers to the organization of naturally occurring text into appropriate categories in order to understand something about what is being communicated (thematic coding) and more broadly how it is being communicated (often called function coding). A unique feature of online activity is that data are easily accessible through online transcripts of activity. These are useful for transparency, however the researcher should be cautious about taking blogs or other online communication at face value.

In 2002, Chappel et al. viewed message analysis as providing useful clues about the character of online learning. Ducate and Lomicka (2008) and Henri and Pudelko (2003) used message analysis to throw light on the role of blogs in developing learning processes. Ducate and Lomica's (2008) year-long study of how self–expression was characterised in the blogosphere by French and German language students reported positively on the usefulness of the content analysis method. They concluded that blogging was a new type of social tool that could be examined using message analysis alongside interviews and questionnaires.

Rouke et al. (1999) categorised online learning processes into cognitive, social and teaching presences, while later studies such as Garrison and Anderson (2003) introduced analysis based on expanded theory about the community of inquiry (COI). The COI framework is a dynamic model of the necessary core elements for both the development of community and the pursuit of inquiry, in any educational environment. Its three core elements - cognitive, social and

teaching presence - have frequently been used as categories of analysis.

A key challenge in content analysis of posts is how can a code be considered a reliable representation of the message and, still more problematic, how can the code used for the message tell us something about the intention of the author or how it was received by the reader. Of course reliability can be increased if there is a high or acceptable level of inter reliability but this still does not get around the problem of validity.

In this study the aims of content analysis were limited. I wanted to give the reader a sense as to the subject or thematic content of the blogs. I was all too aware of the problems of coding for functional and for latent meaning, particular in the case of meanings that are hidden or concealed. I wanted to avoid over-analysing the posts and in this respect my study was like Lai (1997) who analysed messages by blog content. The codes for content were generated by reading every blog and taking notes of content at the level of 'unit of meaning' i.e. not the whole message but the part of a message linked by a common theme.

For example A3 posted this wry entry about her life at home:

> It's been yet another struggle – time constraints, technology!! And personal conflicts. I wish the kids could be looked after for a week to get it all done. This year has taught me not to be cocky…

Source: (A3 May 2008)

In other words I created inductively a list of topics, which emerged in the text. This entry was coded as *managing the home*. In the findings chapter it can be

seen that this category of managing the home was used for general non-course related matters for example *well-being*, *pets*, *celebrations* and *leisure activities* such as football. This process generated a great many open codes and in order to manage the data these open codes were reduced to categories.

As a second example this was a post by A8 arising from a newspaper article about a distressing case of children abusing children:

> *I've just been reading reports regarding the two brothers (11 and 12) that have admitted to the terrible torture of two children (9 and 11) last April. Although I was aware of this case, just having a 'mosey' round the Internet this evening has bought up several open forums where members of the public have had the opportunity to voice their opinions on the case. I was amazed at the amount of people who have said that these two boys are evil and that they should be locked up indefinitely. Some persons have even gone as far to say that they do not deserve life! I was more shocked to then consider that prior to doing this course, I would have been amongst the vast majority of people who made such comments, (I do not include the right to life in this statement - too strong even for my uneducated views).*

Source: (A9 October 2008)

This post was difficult to code because it generated many associations in my mind, for example the impact of the course (A9 says '*I was more shocked to then consider that prior to doing this course, I would have been amongst the vast majority of people who made such comments*'); something about using technology (A9 says '*Although I was aware of this case, just having a 'mosey' round the*

Internet this evening has bought up several open forums where members of the

public have had the opportunity to voice their opinions on the case.'); a moral

commentary (A9 says '*I was amazed at the amount of people who have said that*

these two boys are evil and that they should be locked up indefinitely').

However the codes needed aggregating and after much trial and error I focused

in on the content of the codes in broad terms. This example was coded as an

analysis and reflection comment as it was personal to the student, reflective on

her changing position on the topic as a consequence of having taken the course

and having reached a more distanced perspective. This particular news item was

not a topic on the course programme but it clearly related to her interest as a

student and so fell into the broader theme as about **study.** The category **study**

covered a range of administrative matters, such as details of *exams* and tutor

assignments, as well as non-curriculum related content - for example, a

discussion about brain development, which was not part of the official

programme syllabus. Study also included links to reading or web sites and TV

programs for students to follow.

In a third post at the end of the term, after results day, this student reflected on

the challenge of taking on new roles and this was coded as *emotional well-being*

within the broad theme of the **home**, as it was not directly concerned with study.

However, this entry was prompted by a reflection on study so these are not hard

and fast categories.

> *This really comes as follow-on from my last post and our results day has*
>
> *prompted this entry. Everyone is the 'new one' at some stage in their life,*

some more often than others, which is a good thing. I think by putting

yourself into a new situation, whether it be a job, a new social circle, or

otherwise, it shows that you're adaptable, positive and powerful. How you

deal with being new greatly impacts your frame of mind.

Source: (A9 June 2009)

A9 appeared to be reflecting on having passed her exams she was now moving to the next stage of her course at university and how a good frame of mind impacts on well-being in any situation.

The two previous posts were some of the most difficult to code, but many were much more straightforward. For example A2 posted this entry about her parents:

We have been invited to my parents' house, they even gave me their address.

Don't know what was up with my dad, he was being nice! Maybe they've

changed his meds or something!?!

Source: (A2 May 2008)

This entry was coded as *managing the home* in the general category of **home** – so it can be seen that 'home' code was used for general non-course related matters for example *well-being, pets, celebrations* and *leisure activities* such as football.

There were 26 active blogs that ended up being coded. All of all the blogs were taken with my colleagues and one bloggers entire content (student A8) was shared with my supervisor. Moderators asked to apply the coding categories to

them. We reached agreement in 90% of cases (myself and librarian), 80 percent with a colleague and 80% with my supervisor. To ensure consistency in applying the codes, I moderated my judgments first with two colleagues and then with my supervisor who helped me to see alternatives to the codes and agree a best fit. Also, as an insider researcher, I was keen not to influence the amount of blogging or the content of the blogs, and did this just by not commenting on posts and reassuring students that the assessments were not influenced by the blog work.

The degree of inter-rater reliability was improved due to the time that my librarian colleague and another tutor took to look over the blogs and agree or discuss my choices for codes. This 100% moderation method gave reliable information about what was blogged. The further fine-tuning of the codes with my supervisor led to a realisation that each code could be placed in a category of home study and about blogs. My colleagues and I looked at all the pages together and agreed the codes that I had assigned, and my supervisor tested each every type of code. Both helped me to make the claim that the data is strong and reliable to use in answering this research question.

Through careful coding I was able to produce a tally of what was being discussed at the level of content. I tallied topics by unit of meaning rather than at sentence level or at whole blog level. Though in practice many blogs were tagged using a single code, this meant that one blog entry might have two or more codes. To try to ensure consistency in applying the codes I moderated my judgments with my

supervisors and a couple of colleagues. The process is not of course an exact science and there was not complete agreement between moderators but a close enough fit to feel confident as to the rigor of the process. At the end of the second and third year I carried out a similar process as for Cohort A. Here there was a strong overlap between the codes used for each Cohort But some new codes such as employment (part time work) were introduced for B and C. I used the same broad categories for Cohort B and C to code about blogging, study and home.

Table 11. main categories and sub themes

Main category	Sub themes for each category	Comment
Home (life outside college)	*Pets, celebrations, managing the home, leisure activities, part time employment and emotional well being*	The distinction between outside college was not always clear as students frequently talked about the impact of college on their lives
Blogs	*Blogs or blogging*	Reflections on the process of blogging
Study	*Educational theory, relevant sites, course activities, exams, analysis and reflection, book reviews, TV film links* and *tutors and assignments*	More tightly focused comments on study related matters

The transparency that is vital to create convincing message analysis was enhanced by the fact that I was able to include many examples of blog content

in chapter 5. This gives the reader a sense of the style of blogging and the quality of the coding. The blogs were written informally and evidenced writing skills and students' voices clearly. Note that a procedure followed throughout is that citations are faithful reproductions of the blog posts by the students. Students in fact quickly got used to using an informal style of writing which was not always grammatically consistent ('id' rather than I would or I'd) or correctly spelt. Each citation can be traced back to a student (in this case A1) and to a date. To try to get greater reliability, a sample of texts and codes were moderated with my supervisor.

Data collected from students themselves

Data collection with students was carried out at the end of the year when all postings had stopped. It is interesting to note here that blogging ceased as soon as the course had, in the students' eyes, finished i.e. at the start of exam week. There were two key methods of gaining data from students: surveys and interviews.

Survey

Surveys offer a quick and very often easy method of getting the broad view of a population. There were many advantages to choosing a survey and this was the chosen method in many studies, such as Bresica and Miller (2006). The survey has been carried out with tutors, students and researchers using blogs. Surveys should be relatively easy to administer and can be developed in less time compared to other data-collection methods.

The survey in this study was cost-effective because it was carried out in-

house. Surveys can be administered remotely via the Internet and data can be collected from a large number of respondents and numerous questions can be asked about a subject. A broad range of data can be collected (e.g., attitudes, opinions, beliefs, values, behaviour, factual). Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2007) suggest that a good survey should help the researcher to catch local, institutional and small-scale factors. Surveys have been widely used in the study of blogging for example Coutinho (2007) Davi et al. (2007) and Ellison and Wu (2008).

In this study a questionnaire was designed in order to cover the themes in the literature about the rationale for blogging. The survey covered the themes of control, comfort and safety; learning; nature of the medium and the full questions (see tables 8 and 9).

Table 12. categories and questions

Category	Questions
Past experience of blogging	1
Control, comfort and safety	2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 17, 18, 22, 23
Learning	11, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30
Nature of the medium	12, 13, 19, 20, 21
Networking	5, 6, 9, 14, 15, 16, 27, 28

The survey population included every student, those who read blogs, those who

wrote blogs and those who never participated. Questionnaires have the disadvantage that open-ended questions make it difficult for the researcher to make comparisons between respondents, and for the students to complete an open ended questionnaire takes much longer than placing a tick in a rating scale response box. The choice I made would ensure that all respondents would be sufficiently and equally capable of filling in the Likert scale closed questions. The open–ended questionnaire is a good opportunity for the respondent to shed light on a new issue, but as students were to be interviewed the survey was kept to closed questions. I may have been influenced here by Mackness, Mak, and Williams (2010), who surveyed their bloggers using closed questions. In fact I created a simple grid for students using a three point Likert scale format, 'Agree', 'Neutral' and 'Disagree', with simple questions to provide feedback about their feelings when taking part in a blog. This is in contrast to other research on blogging which has at times used only open ended questions (e.g. Jones et al., 2000) or some open questions, (e.g. Chu et al., 2012; Park et al., 2011; Sun, 2010) but few interviews.

I was influenced in the design of the questionnaires by one I had completed as a learner on CCK08, a large MOOC (see p. 7 where I talked about my participation and a shift in thinking about learning theory). This survey covered concepts of openness, diversity, autonomy, connectiveness and interactivity on a massive online open course. This seemed to be appropriate to my research area, but I made several amendments to ensure the survey answered my own research questions. The full survey and the order of the questions are on page 293 showing how I designed the questionnaire to cover different areas with multiple

questions about an area placed through out the questionnaire. I asked about control, comfort and safety, about learning on the blogs; the nature of the medium and networking on the blogs. The style of the questionnaire was changed to an easy quick tick off sheet.

The survey questions were piloted with a different group of students on the Hospital Play Specialist programme who had started to collaborate, with my guidance, on a wiki the previous year. It could have been a threat to internal validity if the students were used twice for the same test, so although the sample were using a wiki it was a convenient group of adult learners and ensured my student sample for this work did not get more familiar with the situation or questions I planned to ask.

This sample was of eight 20-54 year old women who attended the college once a week to complete their programme. They had very little experience of using a computer and had never used a collaborative tool to share their work. They were a very good comparison group to use and they were willing to be involved.

The scale was a five point likert scale using **"very much do not agree, do not agree, agree, very much agree and don't know".** The pilot convinced me to get rid of the complex and ambiguous terms in the scale. This survey pilot convinced me to use different scale to gain a better co-operation from the respondents and

by helping them to interpret the question and decide on an answer. I also changed the questions to report about the blogs, not the students' own personal behaviour because the pilot showed that it discriminated against the students who did not use the wiki for writing but read the other students' contributions. The blogosphere is made up of readers and lurkers. From papers, such as Noneck and Preece (2001), lurkers make up the majority of members in online groups and by ignoring or missing those out, the questions about a blog and activity online can be distorted. By taking an interest in why people lurk I could see the need for a neutral place where non-posters could register a comment of no comment without saying "I do not know". The pilot also showed that the *very much agree* and *agree* could be easily put together because the feedback from the students in the pilot was they had no idea what the divisions meant. The pilot was important to ensure the survey questionnaire was written in a way that the respondents understood what was wanted from them, whilst the questions remained faithful to the research task.

A deliberate decision was taken to provide hard copies of the questionnaire, as this would be predicted to increase participation rates over online questionnaires. In particular I took into account that many of the participants were unable to open email or ignored emails that they did not consider a priority at that time. The questionnaires were given directly to the learners in their classroom. The students could be described as a 'captive population' in that they were already grouped in a classroom and the survey came at the end of a normal teaching session. Giving the survey into the classroom had the advantage that I could explain the purpose and nature of the questionnaire in more detail and

clarify particular questions for students. Survey participation was voluntary, I did not pressure anyone to complete it and some students chose not to complete it and simply left the room early without any expression of disapproval on my part. However, the circumstances of the survey might have induced some bias towards, firstly, responding and, secondly, responding positively about blogs. However it was stressed that questionnaire completion was not mandatory and indeed some students did not complete one.

The survey was carried out with each cohort at the end of an academic year. For Cohort A this was June 2009; for cohort B June 2010; for cohort C June 2011. Each cohort was given the same 30 questions. Cohort A returned 11 completed questionnaires, Cohort B returned 10 and Cohort C returned 11, total n=32. Some who did not complete the survey were absent from the class; those that chose not to complete it were noticeably more likely to be those that had not taken part in the blogs. Given the respectable and perhaps high response rate (61.5 %) this survey was broadly representative of the cohorts but my impression was that responses were skewed a little to bloggers and those who read blogs.

Responses were aggregated and data represented in simple tables in Chapter 5, broken down by cohort then aggregated. Data from the questionnaire was analysed using Excel 2007, as SPSS software was not readily available for use by the researcher and was considered to be too expensive at this time and not really necessary. As the researcher is very familiar with the use of Excel software, this appeared to be the most appropriate medium.

Interviews

In the survey, students were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences of blogging. Interviewing has been employed in many studies chiefly as a triangulation strategy, e.g. Hammond (1999). Often interviews are face-to-face, individual and semi-structured. However Ducate and Lomicka (2008) were amongst the researchers who chose to use focus group interviews. Interviews have the advantage of allowing the researcher to go in-depth into perceptions and feelings and can provide rich qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2007: p114). According to Cohen et al. (2007), open-ended questions have a number of advantages; 'they are flexible; they allow the interviewer to probe so that she may go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up any misunderstandings' (Cohen et al., 2007: p 357). Open-ended questions can be employed in a one of semi-structured approach. This offers flexibility, as outlined by Gilliam (2005) the semi-structured interview can be 'the most important way of conducting a research interview' (Gilliam, 2005: p70). Interviews are of course open to accusations of 'interview bias'. Interviewees, for example, might want to show themselves in a good light and interviewers may be unduly 'helpful' leading the respondent to say what the interviewer wants to hear. Interviewers might be asking for information, which interviewees may not have the background to answer. As outlined by Cohen et al. (2007), in many studies there is the possibility that respondents may feel pressurized to conform to the perceived norms of the institution and therefore answers to questions may not always be reliable. This had particular significance for me as this was in 'insider' research with self-selected participants. However I sought always to divide off

my tutor and research role and showed in whatever way I could that I would not be offended by non-participation in blogs.

The interviews were not audiotaped, as recommended in Gillham (2005), nor videotaped, as suggested by Mishler (1996), because I was worried that this could have been considered intrusive. Instead I took notes of the interview, wrote these up in more detail and later checked these notes with the interviewee. In retrospect I may have been over sensitive and overly cautious on this point but rely on note taking and student feedback gave me full accounts of the interview (see appendix three for extracts).

It could be argued that by acting both as a tutor and an investigator, my capacity to remain objective was compromised. It could also be argued that the goal of finding out about student's blogging and establishing trust is best achieved by reducing the hierarchy between informants and myself as the researchers, which in this case involved not pressing them to be videoed or recorded.

I used less structured strategies in which the student interviewed was more a participant in meaning making than a conduit from which information is retrieved. The individual in-depth interview allowed time to delve into social and personal matters. I chose not to use a group interview (which would have allowed me to get a wider range of experience) because the public nature of the process could prevent me from delving as deeply into the individual opinions.

Tuckman (1972) suggests that the interview 'should strive to put participants at ease' (cited in Cohen et al., 2007: p 361). The most important demand for

successful interviews is that the interviewers have 'done their homework' (Hunter, 1993) and really prepare well for the interview (Phillips, 1998). I felt I had met both conditions: students were at ease and of course I was immersed in the topic. I felt there was a great deal of rapport with students in their very vivid and open responses to blogging. The interviews took place in college on tutorial days, days in which students were off timetable.

Each participant was initially emailed with the questions and an introductory section stating the overall aims of the study. Some had written their responses and brought them to the interview so their answers were well considered. This is in accord with the recommendations set out by Bryman (2008). The interviews took on average around 30 minutes each, though those with more experiences of blogging were able to talk for longer, and some non-bloggers talked for much less, reflecting their lack of experience.

Interview questions

Four standard open questions were used to initiate discussion with each student. The focus of the interviews was on learner autonomy. I did want to extend the lines of investigation that began with the survey and to go in depth into the idea of learner autonomy as one of the key claims made about online participation.

The focus of the interviews was learner autonomy. I did not want to replicate the questions asked in the survey and wanted to go in-depth into the idea of learner autonomy as one of the key claims made about online participation. The first question of the interview may be considered as a type of open-ended survey by asking, 'On a scale of 1 (not important) to 10 (very important), how would you

rate the importance of learner autonomy?' This enabled the researcher to confirm the student's own understanding of the concept of learner autonomy. This was followed by some longer questions:

- How do you see learning/would you see yourself as an independent learner? How much learner autonomy were you able to exercise in the 2+2 course? (This was to explore whether the pedagogy was moving with the new technology).

- Did you feel blogging enabled you to exercise learner autonomy and helped you to become a student? (This to find out what they thought was the nature of the blogging medium– this was an extension of the questionnaire).

- What strategies did you use for developing your understanding of the 2+2 course concepts? How were these related to your choice of whether to participate in the blogs? (This to investigate the student's view about learning and networking– this was an extension of the questionnaire).

- In retrospect, which of those strategies were successful and/or effective in your learning? (This to find out explore which directions the students thought the pedagogy needed to move in order to address issues of digital literacy as well as issues of power and control in teaching and learning).

These questions however did not cover the how and why of blogging head on but each interview did give time and space for students to expand on their experiences, and further questions were asked which lead to more direct

discussion of the constraints and opportunities that blogging provided.

Table 13. interviewees and frequency of blogging

Students	Type of Contributor (as defined later in the thesis)
C5, C7, B1 and B2	Non-contributor
C6	Uncertain contributor
A2, A8, A15. B3, B4, B6, B12. C1, C2, C3 and C4	Contributors

During the first stage of the interview analysis, I typed up notes from the interviews – these were at times almost verbatim comments - and then identified recurring themes (i.e. open coding). Open codes were then grouped into the wider categories in a similar ways as the survey questions were grouped around issues of: comfort and safety; control, comfort and safety; learning; the nature of the medium and networking.

Learning outcome data

Learning outcomes can be used to answer the broad question, what knowledge and abilities have students acquired from both their academic work and their blogging activities during their years in college. Taken together, the data

collected using these methodologies might help to assess the value added by a college blog.

The measurement of grades for assignments of exams were considered but discarded as at best a very loose proxy measure for the effects of blogging especially undirected blogging. However in the interviews I did ask the students about the usefulness of blogging and reflections about their impact on learning and settling into the programme.

Reflective diaries

One method I did consider was using a reflective diary and indeed other researchers have reflected on the use of this method. For example Freeman et al. (2006) asked students to keep diaries, often online diaries, in order for students to present their feelings about their work. I chose not to do this because I was worried about being intrusive and increasing student workload. However I used my own researcher diary to reflect on critical incidents and on how the students were behaving. This provided a complementary source of data to reflect on the research history and my developing thoughts about it. Here are some entries:

22 December 2010

I think the data should also include observer descriptions of group dynamics. The new blogs seem to all appear over the same week and every one has made one. Could be compliance or enthusiasm for starting their course? One student has gone to every blog adding a comment to each one. Is this a group worker (Belbin roles in teams)?

The analysis could/ should integrate the interaction dynamics within each group to see if personalities are very different in each cohort. There seems to be jokers, highly anxious, leaders, cut and pastern in every group –maybe I can't use usual group work theory for the students on line? Are on- line selves the same as off line selves? It seems some very quiet in class are very expressive on the blog. Are blogs therefore a way to express oneself when the classroom is too threatening? Maybe change theory /

I January 2008

(Lewin) would explain why some 'unfreeze' their usual learning behaviors earlier than others? How would I refreeze the desired response –to blog-without interfering with the question of student autonomy? Any intervention on my behalf will surely reward the desired response so cover up the natural response?

18 January 2008

'Most papers I have read about blogging have the tutor setting how much blogging is to be done. '...a set of instructions prescribing how students should perform in groups, how they should interact and collaborate and how they should solve the problem' (Dillenbourg, 2002, p. 63).

My study with blogs had no rules because this could lead to better, more independent learners. Self-regulated learners take charge of their own learning by choosing and setting goals, using individual strategies in order to monitor, regulate and control the different aspects influencing the learning process and evaluating his or her actions. Eventually, they become less dependent on others and on the contextual features in a learning situation.

However I did not have the time to keep this diary systematically and did not seek to categorise the data explicitly. It served much more as an aide memoire when writing up the thesis. For example the above quote reminds me of my awareness of the gulf between practitioner behavior (i.e. the directing of blog activity) and the belief in theories of connectivism and rhizomic growth.

Quality criteria in case study research

Trustworthiness is becoming a popular terms to replace traditional notions of reliability. A qualitative researcher's tool chest should be geared towards trustworthiness and encompass issues such as credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability.

In this study trustworthiness is claimed by:

- The systematic way data were collected and analyzed

- The attempt to reduce 'bias'

- Being open about my position

- Following procedures of triangulation

Credibility requires well-argued, evidence-supported findings, very often involving a triangulation of data, an audit trail that is transparent and robust and a clear chain of evidence. Guba and Lincoln (1985) use 'dependability' in qualitative research, which closely corresponds to the notion of 'reliability' in quantitative research. They further emphasize 'inquiry audit' (p. 317) as one measure, which might enhance the dependability of qualitative research. This can be used to examine both the process and the product of the research for

consistency (Hoepfl, 1997). In the same vein, Clont (1992) and Seale (1999) endorse the concept of dependability with the concept of consistency or reliability in qualitative research. The consistency of data will be achieved when the steps of the research are verified through examination of such items as raw data, data reduction products, and process notes (Campbell, 1996).

Data triangulation

A key notion followed by many researchers is that there can be greater 'reliability' if there is agreement between different sources of data. But as Griffiths (2004) suggested 'the same may be said about two researchers approaching the same scene with the same methodological tools. Neither can be judged in terms of right and wrong even though the images which they identify may well be different' (p.114). I was not then wedded to the idea that sources should be consistent but took the intuitive position that confirmatory data could lead to expressing findings with greater conviction. The triangulation employed in the study was the picture of participation given in chapter 4; the content analysis in chapter 5 and the summary of student's perceptions in chapter 6. This triangulation strategy is extended in chapter 7 in which results are compared and contrasted to each other and to wider literature.

Alongside triangulation data were also moderated. My librarian colleague was privy to the blogs and we compared and contrasted coding strategies. Extracts of data coding were also checked with my supervisor to enable themes to be constructed reliably.

One of the primary disadvantages of triangulation is that it can be time-consuming. Collecting more data requires greater planning and organization—resources that are not always available to lead researchers (Thurmond, 2001). Other disadvantages include the 'possible disharmony based on investigator biases, conflicts because of theoretical frameworks, and lack of understanding about why triangulation strategies were used' (Thurmond, 2001, p. 256).

In conclusion triangulation is a useful tool and there are different types of strategy that can be used: data, investigator, theory, methodological, and environmental. Triangulation can be used to deepen the researchers' understanding of the issues and maximize their confidence in the findings of qualitative studies.

Timetable of events

Table 14 shows the key events. The blogs were set up at the start of the programme and the survey and interviews were completed at the end of every year. In this way time was given for blogging to take off or simply wither.

Table 14. Timetable of research events

Sept 2007	Cohort A started the programme. All took Profiler tests for literacy numeracy and ICT
Sept 2008	Cohort A (second year students) and cohort B (first year students). Invited to set up blogs. Cohort B took Profiler tests for literacy numeracy and ICT.
June 2009	Surveys and interviews carried out with Cohorts A and B.
Sept 2009	Cohort C started the programme. All took Profiler tests for literacy numeracy and ICT and invited to set up blogs. Cohort A students now left for higher education institution, Cohort B continue to blog.
June 2010	Surveys and interviews carried out with Cohort C.
Sept 2010 – March 2014	Data analysis and writing up

Ethical considerations

Ethics are codified rules deriving from morals, and morality is determined by values. There is similarity in ethical codes in the practice of social research across Europe, but also variations over time or across religions, political regimes. For educational research, the key ethical guidelines are those of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). The key concern of these guidelines is informed consent—individuals should be informed about the research and

provides their voluntary consent; and respect for enrolled subjects—subjects should have their privacy protected, the opportunity to withdraw and their well-being monitored.

I believe no one can claim a total objectivity about their research (the tools used to access data and the methods for analysing these data) and I was keenly aware of how my position might influence my study. There were ethical risks that my position as course tutor would influence participation within the blogs and (e.g. a worry that some might participate because they felt under an obligation to me to do so) or that some students would consent to interviews only because I as course tutor had asked them. These are problems that arise in all insider research and my case was not unique. I tried to address these and other questions by repeating to students that I would not be influenced in my judgments about their progress by their interest in this online project and made this clear to students when collecting data. Of course there must have been some influence but I felt at ease by my position as I had done what I could to address the key challenges; there were other tutors and other sources of authority within the college that reduced my influence over the students and as below in terms of interpretation of data I introduced an element of inter rater moderation.

In terms of research into digital artefacts, the consensus now is that these may in principle be public documents, but the researcher should ask for permission to quote from the blog. This was the approach taken here and I had the students' active consent for publishing extracts from blogs in this thesis.

The respect for a person's rights and dignity are a challenging area in this study,

due to the fact I became privy to all sorts of personal information authored by the learner and put online. The researcher has to be prepared to handle whatever comes up – for example as an insider researcher I became aware that some had family problems and I felt I could not report this information if it has been told to me in my capacity as tutor. In contrast if I reached a view by following blogs that, say, a student was really rather shallow, I would have to 'park' that information when it came to teaching and supporting that same student in my capacity as a tutor. Using the same skills as when working in a social care situation, I would not judge but try to be objective about other people's information. The biggest challenge for me was to communicate clearly to students that anyone not blogging would not be penalised or seen in a derogatory role by me as tutor; this was addressed several times throughout the programme in class. Finally I needed, as a tutor, to monitor the blog space for malice or inappropriate messages as these blogs were an officially sanctioned part of the programme. 'Trolling': a troll joins a list or other online community with the intention of provoking attention to himself or herself, her ideas, his favourite theories etc. and thereby taking over the communicative bandwidth of the group. Trolls may not always intend to be destructive, but they are infamously so, especially for groups that are comparatively vulnerable.' Harring et al. (2001).

Although Trolling did not occur in this study, I knew a student who felt some of her peers were showing off in the blogs and would not continue her own blog. I was careful to make time for participants to talk individually and privately about

their study and any worries they had about the effect of blogging.

The age of the learners did not raise particularly sensitive ethical issues since the final sample did not include young or vulnerable people or raise child protection issues, but for those new to networking their informed consent was an issue, as many had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. I addressed this by arranging for an experienced blogger, an information manager from the library, to discuss the implications of sharing online e.g. safety, privacy, etc. and then leaving the options to blog, or not, open for every student.

In conclusion the ethical dilemmas that became very clear were: how to discuss intellectual property frankly and ensure the bloggers knew their materials were being used, counted and analysed; how to ensure the research project did not disadvantage the non-bloggers or late bloomers; and to show consideration of the multiple roles the tutor plays in such studies.

Summary

To sum up so far, the years of the blog interventions were 2008 to 2010, the setting was an HE programme delivered in an FE college, the country is England and the subjects in the research were learners aged 21 to 48 predominately females on a 2 +2 degree course. The profile of the students and their academic and personal identities has been provided. My relationship to the case has been explained along with the nature of the intervention. Research methods, including content analysis, questionnaires and interviews, have been described. Ethical

issues have been addressed.

CHAPTER 4. Analysis of blogs

This chapter presents the observation findings and is divided into sections on rates of participation, and followers of blogs.

As explained in the methodology chapter, the blogs were analysed by frequency and the number of words posted by each student. The students also created a personal profile and attached personal and course related 'photos' (images of family, pictures from home). Blogging seemed to be associated with keeping a

diary and the names of the blogs, made up by the students in this cohort

reflected this; 'My degree diary', 'Diary of studying Early Childhood', 'My journey'

and 'Destination degree'. Others had personalized their blog with their name,

Magic Matthews, others used humor to set out their on- line self. ' Hay welcome

to my blog' and two had 'Second year' and ' Crisis in my thirties'.

Within blog posts students also attached multi-media slides and one linked some

of her posts to a YouTube 'channel' she had created. Posts contained a mix of

social and academic activity. Blog entries with academic content often drew on

personal experiences. Students posted their own presentations used in class, for

example PowerPoint classroom presentations were attached with the blog,

serving as an archive for others to access; some students added links to multi

media clips when relevant to such classroom discussion. Links were usually

pasted without much explanation, for example A2 simply posted 'This could be

good for the policy module'. However some more extended comments were

sometimes offered, for example A8 wrote 'This is a good one about learning

styles but I don't particularly agree with it because ...' in relation to one link.

I will now look at the data in more detail beginning with participation rates for

each student.

Rates of participation

The raw data on rates of participation are provided in tables 15, 16 and 17

(below). The columns show the code for each student, the number of posts made,

the number of words posted and number of images used in posts (further images

were attached to personal profiles but these are not included within the tables).

Table 15. Rates of participation Cohort A

Cohort A	Posts	Words	Images	Embedded multi-media clips
A1	5	653	1	
A2	14	4509	2	14 pasted from web
A3	44	9258	2	13 pasted from web
A4	4	191	1	
A5	0	0		
A6	0	0		
A7	0	0		
A8	49	25917	5	8 pasted /3 own production
A9	1	76		
A10	1	301		
A11	1	20		
A12	0	0		
A13	3	347	1	
A14	2	76	1	1 own production slideshow
A15	8	135	1	

Table 16. Rates of participation Cohort B

Cohort B	Posts	Words	Images	Embedded multi-media clips
B1	0	0		
B2	0	0		
B3	14	2371	2	
B4	28	13650	1	
B5	24	6031		
B6	13	11122	1	5 pasted
B7	35	11130	7	
B8	0	0		
B9	0	0		
B10	0	0		
B11	0	0		
B12	15	2436		
B13	3	240	1	

Table 17. Rates of participation Cohort C

Cohort C	Posts	Words	Images	Embedded multi-media clips
C1	11	1772	1	
C2	13	1448	4	1 pasted
C3	21	3172	3	
C4	5	1520	5	
C5	0	0		
C6	3	246		
C7	0	0		
C8	0	0		
C9	1	94		
C10	20	1487	1	1
C11	1	169		
C12	1	163		
C13	0	0		
C14	1	94		
C15	0	0		
C16	0	0		
C17	0	0		
C18	0	0		

Table 18 shows the central tendency of blogging activity and gives the mean, median and modal totals for each cohort as well as data for the cohorts combined. It shows that there was a wide range of participation and a significant number not contributing *by posting* at all.

Table 18. Mean numbers of posts and number of words for each cohort

	Cohort A posts	Cohort A words	Cohort B* posts	Cohort B words	C posts	C words	Cohorts A, B, C posts
Mean	8.8	2765.53	10.15	3613.84	4.27	564.72	7.41
Mode	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Range	49	25917	35	13650	21	3172	49
Lower Quartile	0.5	10	0	0	0	0	0
Median	2	135	3	240	1	94	1
Upper Quartile	6.5	500	15	6031	4.5	1147.5	12.5
Inter Quartile Range	6	490	15	6031	4.5	1147.5	12.5
Standard Deviation	15.7	6885.3	12.3	5099.8	7.0	914.3	11.99
% non – contributors	28.6		46.1		44.4		39.130

*Data for cohort B were collected over 16 months

To some extent values given underestimate the level of activity of those who did blogs by including the non-bloggers, and those who had left the programme in the calculations. For example this resulted in a very low median score for each cohort. Table 19 represents the data excluding non- contributors (those who had set a blog up but not gone on to use it).

Table 19. Mean number of posts per cohort excluding non-contributors

	A posts	A words	B posts	B words	C posts	C words	A+B+C posts
Mean	12	3771.1	18.8	6711.4	7.7	1016.5	12.17
Mode	1	76	#N/A	#N/A	1	94	1
Range	49	25917	35	13650	21	3172	48
LQ	1.5	105.5	13.5	2403.5	1	164.5	
Median	4	301	15	6031	4	847	6.5
UQ	11	2581	26	11126	12.5	1511.75	
IQR	9.5	2475.5	12.5	8722.5	11.5	1347.25	
SD	17.52	7886.67	10.76	5269.11	8.00	1033.89	13.40

The final conclusion to be reached from the sets of tables is that:

- Overall the blogging intervention appeared to generate activity. Of course perspectives might vary on how to describe the level of activity. One could argue that the comparison should be made with the absence of blogging previously in which case it is noteworthy that any blogging took place. Alternatively the findings could be compared to a more optimistic scenario in which 'everyone joins in'.

- Many did not get beyond creating a blog, for example half of students in cohorts B and C did not contribute a post. Others blogged minimally.

- Some students appeared to take to blogging and contributed relatively frequently.

- Cohort B had longer to use their blog and their level of activity was indeed higher but not by very much. Cohorts A and B were more active than Cohort C – this is easily identifiable in the tables above.

Contributors, uncertain contributors and non contributors

I wanted to know more about the variation in the cohorts and saw that data on posting allowed for the construction of types of blogger. Figure 1 shows the spread of participation.

Figure 1. The frequency of posts to the blogs across all cohorts

Frequency of posts across all cohorts
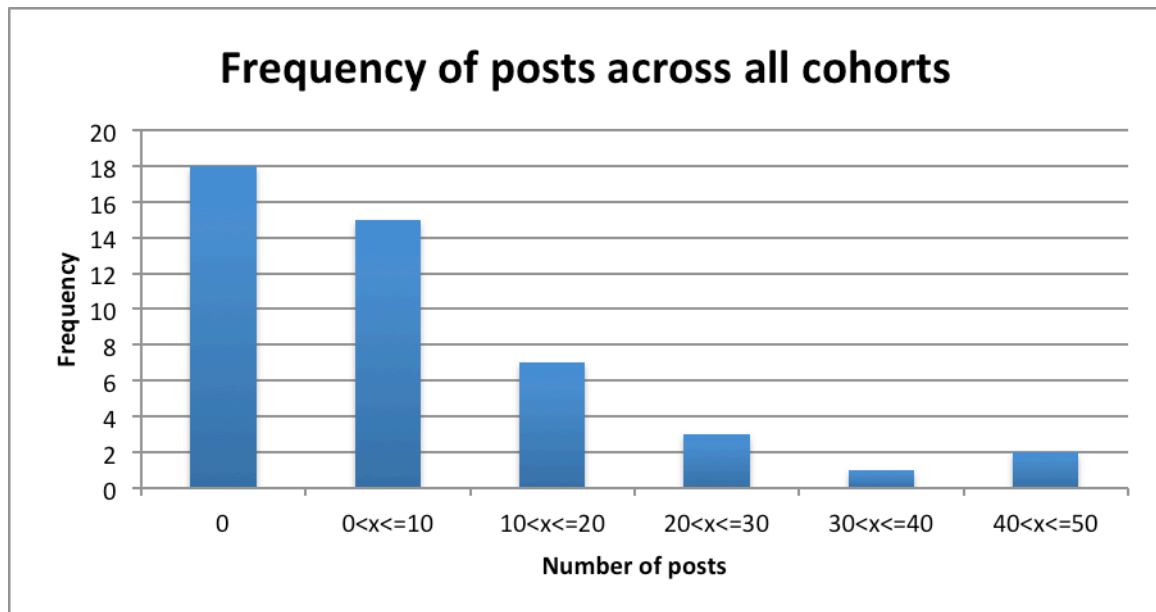
In order to better make sense of these varying rates of participation the labels

Contributors, uncertain contributors and **non-contributory** were introduced.

Contributors posted more than 4 posts. Uncertain contributors made a start on

blogging but only went on to make 2 - 4 posts. Non-contributors created a blog

but did not use it. However, as discussed later, all non-contributors were

followers of blogs and from everyday classroom interaction, it was known that

they did read blogs. Table 20 shows the numbers of each type of blogger within

each group.

Table 20. Comparisons of Contributors and Non-contributors

	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
Contributors	5	6	5
Non-contributors	7	6	12
Uncertain contributors	3	1	1
Total	*15*	*13*	*18*

Table 21. lists the code for each blogger.

	Cohort A	Cohort B	Cohort C
Contributors	A1 A2, A3, A8, A15	B3, B4, B5, B6, B7 B12	C1, C2 C3, C4 and C10
Non-contributors	A5, A6, A7, A9, A10, A11, A12	B1, B2, B8, B9, B10, B11	C5, C7, C8, C9, C11, C12, C13, C14, C15, C16, C17, C18
Uncertain contributors	A4, A13, A14,	B13	C6.
Total	*14*	*13*	*18*

Comparing between cohorts we can see that there is a similarity in the balance of contributions. There are around a third (five Contributors per cohort) who appear to take to blogging, and a slightly larger number that do not. A small number are Uncertain contributors. Cohort C had the largest number of non-contributors and represented two thirds of Cohort C. There is not an easy explanation for this, in fact one would expect uptake of blogging to be higher in the third Cohort because the practice had become more embedded into the curriculum offer. As an outsider/insider researcher and tutor, a possible explanation could be they were less cohesive as a group and more guarded about sharing, but there is no obvious reason this should be the case as the course tutor's interview procedures and student profiles seem to be similar. The simplest explanation is that the last cohort used Facebook as their preferred sharing tool.

One question to ask is whether rates of participation correlate in a broad sense to the profiles of the students given in Chapter 3. The elements of most interest are levels of ICT and literacy. However ICT scores did not differentiate one student from another but literacy scores were more varied. Table 22 shows the breakdown of Contributors, Non-contributors and Uncertain Contributors against literacy profile scores. Each of these groups contained a mix of profiler scores.

Table 22. Literacy scores

	E1	E2	E3	L1	L2	L3
Contributors	0	2	0	5	4	5
Non-contributors	1	4	2	9	5	4
Uncertain Contributors	0	0	0	1	4	0
Total	*1*	*6*	*2*	*15*	*13*	*9*

However there were some patterns related to literacy. Students with entry levels in literacy were less likely to blog. For example out of nine students with entry level scores two were contributors. The majority (a bare majority but unique in the data) of those with the highest scores on entry (level 3) did blog. In regards to dyslexia, in Cohort A eight students were waiting for dyslexia reports due to their poor reading and writing and three of these were logged as Contributors with 14 or so posts. In Cohort B, two students had dyslexia; neither of them blogged and each withdrew from the course. In Cohort C the two students with dyslexia differed: one was a Non-Contributor and one had made 14 posts. It does not follow that a student with dyslexia will or will not blog.

To explore this further a Chi-squared test was carried out. In view of the small number of data points, Uncertain contributors were grouped with Non-

contributors, Level 1 and entry levels were combined as were Level 2 and Level 3. A Chi-squared test was then carried out. The Chi-squared value was 0.70 with 1 degree of freedom; giving a p-value of about 0.40. The test suggests that there is a 40% probability that any variation in participation rates among different literacy levels was due to chance only. The observed participation rates are not significantly different from the expected rates if participation is independent of literacy level. The data suggests a student's reported literacy level is not a statistically significant factor in regard to the likelihood of becoming a blogger. However, there are insufficient entry-level students to draw strong conclusions.

Viewing the issue of literacy from the inside I had a sense that those with higher literacy levels were perhaps more likely to blog and from direct observation I could see those struggling with the literacy demands of course work could not add new strategy into their timetable such as sharing on a blog; these students had to remain very strategic to keep up.

Followers of blogs

As discussed in the methodology section, a follower of a blog is someone who is interested in a blog and signs up as a follower with appropriate identification. As with Facebook, one requests to be accepted as a follower. The blog follower can use RSS feeds to have messages sent from the blogs they are following to their e-mail. The raw data concerned followers of blogs are provided in table 23.

Table 23. Followers of blogs data for Cohort A, B and C

Cohort	Who follows them?	Number	From other cohorts	Blogs they follow themselves	Number	Number from other cohorts
A1	A2 A3 A4 A7 A15 B6 C3 C4 C6 C7	10	5	A3 A9 A13 B6 C18	5	2
A2	A3 A8 A9 B2 B4 B7	6	3	A1 A4 A8 A9 A13 A15	6	0
A3	A1 A8 A9 B2 B4 B5 B7 C3 C4 C6 C7	11	8	A1 A2 A4 A8 A9 A13 A14 B4 B5	9	2
A4	A2 B4 A3 C4 B5	5	3	A1 A8 A9 A13 A15	5	0
A5		0	0		0	0
A6		0	0		0	0
A7 With-drew		0	0	A1 A8 A9 A13 A15 B13	5	0

A8	A2 A3 A4 A7 A8 A9 A10 A13 A14 A15 B2 B4 B5 B6 B7 B12 C1C3 C4 C6 C7	21	11	A2 A3 A8 A9 A15 B4 B5 B6 B7 C6 C19 C13	12	7
A9	A1 A2 A3 A4 A7 A8 A10 B4	8	1	A2 A3 A8 C13	4	1
A10		0	0	A8 A9	2	0
A11		0	0		0	0
A12		0	0		0	0
A13	A1 A2 A3 A4 A7 A14 B3 B4 B5	9	3	A8	1	0
A14	A3 B2 B4B7 C3 C4 C14	7	6	A8 A13 A15	3	0
A15	A4 A7 A8 A14 B4 B5 C3 C4 C6 C7	10	6	A1 A8	2	0

Cohort	Who follows them	Number	From other cohorts	Blogs they follow themselves	Number	Number from other cohorts
B1		0	0		0	0
B2	B4 B5 B7	3	0	A2 A3 A8 A14 B2 B3 B4 B5 B6 B12 B13 C3 C4 C10 C14	15	8
B3	B2 B4 B5 B7 C3 C4	6	2	A13 B4 B5	3	1
B4	A8 B2 B3 B5 B6 B7 B12 C3 C4 C6 C7	11	5	A2 A3 A4 A8 A9 A13 A14 A15 B2 B3 B4 B5 B6 B7 B12 B13 C3 C4 C10	19	11
B5	A8 B2 B3 B4 B6 B7 B13 C3 C4 C14	10	4	A3 A4 A8 A13 A15 B2 B3 B4 B6 B7 B12 B13 C3 C4 C10	15	8
B6	A8 B2 B4 B5 B7 B12 C3 C4	8	3	A1 A8 B4 B5 B7 B13 C3 C4	8	4

B7	A8 B4 B5 B6 B13	5	1	A2 A3 A8 A14 B2 B3 B4 B5 B6 B12 B13 C3 C4 C10 C14	15	8
B8 with-drew		0	0		0	0
B9		0	0		0	0
B10		0	0		0	0
B11		0	0		0	0
B12	B2 B4 B5 B7 C3 C4 C14	7	3	A8 B4 B6 B13 C10	5	2
B13		0	0	B4 B5 B7 C16	4	1

Cohort	Who follows them	Number	From other cohorts	Blogs they follow themselves	Number	Number from other cohorts
C1	C3 C4 C10	3	0	A8 C1 C2 C3 C6 C8 C10 C11 C14 C16	10	1
C2	C1 C3 C4 C6 C7 C10 C14	7	0	B12 C2 C3 C6 C10	5	1
C3	B2 B4 B5 B7 C1 C2 C4 C6 C7 C10 C12 C14	12	4	A1 A3 A8 A14 A15 B3 B4 B5 B12 C1 C2 C3 C4 C6 C8 C10 C11 C13 C14 C16	20	9
C4	B2 B4 B5 B6 B7 B12 C3 C10 C14	9	6	A1 A3 A4 A8 A14 A15 B3 B4 B5 B6 B12 C1 C3 C4 C6 C8 C10 C11 C14 C16	20	11
C5		0	0		0	0

C6	A8 C2 C3 C4 C8	5	1	A1 A3 A8 A15 B4 C2 C3 C8 C10 C14	10	5
C7		0	0	A1 A3 A8 A15 B4 C2 C3 C8 C10 C14	10	5
C8	C1 C3 C4 C7 C14	5	0	C6	1	0
C9		0	0		0	0
C10	B2 B4 B5 B7 B12 C1 C3 C4 C6 C7	10	5	C1 C3 C4 C10	4	0
C11	C1 C3 C4	3	0		0	0
C12		0	0	C3	1	0
C13	C3	0	0		0	0
C14	B2 B7 C1 C3 C4 C6 C7	7	2	A14 B5 B12 C2 C3 C4 C8	7	3
C15		0	0		0	0
C16	B13 C1 C3 C4	4	1		0	0
C17		0	0		0	0
C18		0	0		0	0

Again it is important not to read too much into the raw data, but this suggests that all those who created a blog succeeded in attracting followers. In Cohort A, every person who had created a blog had followers from other cohorts. The inter cohort connections were however declining by Cohort C the third year of the study – though again it is worth noting that connections continued on Facebook between individuals from different cohorts. For example when members of cohort A came back to talk to members of cohort C they extended an invitation to join in their own Facebook page. There is **not** a clear relationship between the frequency with which the person blogs and the number of followers though there were clearly some very well received blogs, for example A8; B2; B5; C1; C3; C4; C6 and C7 all had ten or more followers. Table 24 shows the breakdown of followers per cohort. Again it should be remembered that cohort B blogged for a longer period but this cohort did not have the highest mean number of followers although cohort B had the highest mean number of blogs followed. Cohort A attracted the highest mean number of followers and followers from other cohorts. Cohort A had the lowest mean for following other blogs – a consequence perhaps of being the first cohort to leave the college.

Table 24. Comparisons between the followers of cohorts A, B & C

Cohort	Mean number of followers per blogger*	Mean number of followers from other cohorts	Mean number of blogs followed	Mean number of blogs followed from other cohorts
A	9.67	5.11	4.91	1.09
B	7.14	2.57	10.5	5.38
C	6.78	2	8.8	3.5

*contributor plus uncertain contributor

Summary

The data are fairly consistent. An overriding theme is that given the freedom to participate or not, nearly half of the students did not take up blogging. However all read blogs and many were recognised followers of blogs. There was a consistency in data across cohorts, albeit a particular feature of cohort B was the long time members had for blogging, though this does not seem to have had much affect on the number of messages. A feature of cohort C was the growing use of Facebook within this cohort, which served to dampen participation on Blogger. A second key finding is the wide variation in activity. Students were divided into three categories; Non-contributor; Uncertain contributors and Contributors. Roughly a third of each cohort were Contributors. The link between literacy and blogging is suggestive but falls short of a statistical association.

CHAPTER 5. Results of content analysis of the blogs

This section presents the findings of a content analysis of the students' blogs. As seen in Chapter 4, all students were asked to produce a blog and then were encouraged to develop these blogs over the course of the programme. The blogs were not integrated into the assessment process. However as tutor I viewed the blogs occasionally wrote comments and monitored the blogs for inappropriate use. Again as seen in the previous chapter the rate of participation in blogging varied across students and across cohorts.

This section provides cohort-by-cohort description of what the student's blogged about and is followed by a final section that compares across cohorts. This chapter provides examples of blogs enabling the reader to gain a flavour of students 'voice'. A discussion of coding and moderating is included in the previous methodology chapter; this chapter is providing the findings.

Cohort A: content analysis

Cohort A blogged from September 2008 – May 2009, a period of nine months though most activity was curtailed to the three ten-week terms covered in this period. The cohort consisted of 13 learners, identified as A1 to A13. However A5, A7, A10, A11 and A12 did not create a blog. A6 did not 'agree with technology' so never used blogs or e-mail and A1, and A13 posted very little. Hence this section really concerns the activity of six students. Blogs were placed within three categories: '**blogs**', '**home**' and '**study**'. Codes were used to differentiate the units

of meaning. Figure 2 indicates that blogs by members of Cohort A were mostly used to share study resources and reflect on the process of the programme (49 total coded passages in blue). Home and recreation topics were discussed also but not to the same degree (13 coded units in green) and a few blogs (6 coded units) were self-referential about blogging.

Figure 2. Topics covered by bloggers in Cohort A
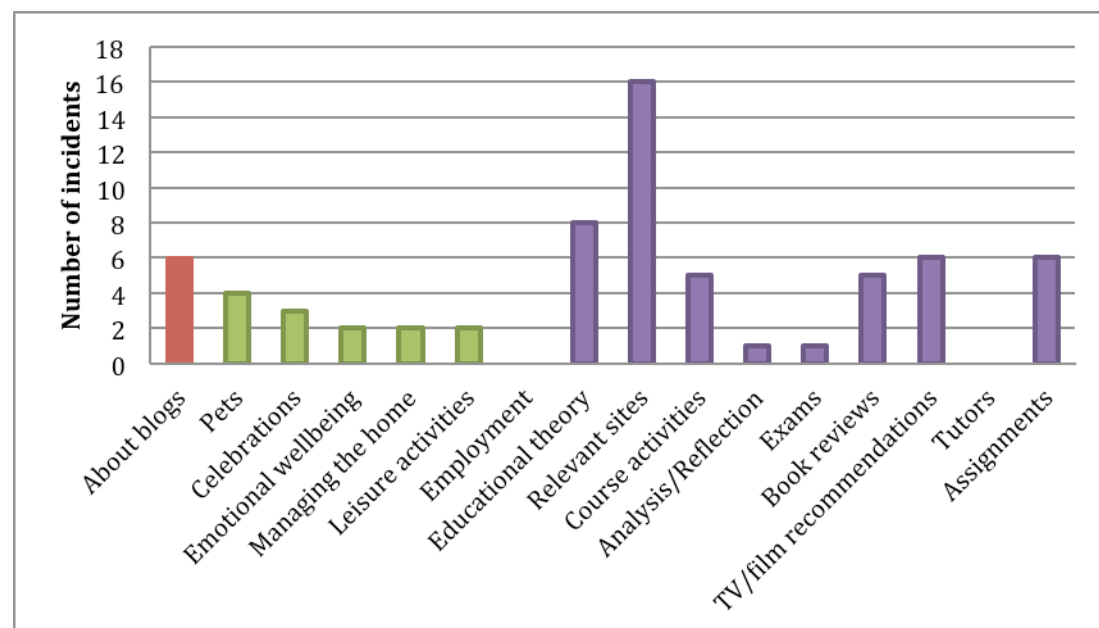
Each of these three main categories (about blogging; about study; and about home) is now described in detail.

As regards blogging

There were some posts (6 coded passages) about the process of blogging itself. These tended to be at early stage of the programme, when students were perhaps feeling more self-conscious about blogging, and later disappeared as a topic for discussion. Several early posts expressed uneasiness about blogging

(and technology) as in this from A8:

> *I'll hold my hands up and admit I have no idea what I'm doing on this blog,*
>
> *its a case of experimenting and seeing what works, so apologies if my blog*
>
> *looks dumb. Hopefully the information it'll hold is correct and I'll end up*
>
> *with some followers* ☺

Source: (A8 September 2008)

In spite of expressing her uncertainty A8 went on to be a frequent user. Another student A3 also expressed her doubts:

> *Personally I am not a technology fan, well not just the computer or Internet,*
>
> *it's anything to do with technology that I don't normally do well. But I am a*
>
> *good student and a very behaved student so I started this blog about one*
>
> *week ago. I were thinking that's it, I've done it and didn't bother to really*
>
> *make it looks good and maybe useful. However I do have a high standard for*
>
> *myself whatever I do, so I spent two, three days tried to figure out how to*
>
> *manage my blog and make it good plus useful for me and anyone who goes*
>
> *on my blog. I also changed my name of the blog, I couldn't think of any*
>
> *words or anything to describe what I am doing on this blog. So I call it my*
>
> *diary of studying early childhood studies that means this is a recording of*
>
> *everything happening during my studies. As English isn't my first language*
>
> *so I am worry that people will judge me on not writing a perfect English.*
>
> *Well, I have to say that I am enjoying writing and goodness sake, who*
>
> *cares!!! I will just try my best then my chin will be up and feel proud of*

myself, because most importantly that I am doing it!!!!!!

Source: (A3 September 2008)

Both this excerpt and the one below show bloggers were concerned not just about how others would view them and their blog but also about how the use of technology had to become a part of their life. A9 started her blog with:

> *Well I am new to all this technology. Luckily my best friend 'Meg A8' has managed to help me get started as always*

Source: (A9 September 2008)

In fact this student (A8) assisted others in the cohort in setting up blogs, and this was mentioned in other blogs:

> *CLEVER A8, SET ME UP WITH MY BLOG.....SO GLAD SHE'S MY FRIEND!*

Source: (A4 September 2008)

Over time students tended not to refer to blogging itself but this student noted her growing relationship with her online self: A8 wrote:

> *I am so pleased to have finished the Country Project I just had to tell my blog!*

Source: (A8 January 2009)

As regards study

The most popular or at least most frequent topic for blogging was the signalling

of new sites and sharing relevant resources (16 coded units) - these were tagged
under the label *relevant sites*. In this example A4 presents a link to a resource
about Kohlberg (a theorist of child development):

Websites that may be of interest:

http://allpsych.com/psychology101/moral_development.html

*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Kohlberg (Although this site should
not be quoted, I believe that it is beneficial as it gives a good insight)*

(A4september 2008)

A4 also went on to paste a large section from the from the Wikipedia site she had
cited:

*Lawrance Kohlberg's theory - The Stages of Moral Development, was
inspired by the work of Jean Piaget (Education and the Development of
Morality). It also came from an interest in moral dilemmas that children,
adolescents and adults face, and constructed a series of stages and
development.*

The Stages of Moral Development

Source: (A2 October 2008)

Several entries pointed to multi-media resources, as in this example:

*Clinicians suggest that children adopted after the age of six months have a
higher risk of problems with attachment. While attachment styles displayed*

in adulthood are not necessarily the same as those seen in infancy, research

suggests that early attachments can have a serious impact on later

relationships. For example, those who are securely attached in childhood

tend to have good self-esteem, strong romantic relationships, and the ability

to self-disclose to others. For more information, see this articles on

attachment styles.

Information cited from: Attachment Theory: An Overview of Attachment

Theory By Kendra Van Wagner, About.com

http://psychology.about.com/od/loveandattraction/a/attachment01.htm

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bul1meciGE *The role of attachment*

in infancy

Source: (A3 March 2009)

The next most popular code in the category of study was *educational theory*

(eight coded passages). This covered topics including child development,

safeguarding children, important educational theorists, policy, news about

education and topics not covered on the programme. For example there was

discussion about brain development (which had not been covered in the course)

but which was of interest to two bloggers. A8 discussed research on the notion of

gaze duration in the context of brain development in this post:

The findings are based on the notion that young babies are less likely to look

at something for a long time - if it is something that they expect to see

(technically called the 'gaze duration'). So, researchers show the babies a

scenario that has both a possible outcome (what one might expect) and

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an impossible outcome (what one wouldn't expect.) They take a box, and the baby watches as they put Mickey Mouse into the box. Then, using a screen, they cover MM up – and show the babies another MM entering the box. Then they take down the screen. The possible scenario of course is to see two MM's behind the screen since 1+1=2 and when the babies saw 2 MM's – they looked away/lost interest.....when the babies were shown the 'impossible outcome' – one MM behind the screen (even though two were put in) – they stared intently at the box (the baby on the video even had a frown on his face!) The odd and slightly confusing issue here, is - how do they know? Surely the babies aren't actually thinking - at least not in terms of 'language' thinking....and they can't draw on experience/learned behaviour......so you have to ask (and the researchers did) it is that they just naturally know it's simply not right? This is what these researchers were saying, concluding that we must assume that there exists a deeper cognitive ability present even at birth.

Interesting isn't it? and I am now really wondering how much babies/young children actually do know already and how much of the current EY curriculum actually accounts for this innate knowledge?

This contribution generated some comments and in offering an alternative view A3 asked:

wow! I know the twoness of two from a sixth sense or experience ...so how come inexperienced minds know it?? was there any ground figure looking for space and frowning more at more light in area. There is less light more

fullness ….Could the conundrum be what's that space doing there ???

Source: (A3 May 2009)

A8 answered:

Yes….because…there is an innate understanding that there really shouldn't

be a space there when two MM's entered the box. It's not counting…it's

showing numerosity ability. Look at this link for interesting up-to-date

research on infant cognition….

http://www.yale.edu/infantlab/Welcome.html'

Source: (A8 May 2009)

These kinds of interactive discussion were fairly rare but served to highlight the

potential of blogging for extending and expanding the nature of learning within

the programme. Aside from sharing *educational theory* students frequently

shared book recommendations and reviews – placed under the label of *book*

reviews with six coded passages. Book recommendations often provided

information on whether there were newer editions or clearer texts or cheaper

versions to be had. A.8 posted with these as recommended reading for her

colleagues:

LEVEL1&2 • Childhood Studies: An Introduction by Dominic Wyse

(Paperback - 12 Nov2003)

• An Introduction to Early Childhood Studies by Dr Trisha Maynard and

Professor Nigel Thomas

• Early Childhood Studies: An Introduction to Children's Worlds and

Children's Lives by Jenny Willan, Rod Parker-Rees, and Jan Savage

(Paperback - 16 Aug 2004)

• An Introduction to Early Childhood: A Multidisciplinary Approach by Dr

Tim Waller (Paperback - 8 July 2005)

Source: (A8 May 2009)

Further entries provided references or suggestions about using other multi -

media resources such as videos, film and CD (some of which were available in

the college library), and television programs on 'I player'. (6 coded passages

labelled as *TV film links*. For example A3 references a video which she had earlier

used as part of a presentation she had shown her group:

Interesting education history and future video to share From doing my

ethnography research, I found this video which show the old time education

and what's future education going to be? (Also used part of it in my

presentation) you can see the way of learning and teacher

attitude/classroom behaviour changes over the time.Activity Starters -

Teaching Past, Present and Future http://www.teachers.tv/video/31468

Source: (A3 November 2008)

Specific research work generated six coded units coded as *assignments*. Entries

appeared as an extension of class work, for example a discussion about a well-

known research about a family centre, posted by A8 involved the raising of

issues and additional knowledge not discussed during the class:

Pen Green family Centre was the first family Centre to be set up in the UK. In June 2007 Pen Green received a glowing, outstanding OFSTED Report, giving them a beacon status for up and coming family Centres to follow.

OFSTED states that Pen Green gives children a first rate start to their education, which meets one of the requirements of the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), which is to offer children top rate education. Another of their targets was that children all progress to their full potential and it was noted that Pen Green was achieving this. The children were leading and were very involved in their learning styles, making decisions and making learning fun. Due to fantastic teaching and the relationships between staff and parents children were happy, healthy and thriving to learn and achieve. The only negative that we can think of is that once you have beacon status, there are pressures to maintain the standard

Source: (A8 October 2008)

Again under assignments, A3 put a title of 'my essay' and pasted in a handwritten mind map that she had photographed:

Just done the mind map for Brian's essay but not sure if I am thinking the right direction of how to tackle it. If anyone have any comments or suggestions after reading it, I will be very happy to have it, please

Source: (A3 March 2009

Figure 3. Mind map for essay

This illustrated how blogs could be used to share photos and scans. A3 did not receive feedback on her blog but did in fact gain feedback in the classroom. Another student, A8, also showed the class an online mind-mapping tool as a result of this entry.

Exams were a focus for sharing of emotions, one blogger A8 posted about her experience of sitting an exam:

> *There was a gasp in the room... no seriously...there was.*

> *We had just read the 'compulsory question' which incidentally, I had no idea there was going to be until 24 hours before..(I thought it would be 2 in each section choose one from each like last year!) and of course, compulsory means that you have to answer it.*

Source: (A8 September 2009)

A final code referred to *analysis and reflection* (1 coded unit) discussed in the introduction to this chapter. This code covered reflective comments on changing attitudes:

> *I was more shocked to then consider that prior to doing this course, I would have been amongst the vast majority of people who made such comments, (I do not include the right to life in this statement - too strong even for my uneducated views).*

Source: (A9 October 2008)

To round up, *study* fell into eight codes the most frequent tallied codes were

related to expanding the course work by linking to *relevant sites* and *educational theory* and the least used codes were *analysis and reflection* upon own learning.

As regards home

This category contained 13 codes, the most frequently tallied (4) was about *pets*, perhaps a safe topic for establishing relationships, rather like the weather?

> *Mum now has a kitten, 12 weeks old called Cat. She is a bundle of energy, a very friendly little thing.*

Source: (A15 January 2009)

The second most popular topic was birthdays and other *celebrations* (three coded passages) for example:

> *M's going to have her party at the weekend I will be knackered.*

Source: (A13 November 2008)

Managing home and *leisure activities* had two coded passages each and included posts that stated news such as this one about football;

A2 blogged:

> *Watching Liverpool v Everton Scrappy game As usual with derby matches Pity about Stevie G (He lives where I was brought up by the way and has a penthouse next to Promenade hospital in Southport where I was born)*

Source: (A2 November 2008)

Most students had children and referred to their children from time to time, again A3 blogged a long entry about her daughter and this gave an indication of the emotional investment she had made as a parent and also offered some reflection as to how being a mother had impacted on her learning:

> *In this piece of writing, I will talk about my daughter Jessica, she is the most beautiful girl in the world who is always in my eyes and in my mind. How does she looks like? Why is her personality so special that shines? Moreover there are some memories that we have as mother and daughter. I will try to explain it but I might fail as there are few words good enough to explain the love that I have for my daughter Jessica. I could never have imagined that I would consider giving up everything in my life for anyone else. I never thought it would be possible to love someone so much and can also give you so many headaches. So with this in my mind, this is how I am going to describe what my little princess/monster is like.*

> *Often children said to me that I am too old to understand how they feel/think and the new world out there. I found myself spilt into two parts because I am still studying in the college so part of me is fresh and still adopting the new tech from the college. But another part of me is a way too old, being a mother of five children (including the foster children), I do feel there is a big gap between me and the children, well not just the age also our values and beliefs. If these children are learning their social skill online then maybe we as parents should go online as well so we can learn and find out more what are children thinking these days.*

Source: (A3 November 2008)

The emotional dimension of student's learning journey was coded as *well-being.* In this cohort there were two examples one at the very beginning and one at the very end of the course. In this example A9 posted about how hard the course introduction had been for her:

> *I've been really stressed for the last two weeks and when we were told how much work that we will need to do and prepare, how much reading we will need to do in such short time.*

Source: (A9 October 2008)

This entry generated support from another student for example A8 replied:

> *Don't worry I always have the same concerns on a new course!*

Source: (A8 October 2008)

The following entry was about how group changes affected this particular student:

> *There is another reason that I haven't been on the blog is I didn't know what to talk about, I was lost with study. This year is my second year and I should have more commitment to the course but somehow I felt really disappointed. I love the feeling that I had last year, it was so full of excitement and commitment with all of us but this year, everyone seems to disappear and lost the connection.*

Source: (A3 February 2009)

This code was also about feelings and raised existential concerns that were difficult to respond to:

D.O.B - whatever you want it to be. I am a person trapped inside another person trying to re-discover herself

Source: (A10 October 2008)

This concludes the results of content analysis from Cohort A showing that, although blogging and technology was a cultural shock for these students, some managed to use blogs to extend class knowledge, add original perspectives and as a space for personal reflection about feelings and well-being.

Findings from Cohort B

Cohort B blogged from September 2008 – May 2010, a period of 17 months though most activity was curtailed to the five ten-week terms covered in this period. The cohort consisted of 13 learners, identified as B1 to B13. However B8, B10 and B11 left the course very early on and did not create a blog. Out of the ten remaining student bloggers, B12 had severe dyslexia and had to have help at home to post and produced very little blog content, B13 was self-identified anti-technology in any form and did not blog at all until the last weeks of the course (naming her blog 'I made it!'). Hence this section really concerns the activity of eight students. Again blogs were placed within three categories of 'about blogs', 'about home' and 'about study', and the same codes were used (*exams, well-being, pets*) to identify units of meaning. Figure 3 shows the breakdown between

these categories and sub themes within each category.

Figure 4. Topics covered by bloggers in cohort B
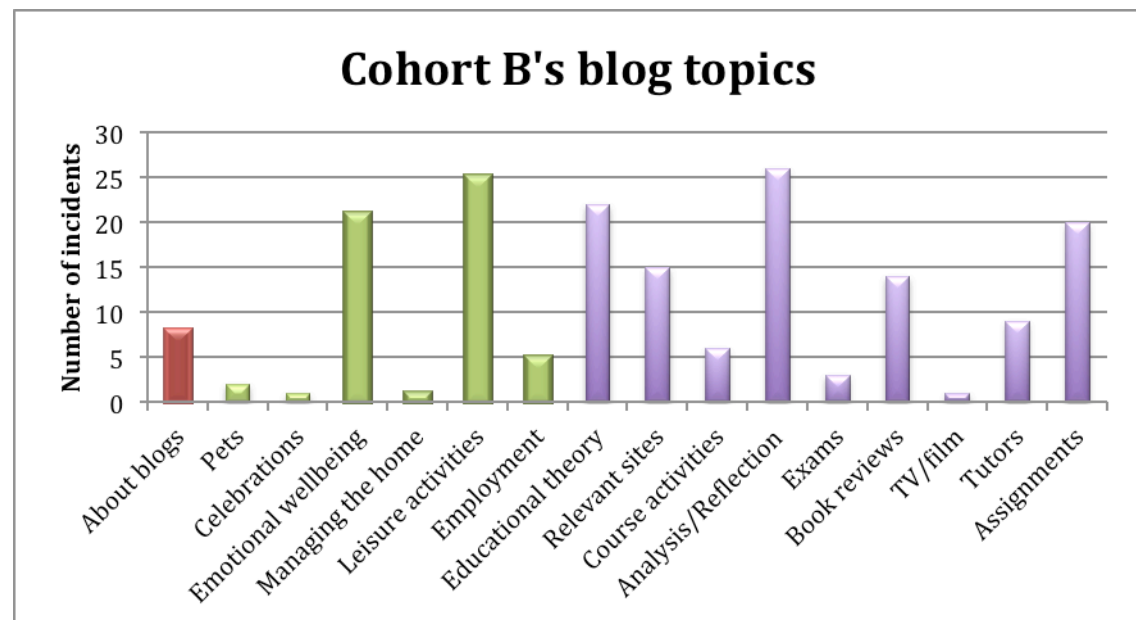
It can be seen that the most frequently coded category was again about studying. The most frequently coded sub themes within this category were: *educational theory* (22 coded passages) *analysis and reflection* (25 coded passages) and *assignments* (20 coded passages). These students also shared *relevant sites* (15 coded passages) and *book reviews* and recommendations (14 posts).

In comparison, the least used codes for Cohort B were *TV film links* (one post), revision and examinations (three coded passages). A new theme began to emerge as their placement work in the community was mentioned (five passages). An obvious point of comparison between blogs in Cohort B as compared to A is the higher frequency of blogs coded as *analysis and reflection*.

The blogs are now considered in more detail under the general categories of

about blogging; home and study.

As regards blogging

There were very few blogs, only three coded passages, which were explicitly focused on blogging as a practice, perhaps reflecting, a year on, the wider awareness of blogs in the general population and the availability of exemplars from Cohort A. Those who chose to introduce their blogs did so using informal language. For example in this exchange B7 blogged to say 'found my way here.......hi !!!!!' and this generated this comment from A3 a member of the previous cohort.

> *Hi, welcome to blogging. The first year is hard but soon you'll find it easier then you think.*

Source: (A3 January 2009)

B6 introduced her blog with some reticence:

> *this is my first blog on blogspot, not too good at blogging to be quite honest, but seen as though it may help me in my quest for a brighter future then so be it, i am unreliable, late and immature for my age, not in an annoying way i dont think, but nevertheless, i have told you now rather than later!*

Source: (B6 January 2009)

At times students discussed each other's blogs as B2 in describing her commitment to keep going:

Ok so hi, if you are reading, i checked out yours thought it was so good i

would do my own! although my one at warwick is still goin (although only

about two entries :-(.) so i make a kinda of promise to myself to keep this

one up!

Source: (B2 January 2009)

Many students commented on the difficulty of 'finding' their blog on the World-Wide Web. For example B6 wrote:

Right thats it for now, i only got on here cos i was on moodle but now i have

found it again i will keep it up x

Source: (B6 January 2009)

In commenting on blogging students valued and needed some interaction. B12 welcomed a comment on her post from B5 and reciprocated with a comment on B5's blog:

Yeah!!! It is worth doing this blogg for months I've been thinking it was

useless because I thought no one was bothered. By the way B5 when I have

time I have a look at your recent blog about your questionnaire

Source: (B12 January 2010)

In reply B4 encouraged B12 to continue:

Stick with the bog defo! Rest assured I always read your blog. I think it adds

another dimension to our learning/writing/understanding of our course (of

any course, I guess). It's also interesting to see what others see as interesting

to link to or write about.

Source: (B4 February 2010)

Hi, I feel as though I have been dragged through the hedge of technology!

What a nightmare to set up this blog, ah well finally made it. ttfn

Source: (B13 September 2009)

As regards study

Analysis and reflection (25 coded entries) was often focussed on a student's growth in confidence as a learner on a degree course:

Quick summery of gettin back to it, lovin it, lookin forward to everything

this year, a lot more than last year, i dnt know if that is because i have

survived the first year an kinda know whats expected of me and know what i

need to do, or if its because everything is planned out more this year and

that i know what i need to do and when for, not sure on that one, or whether

its just that my confidence has upt itself another gear acedemically. It could

be aa mixture or everything nature/nurture as they say.

peace out guys v

Source: (B6 October 2009)

B7 reflected on her progress and areas for improvement:

One more lecture left and three 2 hour exams and my first year at college

will be done. Waiting for some work to be returned but at the moment I am

averaging a 2:1 with a few firsts in there too so quite chuffed with it all. I

don't always have the belief in myself and I think the perception I get of

what others think I can (or can't) achieve is not always what they actually

think(?). But I am getting the hang of this learning game again and I

actually amaze myself sometimes with some of the stuff I can remember and

discuss - just got to get the 'arguement' side of my writing polished up.......it

is a noted fact, I am not great at argueing and teacher said I need to 'argue'

more.......kev-man might disagree????

Source: (B7 May 2009)

Educational theory referred to curriculum development drawing together both classroom references and independent study. B5 was coded *educational theory* and *relevant sites* for her post entitled 'National curriculum' that added a link for reference to an article and a review of a film on teacher's TV.

So this is my contribution ...21st Century Education. This short document will

consider how the education of the future might look. In order to make better

decisions for the future we are able to use reflexive skills by considering

history and other cultures. After listening to Matthew Taylor, Chief

Executive of RSA, on Teachers TV, I felt more drawn to the idea that the

National Curriculum should be a tool that is manipulated towards each

individual child, where children are allowed to emerge in their own time

and allowed to learn through their own interests. There should be a holistic

approach to learning and more classrooms without walls where society

becomes more accommodating and involved in children. In our ever

developing technological world, children and their parents should be

encouraged to embrace the tools of ICT.

For example, a student on The Big Debate on Teachers TV explained how,

through a project, they were asked to set up a market stall and sell things,

he describe how he appreciated having to learn different aspects of the

market and it made learning more interesting. This type of experience

couldn't be achieved without the help of society. If children are expected to

integrate into society, attaining the levels that industry expects of them at

the end of compulsory education, it is up to industry not just to prescribe but

to be a part of their education from an early age. In relation to careers,

children may have a better concrete understanding of the type of work they

enjoy.

I would suggest a National Curriculum for the 21st century to be one that

allows for true personal growth, because only by letting go will we gain

people of the future who can use their imagination and inspiration to take

us further into the future. Society in general needs to nurture our

developing young, because it is through care and the passing on of

knowledge through experience that children can learn.

Source: (B5 October 2009)

Another entry from B6 about the same time also included a review on a video
with her comment on *educational theory*:

alternative schooling

hi all ,

*long time no blog Eeek! sorry, haha but i did warn you! anyway just checked
out a link i found about TAS the alternative school, i got another link to a
bloke called stewart townsend, he has done a video about 'bunking off' this
was made with the hellp of the guys and girl from TAS this is the link to the
video http://vimeo.com/2541500 its worth a watch an i hate to admit it but
it made me really sad, having the knowledge that our future generations are
experiencing these kind of thoughts on a daily basis. Our so-called education
system is supposed to be inclusive - for everyone but watching this brings
the harsh reality of it all, it isnt! its not inclusive and unless something
drastic is done to change this fact it never will be, i know the argument on
the other side is that well there have always been people/children who have
been non-conforming or wayward but its our duty as a society to ensure
that ALL these children get a good start in life, isnt that why we have the
Children Act? Childrens Rights and so on?! it makes me so mad to think of all
them children out there who have been cast aside because they dont fit in to
the mold that is formed by the governing system of britain! the very people
who are supposed to be makin good are at the same time creating bad, i
agree with what Brian says, our education system is like a car factory
productionline any dodgey or faulty parts are pushed to the waste basket
never to be touched again unless its to throw them out completely. I know
that some ofsted reports are daming to alternative schools , but like what is*

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said by Mr townsend 'Schooling, despite the concentration on curriculum and assessment reform in recent years, largely still hasn't tackled the main issue: meaningless (to young people) pedagogy. The government who are supposed to be managing change are not doing so, this links in with the so called independant inspections, ofsted, the more i look into it and find more out about polotics the more i feel this countries government is corrupt and that is just on the education front, never mind taxes and bills!! the same people (government) who are supposidly making a change for the better for our young children are also kicking aside the children who need help the most by making such tight deadlines that the teachers dont have the time to help the children who are struggling, what kind of education is that? in making the education inclusive with one hand they are at the same time making it exclusive. this does not even take into account private schools or church schools this is our state school system doing this and i damn sure that if my daughter ever struggled at school and was excluded by the system i would not be best pleased! what are the government going to do to help those children who are rejected? they have policy after policy in supposidly solving one problem they create another! to solve that problem they make another policy, such as sure start, if the problem which creates these problems could be delt with @ source surely the money spent on sure start education places could be pumped back into mainstream schools to keep these children in instead of isolating them and moving them away, which in turn creates the 'us and them' scenario, which if exposed to constantly (secondary socliasation) will eventually to the extreme create a

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dehumanized human, why should they bother with society when society

wont bother with them..... food for thought right am offski

peace out guys v

Source: (B6 November 2009)

Some students posted their own personal views without references such as this from B7 that ended:

If I reflect on my primary education I do not really remember all of what we

learnt or how we learnt it but I don't remember ever not wanting to go to

school. The school was part of the community, the parents were involved in

some way and I enjoyed the journey. That is how I feel school should be, a

journey.

I am writing this from notes and piecing together a couple of drafts that I

have started so hope this makes sense (I am known for waffling a bit!!!!)

Sorry for the lack of theorists, journals, legislation etc ....but this is already

over 750 words!!!!!

Any opinions greatly welcome......actually it would be nice.

Night peeps x

Source: (B7 October 2009)

Educational theory was also viewed through the lens of personal effects on the family:

Cameron and Sure Start

I am very disappointed by Cameron's suggestion about using Sure Start as a way of providing specific help to dysfunctional and deprived families. No1, how will he define dysfunctional and what exactly is a deprived family. No2. How does he intend on getting these families through the doors of the Sure Start buildings, which will no longer looked upon as centres of the community, but stigmatised family areas; where the people who can't cope go to? and No 3. why does he want to stop the communities that have developed within these centres from forming, because, as a result of these centres, a lot of the private parent and toddler groups have gone, in the search of better quality resources.

I understand that he is pointing out the obvious that the people who need extra resources, whatever that is, are not getting the support they need. However, this problem does not stem from the grassroots of society through centres like Sure Start, but it comes from the inequalities of the whole of our system in society, and when I talk about inequalities, I don't just mean monetary. I mean that unfortunately, England is a deprived society when it comes to children, because, policies don't really consider families and even in general society does not think about the needs of children. We still foster Victorian attitudes and I believe in order for society to change it requires an overhaul of how we consider success, in this I agree with Illich.

So Mr Cameron, your policies already show up who you are. Please do not further deprive the communities of England by withdrawing a resource that

*is necessary to every family with young children, because Sure Start has
helped me and at times it has been a saving grace, its been great to know
that I could go somewhere, feel welcomed, not feel stigmatised, get the
support I needed and just this knowledge alone helped me in ways that
cannot be measured. No, keep Sure Start if anything, give them more
resources to continue a great service. I suggest a more radical way forward,
how about help families with young children, offering them more financial
support, that's right I said it, not cuts. Support people by giving them help.*

*Even as a Christian, I believe your tax breaks for the married couples is
unfair to people who are not married, because there are families who have
children and the parents are not married. Also, the money that will be going
to the richer people is money that will be wasted, when it could be spent on
those 'dysfunctional, deprived families' What do you think? Some bloggers
posted resources or mind maps for revision C1 or simply updated each other
on progress [ ].*

*Aside from exam revision, I have 'only' BM essay and CT presentation and
Child Devel Project left to work on now...so these are moving to drawer 'B'
and Science revision is moving up to drawer 'A' - where it will reside
exclusively for the next two weeks!!*

Source: (B12 January 2010)

Relevant sites was another code for 15 passages. As with cohort A these passages
tended to contain hyper-links to further material. Some of these links again stood

without comment. This was from B12 about Montessori Philosophy:

> *Feeling absolutely exhausted today. I am going to try to put a youtube video on about Montessori.*

Source: (B12 November 2009)

B12 also posted a TED talk onto her blog:

> *Curriculum killing creativity - according to Sir Ken Robinson*
>
> *Yesterday, Pete told me about this Sir Ken Robinson who spoke at TED about how the curriculum is killing creativity. Loved this!! Hope this will WOW you too.*

Source: (B12 December 2009)

Book reviews (14 passages) were posted either as a general book to read or as a link to useful reading for an assignment. B13 reported on a good book for an assignment:

> *I am struggleing a bit with Brian's essay, can't get my head round it, I know what the problem is, as soon as I finally get on with it, things will become clearer. Have just started reading John Holt's 'Why Children Fail' an interesting read, quite funny in parts. I havn't quite got to his theory on education yet. Think i am going to do the essay on him and Illich, but that may change again.Enough rambling from me, ttfn*

Source: (B13 October 2009)

TV recommendations was coded once under study. However some *leisure activities*, under home, also had links or made reference to television programmes typically 'soaps'. An example is from B7 discussing Eurovision Song contest:

> *hi....still here....?*
>
> *There has been a lot going on of late so not been around much.*
>
> *On my own tonight cause man is out being social and for some strange reason I have the Eurovision song contest on.......not usually done in this house but out of 400 plus channels it seemed like a good idea at the time. Must say, Mr Wogan takes some beating but Graham Norton is making me laugh.........what a life I lead - life on the edge, bring it on.*
>
> *Want to hear a good song ? Click here....Empire of the Sun - We are the People, the video takes some getting used to, very 80's and slightly strange but the song is fab.*

Source: (B7 May 2009)

Tutors (9 posts) and *assignments* (20 posts) were discussed under study. This one asked for help about an assignment in a jokey way:

> *I am glad to be back to college, all the work we have to do sounds interesting, I will enjoy doing it. Year 2 seems to be more practical, though perhaps more work than last year. I am currently thinking of a curriculum model for the 21st century, I m not sure wether we have to talk about a*

particular model, or the subjects that we think should be included, or both,

what does everyone else think? replies on a postcard please!!! (only kidding!

replies on here will be fine!) . Anyway, must go, x

Source: (B3 November 2008)

This blog entry shows that bloggers were not expecting tutors to read or comment on posts as its audience is other students.

Some students add their notes from classes with links for further reading for those who were unable to attend or helping create a picture of their experience in that class. For example B6 wrote in all different colours and links:

Hi guys back again,

I know i wont be able to keep doin this every day but while its fresh in the

mind there is no time like the present, although i have forgotten sum stuff

already :-/ . Ok so today we had our first hr with ihar, i enjoyed it as i got to

,know a bit about ihar an you guys, but also as lins said we were NORMING

which is part of the theory from TUCKMAN (not sure bout spelling) of group

working> see link

http://www.infed.org/thinkers/tuckman.htm . Also from ihar I got a few

questions that i needed to start thinking about such as why, when , how,

where, who I know these are pretty simple questions to ask but its

remembering the simplist things that i sometimes forget about! we also got

a reminder of the heritage site an the info about all the new ebooks which

have been added, great for time saving an leisurely reading, no pressure

to return books as they are online! sorted and again the reminder of ATHENS. great recap for us i thought.

During lins session i gained a lot of info not just for her part of the course but for other parts too, links to theorists such as BERNSTEIN FOR THE OBS OF CHILD for fionna .

Other theorists I will list below as i myself find it easier to read a short sentance than to get lost in a paragraph of them!

JOHN DEWEY :- miss-education or education. i.e., do you tell a child that all flowers are red or do you tell them that the come in all different colours?

this could also link to PIAGET and his schemas,ie tell a child that juice is in a blue cup constantley, but then child goes to granmas an gets juice in a green cup, the child will insist that there is no juice in the green cup beacuse juice comes in a blue cup, some chldren with maybe attention disorder may refrain from drinking out of that cup because of that dissorder where others would actually try the juice in a green cup after some persuassion.

VYGOTSKY'S PRODUCTS: Internalize/ externalize, if you dnt externalize then you cant learn. i think this relates to merging technologies but willhave to ask nxt week.

HOWARD JARCHE :- Context is as important as content (you know me + i know you)

SKINNER:- BEHAVIOURISM----------------------- these two forms of learning

when compared with

PIAGET, BRUNER, GAGNE : CONECTIONISM---- itc are outdated so the

possible new form is below

STEPHEN DADS + GEORGE SEMANS :- CONNECTIVISM like a spider web,

gaining from different sources to learn and different people (NODES).

BRONFENBRENNER could also be connected with this form, in his theory of

macro ,meso, micro systems.

So they were the theorists i got from todays session some i will have to look

up others i wont, I also learnt about TRIANGULATE which i think is going to

be usefull in an exam, three points of call for my research these being[ ]

Source: (B6 September 2009)

The *tutors* were discussed informally such as in this post about Fiona ,'Fi.'

Ok so yeah did have a couple of worries about fi to be honest, i was told that

fi was a cross between brian an lin, arrrrgh nightmare!, no offence guys.

With this in mind, although i do keep an open mind when meeting new

people regardless of what has been said, i found tht fi was as described as

such but not to the extreme i had imagined in my nightmares! lol a good mix

of the two i would say, which is sound by me.

Source: (B6 September 2009).

Another student commented on some helpful feedback given on her work:

I was really impressed with Lynn's comments, I did work really hard on that work and thank God for my lovely hubby who always proof reads for me.

Source (B12 October 2009)

Course activities (six coded passages) usually arose as a topic after a speaker had come or a visit such as this one when the class attended a conference at the university.

ICT Conference at Warwick

Well I really enjoyed this conference today, got some good ideas for the essay I have to do for Brian and also really inspired to complete my blogg more often after seeing the children's bloggs. I would like to put all my thoughts on the blogg but sometimes just too busy and I would love more comments.

Source: (B12 March 2010)

Exams (three posts) were usually about how hard they were and how concerned the students were about the course content matching the exam.

B7 reported her exam thoughts:

yep....lets hope BM is in a good mood when marking!!! We deffo got an 'unplanned' compulsory question.....no matter how you look at it. Oh well....learning curve just went hyperbolic!!!!!. they were right, the first year has gone FAST !!Best of luck with rest of exams :o)

Source: (B7 may 2009)

B5 joined in a blog about *exams*:

I take it this was BM exam. Think he flumuxed us all....we all were more than a little suprised at the compulsary question on ours too, although in hindsight (such a wonderful phenomenon), i know i had revised what was needed to answer it much better than i did...1st exam nerves!

Source: (B5 May 2009)

B3 also joined in:

> I'm really concerned that i havent passed BM exam, i'm fairly confident i'v
> done enough for CT, but reading that LA was the hardest last
> year...well....not looking forward to monday morning. I cant understand why
> as soon as i turn over the question sheet my mind completly empties itself of
> all i knew.
> Good luck for your final exam, i'm sure you'll do well.

Source: (B3 May 2009)

As regards home

Leisure activities was the main focus for the blog writers in respect to home with
(25 coded passages) and covered all sorts of life happenings, B7 wrote:

> I can't go through a week without making something.......and as much as I
> love all things crafty: playing with paper, making jewellery etc etc there is
> nothing like going back to your roots, for me knitting and sewing, what I
> learnt to do first, thanks mum :o)

Source: (B7 January 2010)

> Had a lovely weekend in Southwold, beautiful place, relaxing and some
> lovely fish and chips.
>
> *Source: (B7 August 2009)*

> *Fab week in Wales camping, no phone reception, no internet, no tv just beautiful surroundings, me & mr Kev (I won't mention the rain or trying to walk up a mountain in a storm!!!!) This time we took the train up Snowdon.....walking it last year was enough !!!!!*

Source: (B3 September 2009)

> *Rest of my time is spent writing a literature review (which I am just NOT getting the hang of - it's hard!!!!), reading college books, child observations, writing up a 12 month project and dealing with every day stuff..............'me/us' time is sparse to say the least, but I am fitting in a bit of knitting when my head just won't take any more :o)*

Source: (B7 May 2009)

B3 wrote about an imminent move to Ireland:

> *Hi everyone, well, the past month has been a real revelation, things have changed a lot in one area of my life, which is going to have a dramatic effect on the rest of my life, I will explain about this when I get back to college*

Source: (B3 September 2009)

B5 reviewed the level of ICT in her home life and this was categorized as home and coded *leisure activities*:

> *Mine (and my families) recreation includes watching television, playing games consoles and 'surfing' the web. Although we part-take in other activities, could we manage without these things completely?*

Necessities of life - I dont post letters, I email or facebook people i need to contact. I dont go into town and manually transfer monies, I do it all online. I dont always go and pick my own spuds - someone in ASDA does it for me then delivers it to my doorstep. And so on..... Yes, these functions, services and outlets are there to be used and to make our lives a little less stressful and busy. Can we cope without them? I'm interested to find out. I'm sure my son and hubby may not be, but its an experiment I may very well undertake in the not to distant future.

Source: (B5 October 2009)

Aspirations to get some relaxation time or exercise time were also a theme in the blogs such as this one from B6:

ello, ello, elloooooo,

First day back today, was lookin forward to it! got a bit ambitious though, an took my gym kit with me, but alas i never went, oh well there is always tomora.

Source: (B6 September 2009)

Emotional well-being (21 coded passages) was a frequently used code and, as blogging developed, conversations about emotional issues could now become less private and include students that had never met each other except online. The blogs frequently were used to express concerns, express confidence and raise doubts and other feelings as their study progressed:

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Hi again. I have about a million books, and I've been printing off loads of info for my lit review, most of it isn't relevant however, I haven't really got a clue what I really doing when it comes to the lit review and its really difficult to know in my head how a lit review all fits in when it comes to research and doing studies. So I think I'll youtube it again. Hopefully, this week I'll try to organise myself, tidy up my notes and maybe even read them again. Just really busy. I think its time to do a to do list and really I just got to get down and dirty with all that reading. :@/

Source: (B12 October 2009)

Well-being was also used as a code for this post from a new student who stated:*Hi, dont know about you but there seems to be a lot to take in for the fisrt day. Hope it all becomes clearer....*

Source: (B2 September 2009)

Blogs expressing concerns became less frequent as the weeks went on and students got down to posting relevant study links more often:

Another week done, and I think it went pretty well. I'm clearer now on all aspects of the course, writing essays and study methods seem less daunting than they did a week ago. The lectures with Fiona and Lin were enjoyable and informative. I've learnt so much in the past fortnight, which has also improved my confidence in my own ability.

Source: (B4 October 2009)

Identity as a *good* student was a constant theme such as this one from B6:

I think some people take me the wrong way, as i come across as quite confident as i speak out a lot in lectures, but its just the best way for me to learn and understand what i am taking in, underneath i have the same if not more worries about everything that everyboday else has - Am i working hard enough? am i going in the right direction? is the work i am producing at an acceptable level for the course i am doin? all these things are constantly in my head especially when we have a new essay or presentation to do.

Source: (B6 January 2010)

Blogs gave students the opportunity to share their worries and frustration. In response to a blog by A8, B6 commented on her blog about revising the wrong things (this was coded using the label *exams)*:

Unlike you I hadn't recently revised what the compulsory question in ours was asking for...so I just hope how I answered it was the right take on it!...I was confident as I left the exam...but as time has moved on I'm talking my way out of it being OK....as you say Hindsight and all that!!!! I'm rather miffed that I either completely misread our revision sessions (as did many others!!) or BM has flumuxed us second years too...let's hope he's feeling generous when marking....:-)

Source: (A8 to B6 May 2009)

Emotional comments about other students were rare but this one from B4 commenting on another's decision to give up the course drew attention to her

own determination to stay the distance:

> *It is interesting to observe others' determination and lack of. I never thought that giving up on this degree was an option, even though sometimes on reflection it would have been so easy to do. You obviously draw your motivation from sources so easily found to you and from my experience of working in schools that will be etremely useful in your role as a classroom teacher.*

Source: (B4 May 2010)

B4 spurred the new students from Cohort C on by writing on their blogs and on hers:

> *Well – this time next year I will have graduated, with know what ITT I am doing in September….yes.. that light at the end of the tunnel is definitely starting to shine a bit brighter!*

Source: (B4 May 2010)

Those who had passed their two years in Cohort A shared their 'survivor' status with new (unknown) students in Cohort B by posting on their own blog:

> *Good Luck to all newbies….and to the others who move on through the programme. Work hard...read loads....ask questions.....and success is there for the taking!*

Source: (A8 May 2009)

Posts were often left without comment even when one was implicitly invited such as this one at the end of first week when B12 posted:

> *End of Week One .I am overwhelmed with all the stuff I need to learn.*
> *However, I am making progress, I just need to find out exactly what all the*
> *deadlines are for each subject, and I need to find out what exactly I need to*
> *brush up on. For the moment I'm not feeling like this thing is impossible, just*
> *a major challenge.*

Source: (B12 September 2009)

Later B12 also posted a clearer invite to discuss how hard the demands of study and home life were and again received no comments:

> *I am struggling a little bit because there just so much to do. I have to keep*
> *with up with learning how to observe children, book in time to do those*
> *observations, start reading up for the lit reviews, write up about my ideal*
> *national curriculum, need and run a household of five children including*
> *fitting in time for other members of family. PHEW!!! Let me catch my*
> *breath. All all I want to do it rest. How is everyone else doing?*

Source: (B12 October 2009)

The *well-being* code also included bereavement. One student offered several posts thread about her grandfather who had died just before the exams:

> *Within the next 2 weeks, amidst our loss and sadness I helped my Dad sort*
> *the funeral, empty my granddads house (did you know the council only give*

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you one week to vacate after a death.......bizarre.....!!),

Source: (B7 July 2009)

Grandad's funeral has been and gone, it was extremely emotional but totally what he deserved. Guard of honour, standard, last post - he would have been proud to have received it. One of his cards read 'farewell old soldier' and that is how he went. He is now with my Nana and all the others he has missed since they have gone and he is hopefully happy.

The rest of us are just trying to deal with what has happened. It has been hard, emotional and exhausting - very little sleep is being had.....which doesn't help with revising and acheiving those passes that I want !!!!!

Source: (B7 August 2009)

Missing my grandad and my other grandparents. Lots of things would be different if they were here. I could always go down my grandads and have a good moan and he would too, we would moan together.

Source: (B7 September 2009)

Employment (five coded passages) became a new code as Cohort A had not mentioned it even though most of them had a part time job. For some the job posed many more problems in completing the course:

yo yo yo................

It is 12.20 am......and college is in 9 hours time - this is how my days work out

at the moment. After spending the last 9 hours sorting out a chemical

quarantine collection, racing around on a fork lift truck and staring at a

computer, I need to unwind !!!!!!!

Source: (B7 November 2009)

For others a job in early years helped the coursework. B3 posted about her new part –time job:

I am so glad to have it! I now have a work placement at St Mary's primary

school in Hinckley on a Monday, I do enjoy it, year 1 and and 2 are lovely the

staff are great too. I didnt get any work from the agency, the paperwork

took too long to come through unfortunatley.

Source: (B3 September 2009)

Pets (3 passages) could include sad news and funny news:

Bad news, our Becky Boo went off to doggy heaven. She has been with us for

8 years and was the ripe old age of about 15 so she did well. But the house is

empty without her ....I am sure she is still here, following us around - just

not leaving hair everywhere.

Source: (B7 August 2009)

B6 blogged on a lighter note about her new pet:

I got a doggie the other day and he is wicked, a lab, 5mths , really sweet ;-)

so been kick startin my fitness phase by walkin him everywhere!! my ar*e is

killin me! lol.

B7 included a photo and spoke about her new puppy and pasted a photo to her
blog:

Introducing........ Finley aka Fin,fat face, puppety mcwupperty, fluffety wuffety.....you
get the picture!!!!!

Source: (B7 October 2010)

A new code *Celebrations* was created and used once. B7 blogged about going
back home to Europe for a birthday:

> *Off for my yearly trip in a couple of days to see my little man who is 5 next*
> *week - never missed one yet and not about to start now. Looking forward to*
> *my trip for Samuels birthday, one person who can make me smile and laugh*
> *when the rest of life is falling down about me.*

> *Fully laden with birthday and xmas pressies......about 20kilo's at a*
> *guess........!!!!!*

Source: (B7 December 2009)

Managing the home had one coded passage; this from B7:

> *My motto when I feel like collapsing is if you want something bad enough*
> *you will work hard for it. Very rare I put myself first but with this I am (well,*
> *I am trying to)!!! My man is fab and understands why I am doing this to*
> *myself (even if he does nag that I am trying to do too much)- he cooks my*
> *tea every day and brings it to work (the only time he sees me Mon -Fri,*

some may think he is lucky?), he cleans, shops, washes and keeps house all

week for me {xxxxxxx

Source: (B7 October 2009)

Findings from cohort C

Cohort C blogged from September 2009 – May 2010, a period of eight months

though most activity was curtailed to the three ten week terms covered in this

period. The data were collected in June 2010.The cohort consisted of 18 learners,

identified as C1 to C18. However C5, C7, C8, C13, C15, C16, C17 and C18 did not

create a blog. C9, C11, C12 and C14 made only one post. Out of the six remaining

student bloggers, C1, C2, C3, C4, C6 and C10, there were 73 posts but C6 and C4

had produced very little blog content. Hence this section really concerns the

activity of six students with varying content. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of

posts by category and sub theme.

Figure 5. Topics covered by bloggers in Cohort C
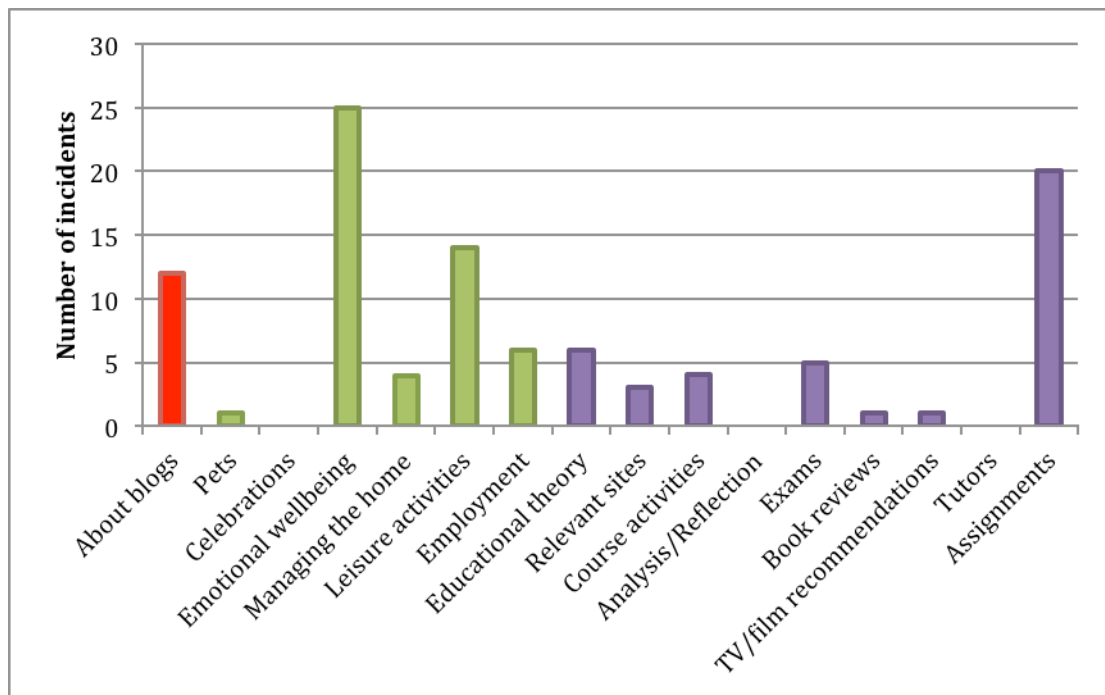
Again the coded passages were placed within three categories of 'about blogs' (12 coded passages in red), 'about home' (50 coded passages in green) and 'about study' (38 coded passages in blue) and the same codes were used (*exams, well-being, pets*). In comparison to cohorts A and B, Cohort C had no coded passages for *tutors*, *exams* and *analysis and reflection*.

There were some differences in C when compared to other cohorts; *Educational theory* (six coded passages) was much less frequently coded than any of the other cohorts, but the units for the *assignments* (20 coded passages) were similar to Cohort B and more than Cohort A. Cohort C had more coded passages for *employment* (six coded passages) and *emotional well-being* (25 coded passages) than the other two cohorts. In additional the coded passages about *blogs* (12 coded passages) appeared much more frequently in Cohort C's posts than in those from the two other cohorts.

As regards blogging

The process of blogging itself was an issue at the start of the programme and covered in posts such as this one completed by C6 during the first week of their programme:

> *My first blog*
>
> *Well this is new. I'd never heard of blogging until today, how sad! And had no idea how to do it. It's not as hard as i thought it would be, thank god! Well i'm looking forward to the degree although i know its going to be the hardest thing i've ever had to do. I'm determined to do this though and i really hope that i can do well. Goodbye social life, hello studying!!! :-(*

Source: (C6 September 2009)

The new bloggers were often warmly greeted by the older bloggers with one liner such as this C11 wrote onto another's blog (D cohorts) in their first week of blogging;

> *' C11 Loving the blog!!!*

Source: (C11 September 2010)

This could be evidence that some students were open to 'talking' online to people they had not met face to face. There were also posts about the technology of blogs; C10 explored different ways of structuring this blog. In this example C10 states she has successfully managed to add a film link:

Tuesday, 9 February 2010

Hi again just testing to see if I can add a film....

Source: (C10 February 2010)

Most students did not see the point of blogging without feedback and ironically this post did not get any comment:

Long Time Coming

It's been a while, so I thought I had better try and get into the habbit of using my blog more often, as we will need to use them next year as part of our literature review. I haven't really felt the urge to post anything over the past few months. Initally, entering a blogging community seemed to have a lot of potential for idea sharing and supporting each other during transitional dips that the course is bound to throw up. But looking back, since the inital lectures in October, the blogs havent really gotten off the ground. Facebook seems to be the prefered method of online communication. Perhaps this is because it has a wider scope, combining peoples social, educational and work lives in an easy to use single source. The problem with blogging is that to keep in touch with everyone on the course, every blog needs to be consulted every week or so, which consists of visiting over twenty sources. Facebook however offers upto date communication with every member of the course in one visit and also offers the opportunity for live chat. Despite my views I am prepared to give blogging another go, and hopefully in the second year the blogs will live up

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to expectations.

Source: (C1 May 2010)

Students also referred to Blogging as another help line on the course:

[ ] ....you have to make use of the resources such as the tutors, blogging,

facebook etc, they make you see you are not feeling these things on your

own and you CAN do this!

Source: (C11 May 2010)

Lastly blogs were seen as a keepsake that would be available like a diary:

I can still remember when I was young, a future teller once told me that I

would never achiever HE, and here I am on the way to achieve it. finger

cross I will see you on the final year, wear our cap and gown, together

celebrate our success. will you still carry on write on this blog? I will try my

best to carry on this blog so when I finish, I will have some good things to

remember with.'

Source: (C3 May 2010)

The cohort saw blogs as a journal about the journey they were making but they had to have an audience to feel motivated to write up this journey.

A*s regards study*

The largest number of posts (20 passages) was about *assignments*, for example the cohort up-dating the rest of the students on their work:

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Can't believe the first year is over and done with! Phew! Actually looking

forward to getting my results. Well thought i'd get a head start and do some

research for next years literature review into children and race but i'm

struggling for ideas. Does anyone have any advice on...

Source: (C6 May 2010)

back again so soon..

Firstly apolpgies for those reading my previous posts, working this late isn't

good for my spelling. well at least that one thing i need to deal with in my

study module proof reading..

I have just completed my first observation and typed up notes and produced

a document. who'd believe that of me...

Source: (C6 October 2009)

C2 planned coursework strategies through her blog:

Hello, I'm so stressing about next year already! A lit review that makes me

panic just those two little words! I would like any advice on what to read, I

think I'll email Lin and see what she advises!!!Now in panic mode about year

2! Oh my YEAR 2, how did that happen!

Source: (C2 August 2009)

C11 reflected on how her life has changed; now she had *assignments* to do her
Friday nights were not the same:

im going to WARWICK tommorrow to get stuck into my assignment,it has

been hard work already and i know i have lots more to do and lots of

transditional dips to go through i have already started to change my time

management i would be normally be having a drink on a friday night but im

blogging

Source: (C11 October 2009)

C3 posted about the difficulty in finding time to study:

I have a niggle in the back of my mind that i still haven't got my head round

studying this week, yesterday was mad too, housework in the morning,

meeting in the afternoon and bed early for my 5am wake up call this

morning. Liz and i are styudy buddying for thursday and friday, so hoping i

will feel better about my work come the weekend!

Source: (C3 October 2009)

Educational theory (six coded passages) was discussed though often at a rather
surface level. However CI was able to go into depth on the origins of racism and
to cite well established theories and 'authorities':

Wednesday, 29 September 2009

The Origins of Racism in Children

I have been looking at different theories which attempt to explain the cause

of racist attitudes in children. There is plenty of literature on the subject, but

these seem to be the core theories:

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The Authoritarian Personality (Adorno et al. (1950) points towards a build-up of aggression caused by enforced conventionalism by an authoritarian figure. This built up aggression manifests itself in the form of discrimination towards social deviants which are defined by the views of the authoritarian, and in many cases take the form of racial or ethnic minorities who may not conform to the cultures dominant conventions.

Social Learning theory (Allport (1954) claims that the origin of prejudice in children is observation and imitation of a valued person (parent, teacher etc.). The influence of the adult on the child can first be seen in repetition of statements of prejudice and with the cognitive development of the child these statements become adopted as beliefs. An extension of this theory is the Intergroup Contact theory which identifies a lack of contact between members of different social groups as a Contributory factor in the formation of prejudice.

Cognitive Developmental theory draws upon the work of Jean Piaget (1951) which points towards a young child's inability to pick out individual characteristics and similarities when encountering new people. Often young children generalize when defining different groups of people and use physical appearance to categorize groups. It is not until a child reaches a certain stage of cognitive development (around 7 years old) that they acquire the ability to group others using multiple factors of classification.

Evolutionary theory (Fishbein (1996) + Hirschfeld (2001) claims that

humans are hard wired to show a preference towards their own race. It is

claimed that this is to maximise genetic purity and from a cognitive point of

view this preference helps children to prioritise information concerning

their own group and ignore 'out group' information

Source: (C1 September 2009)

Some posts were not so well academically referenced or directly related to course work. C3 assumed readers had seen an advert for Action for Children, and supported the cause without question. The author had possibly cut and paste text, and had not drawn out the significance for the audience:

Celebrity TV presenter Davina McCall launched the appeal with Driving the

charity towards its goal of raising £17 million to help neglected children

over the next three years, a wide range of fundraising activities are taking

place nationwide. These include street prospecting, cold-telemarketing and

direct mail to prospective supporters.

a primetime, 3-minute advert that appeared during Channel 4 News

(October 12), talking about child neglect and calling on the public to

support the charity's appeal by making a donation.

'Neglect is a growing problem and one we must fix. The same issues for

neglected children and their families are coming up time and time again-

but we can make a difference,' said Action for Children's Executive Director

of External Relations and Communications, Polly Neate.

> *'That's why it's so important, through integrated marketing, PR, and fundraising activities that our appeal reaches out to all stakeholders. From parents to policy makers, we need to make everyone aware of just how serious a problem child neglect is right now, to call on them to be extra vigilant, and donate to our appeal so that we can save more children from slipping through the net.'*

Source: (C3 October 2009)

Course activities (4 coded passages) included on site and off site incidents. Some posted with humour about getting lost such as C10:

> *Well Reverand its been nearly a week since my last blog.... what a week still struggling on, some things starting to make a little sence others not... Warwick of Thursday had a great walk around the campus in the morning, not planned some parking attendant sent me to the wrong costcutter 45 mins walking, never the less made it to the induction day on time.*

Source: (C10 October 2009)

Another blogger reported the induction day at Warwick:

> *Navigation by myself was absolutely outstanding i must say lol, Found car park 13 ok (Thanks Brian) and followed my nose to costcutter by guessing and tadaaa we were at the coffee shop! Chuckle at Liz's driving though, decided to follow a lorry to protect Cliff (her car) but almost forgot to adhere to UK traffic rules of stopping on a red light.*

Spotted Jen, so made a beeline for her and as she didn't recognise me her vacant look was a picture lol.

Anyway interesting presentations today by several people followed by free lunch, only downside to this was spending too much time in the rain for fire drills that weren't even going off in the building we were in. To then walk back to the building to have ours going off. so was sent back to the car park again. Not funny when just getting over a bout of illness!

Was feeling very tired by the end and was glad to go and have a wander around the campus, followed by chicken & Leek bake and coffee, scrummy.

Source: (C3 Oct 2009)

This light and personal tone was often used in the blogs and the use of correct grammar and punctuation was rare.

An example of relaxed reporting is shown in this comment of a 'Whodunit' game played in class:

Theres been a Murrder !!! great fun and a great way to learn belkins roles. see something has sunk in at last.

Source: (C10 October 2009)

In addition C10 arranged a trip for all students to The Education Show and advertised it on their blog and hyper linked this to the booking form:

DAY TRIP....

Source: (C10 March 2009)

Relevant sites (three coded passages) tended to make some reference to further research. C1 offered that::

> *There are some interesting studies to be found on the internet, including one*
>
> *by CNN which seeks to identify racist attitudes in young children. I have*
>
> *provided a link to this study below.*
>
> *http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/05/18/doll.study.parents/index.html*

Source: (C1 May 2010)

Exams (four coded passages) offered practical and emotional help. C1 provided an a personalized in-depth take on how to apply theory to the exams:

Figure 6. A student's image of an ecological system.
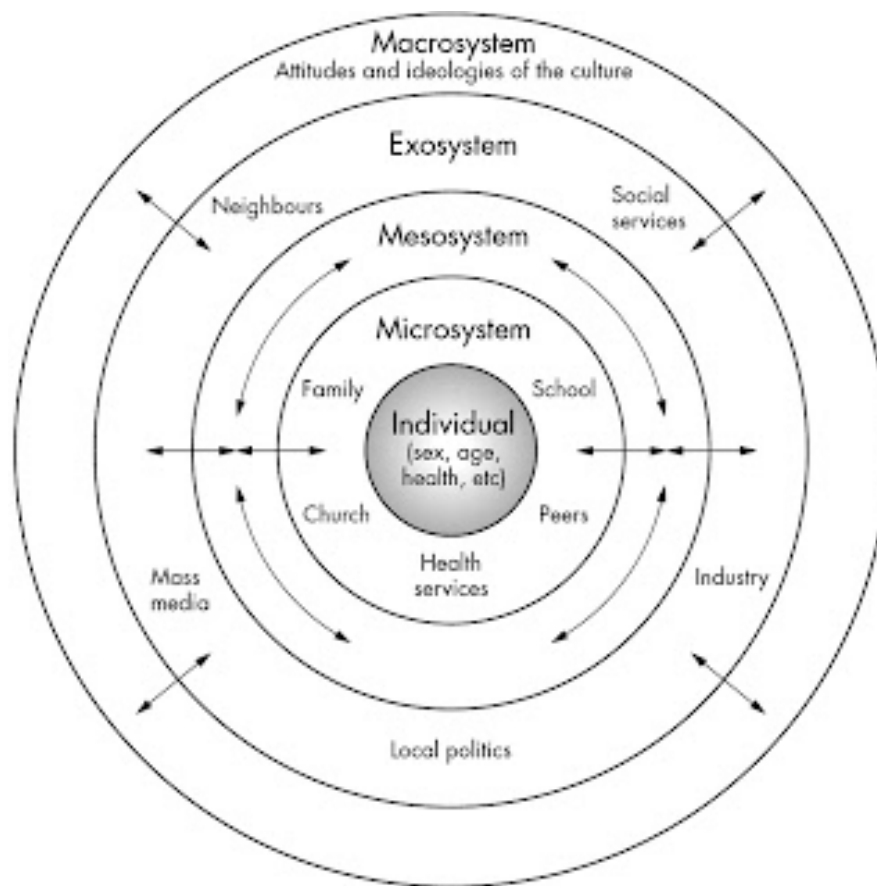
I've been working on some of the example questions we were given by Lin and Rachel and as a result have been revising multi agency work. A good theory, which demonstrates the influence of external factors on the social development, is Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. It is a four tiered system that shows how the child is at the centre of a complex social structure with the influence of direct interactions, external influences which do not rely on direct interactions and the influence of society as a whole. It shows how workers from different agencies or settings can influence a child's microsystem directly or indirectly, so it seems relevant in highlighting the importantance of health workers, social services, teachers etc.

Source: (C1 May 2010)

Exams were also a topic for some bloggers:

WEDNESDAY, 19 MAY 2010

Revision, Revision, Revision.

I've been making some more exam cards today, focusing mainly on the various enquiries that have influenced changes in policy and practice; i.e. Victoria Climbe, Cleveland, Orkney etc. I've also looked at the Equality Act 2010, which incorporates all the acts to prevent discrimination and allows them to be implomented in one document. As Lin said this act can be applied to exam questions featuring any type of discrimination, including gender, racism, disability, sexuality, cultural and religious. The only note of caution is that it is not law until October 2010, but has been passed by both houses so should warrant a mention. I've also aquired some new terminology in relation to our research project for Fiona; Heuristic play: offering children, for a defined period of time, in a controlled environment, varying and numerous items and receptacles to play with without adult intervention. This seems to be applied mainly to the 1-3 age range and is designed to promote exploration, and with repetition, the formation of schema.

Source: (C1 May 2010)

Another student C3 posted after the *exams*:

Exam time!

Woo hoo, exams weren't too bad really, can't believe i smoked like a trooper,

had lack of sleep and munched my way into another stone in weight!!!! But

hey, i survived and they weren't as bad as i thought. Its all about being

prepared and revising a little at a time to ensure retainment of the info. So

glad they are over though!!!

Source: (C3 May 2010)

Book reviews (1 coded passage) were entered on one blog – only the bare
information was included.:

C1 I also took Meg's advice and went and purchased the Haralambos and

Holborn Sociology text book this afternoon (£29.99 from Waterstones) and

added Developmental Psycology : A Students Handbook by Margaret Harris

and George Butterworth (£22.50). That book also looks very useful, just

need a new bookcase now to fit them all on!

Source: (C11 October 2009)

As regards home

The most frequent used coded was *emotional well-being* (25 coded passages) and
this was followed by 14 coded passages about *leisure activities*. The other coded
passages were much smaller: employment (six coded passages) *managing the
home* (four coded passages) and pets (one coded passage).

Emotional well-being often mentioned the stress of merging study with home
duties. C6 posted:

Woo hoo, the first week is over and i've survived! We've learnt alot of new

things this week that i think are really going to help with our assignments. I'm dreading the amount of work we're going to have to do though, and exams!!! There's nothing worse than exams, the word STRESS springs to mind! Well overall i think the week's gone well, we havent got too much to do at the minute but i'm sure that will change. Looking forward to starting properly on Monday! X

Source: (C6 October 2009)

C1 shared their emotions about the first week of the course:

I've enjoyed my first week at college, everyone seems really friendly and I feel more at ease than I did on Monday morning. When I first walked into college I didn't know what to expect. I was worried I wouldn't fit in or that people wouldn't like me. The whole process of introducing myself to new people in a new surrounding I find very daunting. I managed to get through it though, and I came back on Tuesday so it couldn't have been that bad!

Source: (C1 September 2009)

By the end of the year students were able to describe their learning journey to new students. C11 replied to a blog from a new first year who had expressed concerns about the course:

I have just done my first year and getting ready to start the next year. It is very daunting i know and you will question yourself several times if your doing the right thing, i know a few of us have, but [ ].

Source: (C11 May 2010)

Another blog from C11 showed empathy with new students and their concerns:

> *hiya D12 im sure you will settle in, it just takes time to find your feet im*
> *starting my 2nd year next week and cant wait!!!! but i felt just the same as*
> *you are feeling right now good luck with everything .*

Source: (C11 September 2010)

The 'newbies' seemed to encourage the older bloggers to start writing again. C11
blogged in response a student in cohort D:

> *by the way i havnt blogged much as you will see but im going to alot more*
> *this year fingers crossed lol*

Source: (C11 September 2010)

Another in Cohort C helped by giving advice on academic matters and how
academic matters affected emotions:

> *The hardest part for me was getting that first assignment completed, i*
> *wasn't sure how to write it, the contents, referencing etc and panicked like*
> *mad about it, but just seek out lots of books, journals and most of all speak*
> *to the tutors, they are there to help. At first you may feel a bit awkward and*
> *wonder what they will think of you, but please don't worry about that, they*
> *are not their to judge!!*

Source: (C1 September 2010)

Emotional and academic problems and concerns expressed about staying on the programme were voiced frequently and members of the cohort offered support, such as this contribution from C10:

> *Hi all, sorry been a while since last posting. Its been a bit of a roller coaster of a time as some of you are aware. I have had a low point and nearly throw in the towel but thanks to tutors and fellow students that helped me over this period.*

Source: (C10 October 2009)

Leisure activities were the second most frequently coded and covered nights out, eating and social life and sometimes all three as in this from C3:

> *I had a great night, went to a comedy show in Birmingham, the Read Deal Comedy show, had dinner at Filini and stayed at the Radisson hotel, my bf was very happy that all of these places were in almost breathing distance of each other! Was lovely the food was beautiful – I had buffalo mozzarella, veal and parma ham and then a chocolate tarte with caramel ice cream – washed down with a lush bottle of shiraz, that I intend to source and stock up on! The champagne flowed nicely at the start of the night and the cosmos at the end of the night – yum! Not as good as O'bars cosmos and the bar man wasn't in the same beauty league but still good! Real Deal was awesome as always, Talentt Dacomedian was hilarious, bigging up white girls over black girls – what can I say? The man knows what he is talking about! Lol! I told him he could laugh the knickers off a nun, he told me I*

need to be on the stage! Not a bad idea, seems a better prospect than sitting in a dental practice the whole summer!

Source: (C3 April 2010)

Managing the home (four coded passages)

The similarity between other cohorts' topics was the student's ambition to fit in study with home duties .The frustration can be clearly seen in this post by C3:

Crappy start already! - Reading Week

Arghhhhhhh i am writing this to help clear my mind!!!

I had planned this morning to study and its now almost half past 10 and i haven't started!

Reason - KIds, got some issues going on and my memory is clouded as i have been on the phone since 9 making calls and having discussions! Sure Lin will be with me on this one!

I have tons of washing, house is a tip, tights to pack but you know what! stuff it all and im gonna shout from the roof tops TODAY IS STUDY DAY, LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!!!! And that includes my fella who keeps asking me questions.

Ok, think its out of my system, time for some paracetamol, red bull and nicotine, hopefully i will then be ready! ummm wonder if this will help me do a good written piece or cloud my judgement, soon see.

Source: (C3 October 2009)

This post from another student in half term week shows how course members are now part of each other's social group during half term:

Hello

> *Been busy at the bank this week and Hannah is keeping me on my toes, so busy here there and everywhere! Got to go shopping for holiday clothes this afternoon, not looking forward to it because I'll not be able to find what I'm looking for! But Hannah is easy to buy for! Life is just not fare!!!!!*

> *Anyway met up with Leanne, Liz and Zoe this morning, lovely, tea, coffee and banana tea loaf, not enough sausages I'm afraid, bad planning on my part!!!!!*

Source: (C2 October 2009)

Pets (one coded passage) was mentioned in a one liner by C2 as way of introduction to her blog for the *about me* piece on the blog:

> *I have a beautiful daughter called Hannah (8) and a rabbit called Nibbles, and he does nibble!*

Source: (C2 Sept 2009)

Leisure activities were popular subjects with 14 coded passages:

> *On the other hand had a good weekend walking in the Peak disrict with a groupof Scouts and alos gave time to reflect..C10 Out side of the uni world*

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last week went of a walking weekend with some scouts to a remote cottage

no running water, no electric and no Loo !!!! but a great weekend of

walking. didd cost a lot because I broke my car big time... ah well thats life..

Wednesday took my Beaver groupt bell ringing in local abbey, thats also

good fun...

Source: (C10 October 2009)

Employment:

Great news I have managed to get a new job, only causal but works well

around my course work hopefully.

Source: (C10 October 2009)

C2 wrote often about her home life:

Anyway loving the school holidays, how cool is it 6 weeks off with Hannah!

Expensive though isn't it ! Been bowling and to the pictures to see Toy Story

3 (I had a little weep) It didn't end the way I wanted it too! We much

preferred Karate Kid (I remember the original! how sad). Been busy busy

busy visiting friends and went the pre-season friendly between Coventry City

v WBA, come on you Baggies (1-1).

Source: (C2 October 2009)

Others also shared their home and again:

Hello, Been busy at the bank this week and my boy is keeping me on my toes,

so busy here there and everywhere! Got to go shopping for holiday clothes

this afternoon, not looking forward to it because I'll not be able to find what

I'm looking for!

Source: (C4 October 2009)

When writing about her home-life, C3 blogged:

I have a beautiful daughter called Hannah (8) and a rabbit called Nibbles,

and he does nibble! I want to appear on Neighbours and sort out Paul

Robinson!! I would love to meet Jonny Wilkinson but would faint into a

quivering wreck! I love football and West Brom, Arsenal and Millwall!! I

know! Just ask me anything about Disney Channel and I'd know it! Sad Off to

see Jonas Brothers in November and secretly excited!

Source: (C3 October 2009)

A comparison between the cohorts

When comparing what cohorts A, B and C blog about, it can be seen, in figure 7, that in respect to the three key categories about *blogs, home* and *about study*:

- About blogs is the least well represented topic, an obvious explanation here is that the process of blogging was a concern for students as they began setting up their blogs but it soon disappeared as a topic once they had gained more confidence and less self-consciousness

- For cohorts A and B home was the second or median most frequently coded category. For cohort B there were more posts about home than

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about study. A point to bear in mind here is that the sub theme emotional well-being was placed under home as many of the posts were concerned with balancing home and study life. However as seen earlier the posts were very much about the challenge of taking up study and many could equally have been placed under the study category. This is important to note as the raw data might underplay the seriousness of the bloggers postings and the value of blogging for not just sharing social news but offering support for each other's learning journey.

- The most frequently coded category was about **study** for cohorts A and B and well represented in the messages sent within cohort B. Many of these messages could be placed under the broad heading of sharing information but there were isolated examples of reflection and analysis. In relation to ideas of knowledge building presented in the literature review this would place discussion in this case study more or less at an 'entry level' (Salmon 2002) but with emergent activity at deeper levels.

Figure 7. Comparison of cohorts A, B and C blog topics.

Comparison of Cohorts A, B and C's blog topics
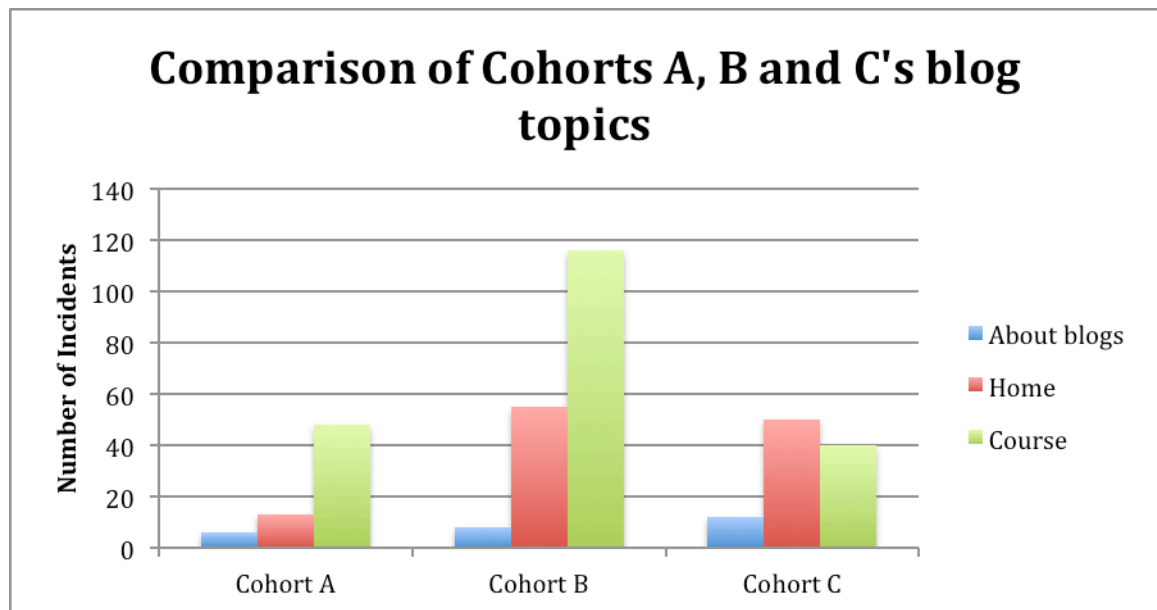
Summary of chapter

A content analysis was carried out and the categories about blogs, home and study were developed. Within these categories were sub themes listed at the start of the chapter. The blogs were written in an accessible style that lowered the demand for accuracy on the authors. In spite of the low recorded score for ICT skills at the start of the programme students were able to show developing information handling skills (for example the ability to source information on the web and to assess its relevance) as well as technical skills (for example uploading files and producing presentations).

Passages (often but not always complete blogs) were coded It was found that blogs were being used as much more than a social tool, many of the posts were study related and many merged study and home related content. There were examples of reflective and analytical discussion and of collaborative activity, but

these were underdeveloped. There were many examples of sharing links and an attempt to draw attention to resources and ideas not covered in the programme. There is evidence here of using blog to extend and enhance formal learning.

Blogs were used to provide a connection between cohorts and there were several examples in which existing students encouraged, and offered practical support, for 'newbies'. There were examples of students discussing ideas with people they had not meet face to face. This indicates social presence can be generated online though as seen in the next chapter there were limits. There were repeated signals of 'community mindedness' rather than a full-blown learning community.

CHAPTER 6. Findings from the questionnaires and interviews.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, a short questionnaire survey was given to students at the end of the academic year. Return rates were high (61.5%) across all three cohorts. Overall the survey showed considerable comfort with blogging but responses were fairly uniform making it difficult to draw more finely tuned conclusions. The results of the survey are given below, table 25

Table 25. Questionnaire Data

D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, T = Total

Cohort A			Cohort B			Cohort C			All cohorts			
D	N	A	D	N	A	D	N	A	D	N	A	T

1. I was already familiar with blogging

1	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	0	0	32

2. The blogging community was friendly

0	0	11	0	6	4	1	6	4	1	12	19	32

3. There was no posturing and pontificating (showing off)

0	10	1	0	8	2	1	6	4	1	24	7	32

4. There was a mutual respect between bloggers

0	11	0	0	5	5	1	7	3	1	23	8	32

5. It was possible to find out about the author of a particular post in a blog

0	0	11	0	4	6	0	6	5	0	10	22	32

6. There was a sense of community in the blogs

0	0	11	0	3	7	0	1	10	0	4	28	32

7. Posting to the blogs did not create feelings of anxiety

0	1	10	1	4	5	0	6	5	1	11	20	32

8. There were less aggressive and directly personal challenges in the blogs than in the class

0	3	8	0	6	4	0	6	5	0	15	17	32

9. It was easy to make personal connections in the blogs

0	0	11	0	6	4	1	4	6	1	10	21	32

10. The blogs were not teacher-controlled

0	0	11	0	4	6	0	4	7	0	8	24	32

11. The blogs enabled personal sense-making

0	0	11	0	2	8	0	4	7	0	6	26	32

12. The blogs enabled self-expression

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

13. The blogs allowed for the creation of an attractive layout in which to express ideas

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

14. It was easy to establish a personal presence in the blogs

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

15. It was easy to establish a personal voice in the blogs

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

16. The blogs enabled the development of personal connections, beyond the immediate task

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

17. It was easy to control who to enter into discussion with in the blogs

0	3	8	0	6	4	0	6	5	0	15	17	32

18. In the blogs the 'tone' of discussions met implicitly accepted protocols

0	1	10	0	5	5	0	5	6	0	11	21	32

19. The blogs fostered quiet, slow reflection

0	1	10	0	1	9	0	0	11	0	2	30	32

20. The blogs enabled 'ownership' of the publishing space

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

21. Bloggers could control the pace of discussion on their blogs

0	0	11	0	2	8	0	4	7	0	6	26	32

22. The blogs provided a protected space

0	2	9	0	6	4	0	3	8	0	11	21	32

23. Bloggers could build and protect their self-esteem in their blogs

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

24. The blogs enabled intensive personal learning

0	6	5	0	5	5	0	5	6	0	16	16	32

25. In the blogs you could make explicit connections between dissimilar concepts

0	3	8	0	1	9	0	1	10	0	5	27	32

26. Bloggers had time and space to focus on the development of discussions which went off on a tangent

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

27. Bloggers could develop thoughtful, long-term relationships and networks

0	0	11	0	10	0	0	3	8	0	13	19	32

28. Bloggers could develop ties which were initially weak but then gradually strengthened

0	7	4	0	7	3	0	5	6	0	19	13	32

29. It was easy to explore new, innovative ideas in the blogs

0	0	11	0	0	10	0	0	11	0	0	32	32

30. The blogs provided the space to think without restrictions

0	1	10	0	0	10	0	1	10	0	2	30	32

The table displays data for each cohort, but given the similar pattern of responses the findings are discussed at a combined cohort level. The findings are discussed below in relation to awareness of blogs and the previously identified themes of control, learning, nature of the medium and networking. At this stage interview findings are threaded into the discussion of the survey. Details of these

interviews are given in the methodology chapter .The participants interviewed were: A2, A8 and A15. B1, B2, B3, B4, B6 and B12. C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7 and C10 giving a total of 17 out of 32 (53%). The sample was representative of different types of contributors as seen in table 13.

Awareness of blogs

Question one was straightforward, asking if the participants were already familiar with blogging. All (32 students) replied they were not. The interviews supported this finding - none of the students had ever blogged before and had not heard of blogging. Given the much higher awareness of blogs and of social networks today this shows how quickly practice has changed.

The interviews backed up that many students had very little experience of blogging, and indeed of information-technology, before they came to college. As student A2 said:

> *To be completely honest, prior to beginning my degree at North Warwickshire and Hinckley College (NWHC), I had never encountered a 'blog'. My knowledge of technology and its uses were relatively alien to me, I could do what I needed to do – that was pretty much the extent of my ICT expertise.*

Attitudes towards using technology were often 'fearful' and use of ICT was a concern for most students e.g. C10 expressed her stance that:

> *I am not a great believer in technology. I never knew how to turn a computer on until this course.*

And again from (C7):

The first study skills module went too fast for me. Computers scared me and I

had to get my youngest (Son) to show me how to use the Google. He could not

help me with the blog, A8 did that.

Control, comfort and safety

The above category was covered in two sections of the survey. Figure 8 gives

data in response to questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 (concerned with questions of comfort)

and Figure 9 gives data in response 10, 17, 18, 22 and 23 (more concerned with

questions of control).

Figure 8. Responses to comfort and safety questions
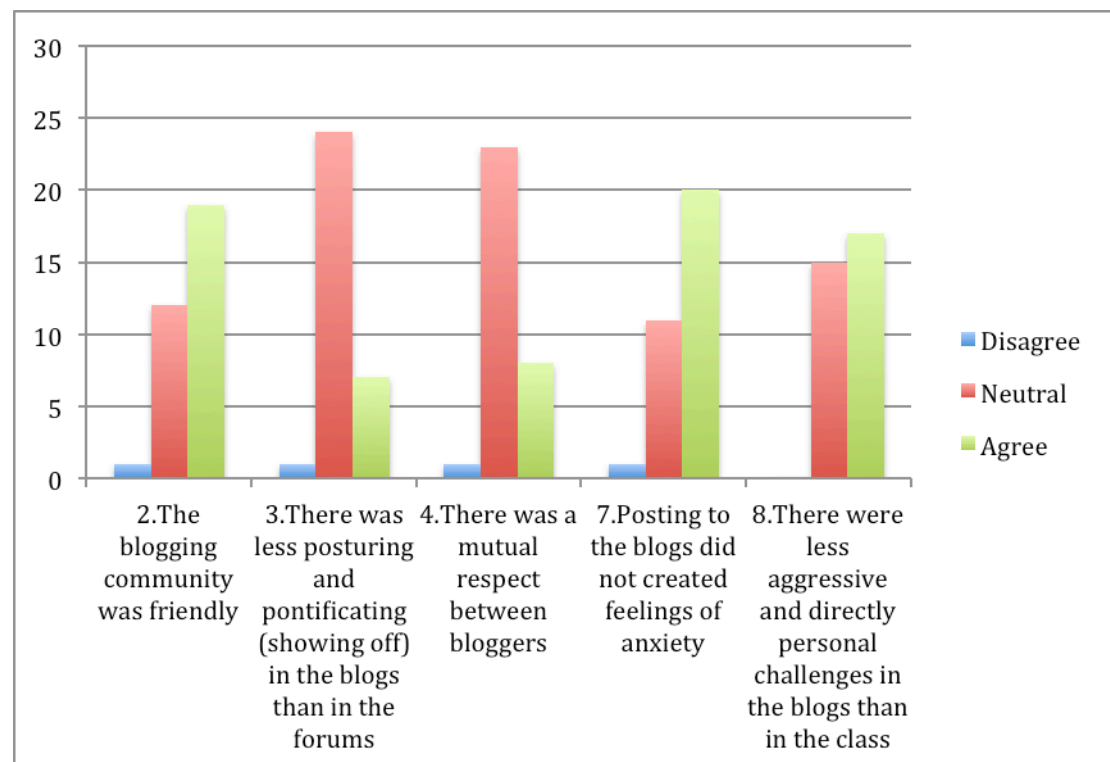
Figure 9. Survey responses in respect control questions about control
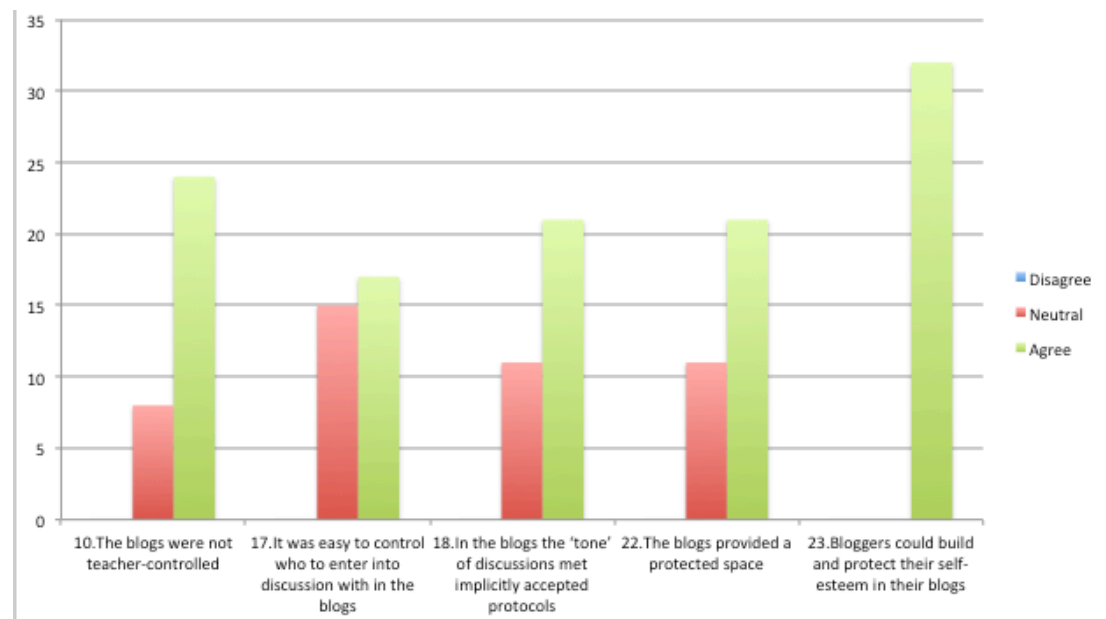
Overall the responses concerning control and safety suggested that the students saw the blogs as safe; the vast majority (26 out of 32) felt they had control over their blogs. Students did not feel that the blogging was teacher controlled and felt they could protect their sense of self –esteem whilst using the blog (questions 10, 23, 18 and 22). Most (20 out of 32) also felt that posting to the blogs did not create feelings of anxiety. Most (21 out of 32) responded that the tone of the discussions was polite and friendly. Students who felt less certain about control and saftey had perhaps blogged so little they felt less qualitifed to judge and expressed neutral rather than negative feeling about blogging (questions 3 and 4). Given that blogging was seen as safe and secure, interview data were trawled to idenitfy reasons why students were not using blogging to a greater degree. Responses fell into the themes of exposure, time, lifestyle, role

of the student and technology challenge.

Exposure

C5 who was a Non contributor and had disagreed with the statements in questions 2,3,4 and 5, revealed in her interview that she was frightened by the prospect of online bullying. This was a sensitive topic for her as she explained that she had been bullied at school:

> *I had a terrible time at school, I was bullied like you would not believe. Bullied all the time. I have started a blog but I took it down as soon as I saw others' work. They were trying to be smarter than me. What if I wrote something and they said it was wrong? I just talk in class anyway.*

Another Non-Contributor (C7) also expressed her vulnerability:

> *I think effective blogs rely on the writer allowing themselves to be vulnerable, and to be able to openly discuss strengths and weaknesses in order to capture and be relatable to the reader. For me personally that kind of expression makes me uncomfortable to be that vulnerable.*

Another interviewee (C6) admitted she felt very unsafe and worried about having her thoughts tracked:

> *The tutor can spy on me and find that I am not very academic. Privacy is a big issue for me, I don't know who is following me or reading what I write, I just write my thoughts in private.*

Those that did blog did not share these concerns. One contributor, A2 felt the

blogs had to be less protected and open to the world to gain more from them:

> *I think the blog is very helpful to show other people our work thoughts and discussion matters that are in our class but however other students outside our class aren't able to see our work on the blog hence we do not have a large amount of friends or followers to out blogs as others do.*

This quote draws attention to a paradox or at least a dilemma when promoting blogging. Some students may feel they need a closed, perhaps a private, space in order to blog but others would like blogs to be more open to the world. It was not possible to promote both needs, though of course students could set permissions to enable different audiences.

Time

Fear of exposure is a 'psychological'constraint on blogging but there were also more practical considerations. Almost every interviewee mentioned time as a barrier. For example B3 found lack of time the biggest drawback:

> *Possibly the biggest drawback was time – having a busy life; children, family, job and a university course to juggle were a priority over contributing to a blog on a regular basis. When the workload increased, updating, even checking my blog, stopped.*

Many of the interviewees mentioned that time pressures, for example the pressure on organizing and completing the many pieces of work on the course, was a barrier to blogging but not a barrier to reading others blogs. B12

explained:

My lack of organization means time is limited so blogging is an unnecessary extra especially when I have to finish an assignment. I do blog more than others I think, I do like reading others posts I am amazed at how many find relevant videos and stuff, I don't want to miss anything.

Another student (B2) was a little apologetic at first because she had not made a blog and then disclosed:

'I did not participate in making a blog (but read a lot) because I try to balance my home and family commitments with my homework.

It was in the nature of the medium to be time consuming. Text had to be more carefully constructed than speech and the fact others could read it meant that many students felt a pressure to write well and make their blogs worthwhile to possible readers. As C2 explained:

I have trouble finding the time because I don't want to put something stupid and I won't cut and paste. I have to put a bit more into it. Then it turns into a long critical post and I look up and I have used up an hour or more. Once I start reading others, do a little comment on them, find another I can spend a whole night.

Time management was closely link to time pressure. One student C5 felt a distinct lack of control in respect to time:

I must admit I am a failure I never kept up with anything! *No good asking me*

about blogs!

For most time given to blogging ebbed and flowed. A15 explained that she had let blogging slide and workload increased:

As I mentioned previously; as the workload increased, my use of my blog and others, decreased. It effectively had done the job I required of it and now lay redundant.

B12 found she stopped blogging as deadlines drew near:

I did stop posting before exams or before handing in an essay because I had to prioritize workloads.

Lifestyle and blogging

One interviewee (A8) talked about the changes needed to her lifestyle to become a student as well as a blogger:

We all have a culture of watching TV. Before this course my evening was made up of sitting watching 'Corrie' (Coronation Street) not doing course work. Creating on a computer is new to us and becoming a writer is new. Writing the blog is not seen as leisure, well it is a bit, but it is not seen as work either.

The role of the student

Another cultural issue that affected students was how they saw teaching and learning roles. Some interviewees explained in their previous experiences of education they had taken for granted the authority of the teacher. They had

grown used to relying on feedback from tutors rather than peers and expected the same to happen now. As put by one interviewee (C6):

I found it easy to make contact with the tutor when needed. I did not need to go off target by talking to all the others.

Students were aware that blogging was voluntary and not assessed; they were not given the direction needed to take it up, as put by C3:

The fact the blogs were not being assessed troubled me, why write it?

And again (C7):

No one checks the blogs so there is no feedback from the teachers.

The blogs were seen by some as additional non-productive tasks: B2 explained

They are not part of the grades and don't get you anything back so they just add pressure to the coursework.

Other participants referred to the randomness of blog content and the lack of connection between blogs and course requirements. Others would only be willing to use the blogs if other students joined in and all had been given structured reasons to blog. Alongside the theme that the blogs had to be structured and marked by tutors was the notion they must contain materials to read that were geared to answering essay questions. The blogs could play a useful role mediating between assessment demands and students understanding of those demands. However the content of the blogs would need to be focused. Some contributors such as C1 were upset that bloggers had different goals and

that some blogs appeared trivial:

I took time to contribute but others...Just wrote what they liked, It could be about their cat! Nobody really used them properly. There was very little to use for the essay on them.

C1 was also disappointed not just by the content but about the lack of blogging:

By my reckoning the blogs are a good idea but it did not get off the ground.

Some reported they did not understand the point of blogging and others reported it would waste time to read blogs and would not help with their own work. As C4 put it:

It is difficult to find things on the blog related to my work and I ended up preferring to use lots of notes I had taken in lectures.

Technology challenges

Most interviewees mentioned that the technical demands on using technology interfered in the posting of blogs to a greater extent than expected. This issue would not have been picked up in the survey but was a key issue for many students who were new to using computers as with C3:

I mostly observed and did not get involved into conversations much because I could not post comments, The identity word to make sure I am not a machine was never right. After writing a long blurb I could not post it- it was very frustrating!

Some overcome the problems by using family help and once they managed the technical problems they became regular bloggers such as B12:

> I had a husband who helped me get started and due to help I coped. Every time I wanted to post at first I asked him to sit by me and help then I could go through the steps on my own.

Many students could not envisage where their blogs resided, the idea of an online world was a symbolic concept that meant little to students new to computing, as C5 put it:

> The blog seemed to disappear; I could not think how to get it back onto my laptop. Then I saw them on Moodle links and tried to click them. Blogger said I hadn't got one (a blog). Then I remembered I had a different name. By the time I logged onto the site my time ran out. I can easily forget my password. I know you told me to put it onto my pad but I have changed my pad and lost it. I did not get how to do it really after the first session when I made a design for it. I was ok if I sat by Jen and she sorted me out but it is a lot of work for nothing. It does nothing for my learning style as I don't like to type.

Summarizing, it can be seen that there was diversity of attitudes and practice among these students. Some enjoyed blogging and had confidence to cope with learning and technology and developed the capacity to network with others. They felt in control. Others struggled with time and time management and felt uneasy about exposing their thoughts and feelings, particularly in a tutor free undirected environment. They did not feel the same sense of being in control.

Learning

The theme of learning was covered in questions 1, 11, 24, 25, 26, 29 and 30 of

the questionnaire as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Survey responses in respect to learning
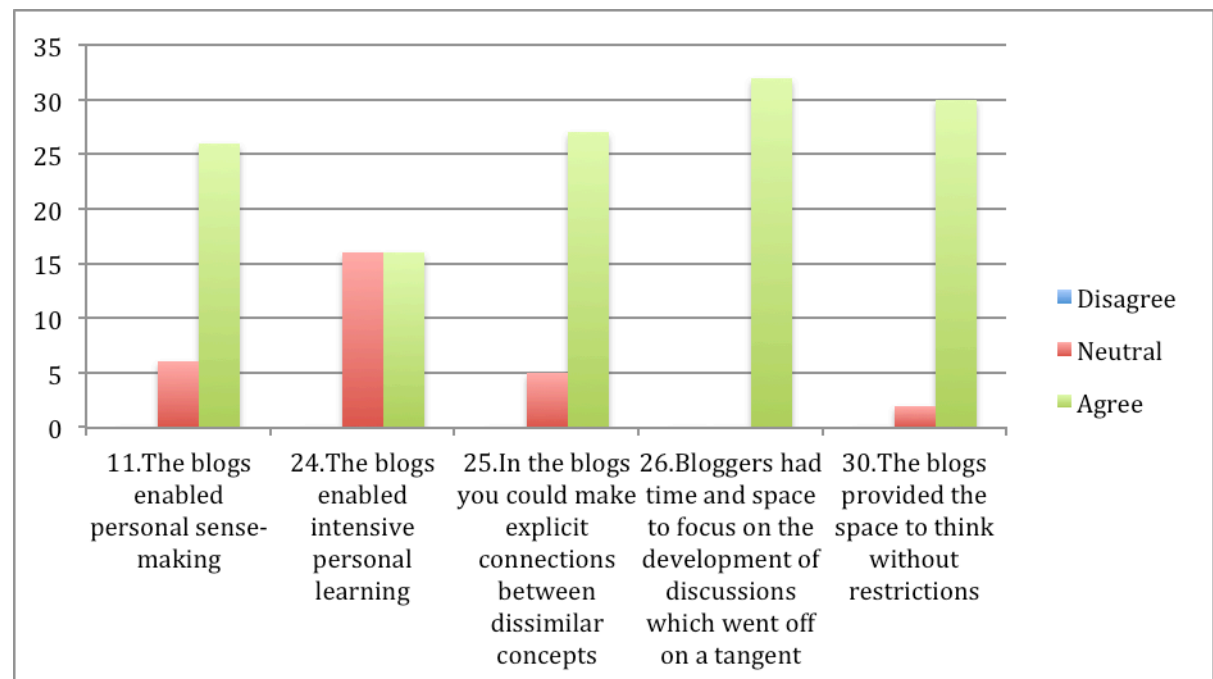
The key finding here is that students did believe that blogs could support

learning. Blogs could allow the student to extend discussions beyond the

classroom and the formal curriculum (question26). Writing supported a process

of personal sense making and a means for reflecting on 'learning' (questions 11,

24 and 30). 27 out of 30 respondents agreed that blogs enabled them to see

connections between different ideas, suggesting the blogs did help in making

learning coherent.

The interviews supported all of these points. For example A8 used her blog fully

to record and reflect on her work (refer back to Chapter 3). Blogging was part of

her need to articulate ideas and reflect on them:

I have lots of strategies. I use Internet research and posting to my blog,

reading; research alone, discussions on net and face-to-face. I sort of make

memos to myself about what I think. I can then review and reflect on this later.

In each cohort there were one or two extended bloggers (champions) such as A8 whose blogs were widely read. These Contributors almost took on a teaching or others recognized mentoring role and this role. The point to stress, however, is that those carrying out this role also valued the support it gave to their own learning.

On a more everyday level bloggers talked about how writing helped them remember concepts, much more so than reading or listening. B6 said:

Blogging sets information in my own head and helps my memory. Everything I have blogged I remember.

And again *(B4):*

It has made my learning concrete, even a small post had to be written and thought about.

For some blogging was seen as a tool to help in recapping what they had covered on the course. B4 explained:

For me the blog that I set up became part of the learning process as I used it to reflect upon and reconstruct the days learning. It helped in reinforcing new knowledge, as the process of blogging about it meant that I had to review and express what I had learned in my own words. This made me think about the lectures or readings in greater depth than I would have if I had not blogged about them. I also revisited the blog when revising in order to recap what I had

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previously learned, which was also a positive of the blogging experience.

As B6 explained she gained strength from looking at her past blogs:

> *I enjoy it (blogging) for my own benefit, it is private and I write how I speak. I like to look back and reflect how I have gone through transitions. I don't look at others but do a lot on mine about how I feel about the work. I settle my emotions and fear about finishing the course by seeing that I have overcome all sorts of challenges in the first year, I remember those feelings and now I have got through it all. This will be ok. Then I can get on with my work once I have sorted my emotions out.*

A2 reflected on the value of multi-media material within the blogs as a support for her learning:

> *My blog was like a journey through the course work. Whatever I wrote I remembered and it was even better if I got a comment .I could reflect on my blog later and I felt I could have written it better. I found lots of videos which people said they liked..English is not my first language but I joined in with links and videos and I like this way of learning but of course you cannot put these into an essay!*

As seen earlier, levels of blogging peaked and troughed throughout the course. The reading of blogs seemed to have peaked at exam times. B4 explained to how a fellow student's blog has provided a way into the material she needed to revise:

> *It was a good way to nick a load of exam stuff off other people's blog*

(laughs) I hadn't a clue what I was revising until I saw B12 s blog!

In a similar vein C4 commented:

Thank God (B6) posted all about the exam revision on his blog or I would not have a clue! It got me started on revising properly.

To summarise blogs seemed to have enabled bloggers to learn. By blogging students seemed to be able to make sense of new material and ideas and for some writing blogs enabled a settling of anxieties and concerns. Reading of blogs enabled the sharing of knowledge beyond the formal curriculum.

The nature of the medium

As shown in Figure 11 the nature of the medium was covered in questions 12, 13, 19, 20, and 21.

Figure 11. Survey responses in relation to the nature of the medium
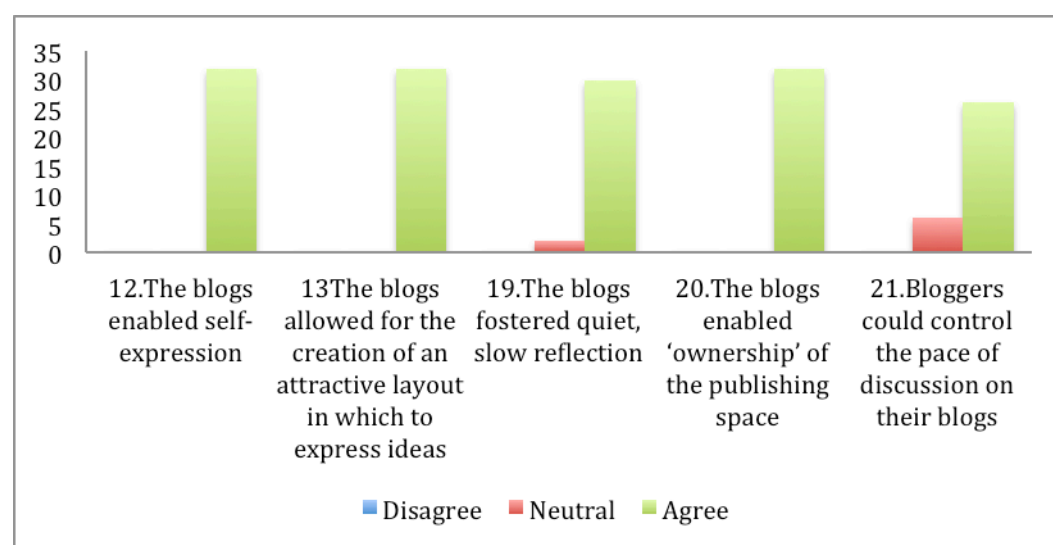
The findings showed that students saw blogs as a different type of medium to face-to-face talk. Exchanges were slower and more reflective and blogs gave

unlimited opportunities for all to speak. Bloggers could not be interrupted and could spend time getting an idea clear. Blogs themselves were not seen as offering less than face-to-face talk rather a different set of opportunities.

Interviews added to this picture for example some students, such as B1 commented on the collaborative nature of blogs:

> *The blog was a good collaborative experience. The other bloggers in my group did not often commenting on my posts but I knew they read them. This was a talking point in class and started an exchange of materials and references.. I was enjoying the debate and others subject matter from different places for th assignments.*

Blogs were seen as an alternative medium for reflection and for providing a voice outside the classroom walls, as B3 explained:

> *I can post at two in the morning when I cannot sleep or during class when I am using my laptop and I remember the topics but want to add what I found in a search.*

One interviewee, A15 reflected on the differences between learning from an essay and from a blog and drew attention to the less constrained world of blogging:

> *The blog provided an informal arena for expressing opinion and thoughts about theories, policies and practice that the formal essays didn't provide. The academic expectations of essay writing gave less scope for expressing one's true*

opinions, whereas the blogs allowed this freedom and gave me an outlet to

write what I really thought, which was quite liberating.

A key characteristic of blogging was that it relied on asynchronous exchange. This created difficulties as there was no control over the responses to a blog and no way of engineering response as could be done face to face. Very often blogging seemed like a one-way conversation, as C1 put it:

I sense there is no one in, not at home for most of the time. I see some have left

messages at one in the morning! I leave a message and it is not answered for

days. I cannot tell if anyone has read it .The exchange is so infrequent I feel no

one is there, that's why I gave up posting.

Networking

Figure 12 shows findings in respect to opportunities for networking.

Overall 19 out of 32 agreed there was a sense of community in the blogs (Question 6), though some expressed a neutral stance perhaps because they did not blog or felt that a sense community had not developed. In general the students felt that it was easy to establish a personal voice in the blogs and to feel social presence and a connection with others (Questions 9, 14 and 15).

Figure 12. Survey responses in respect to networking
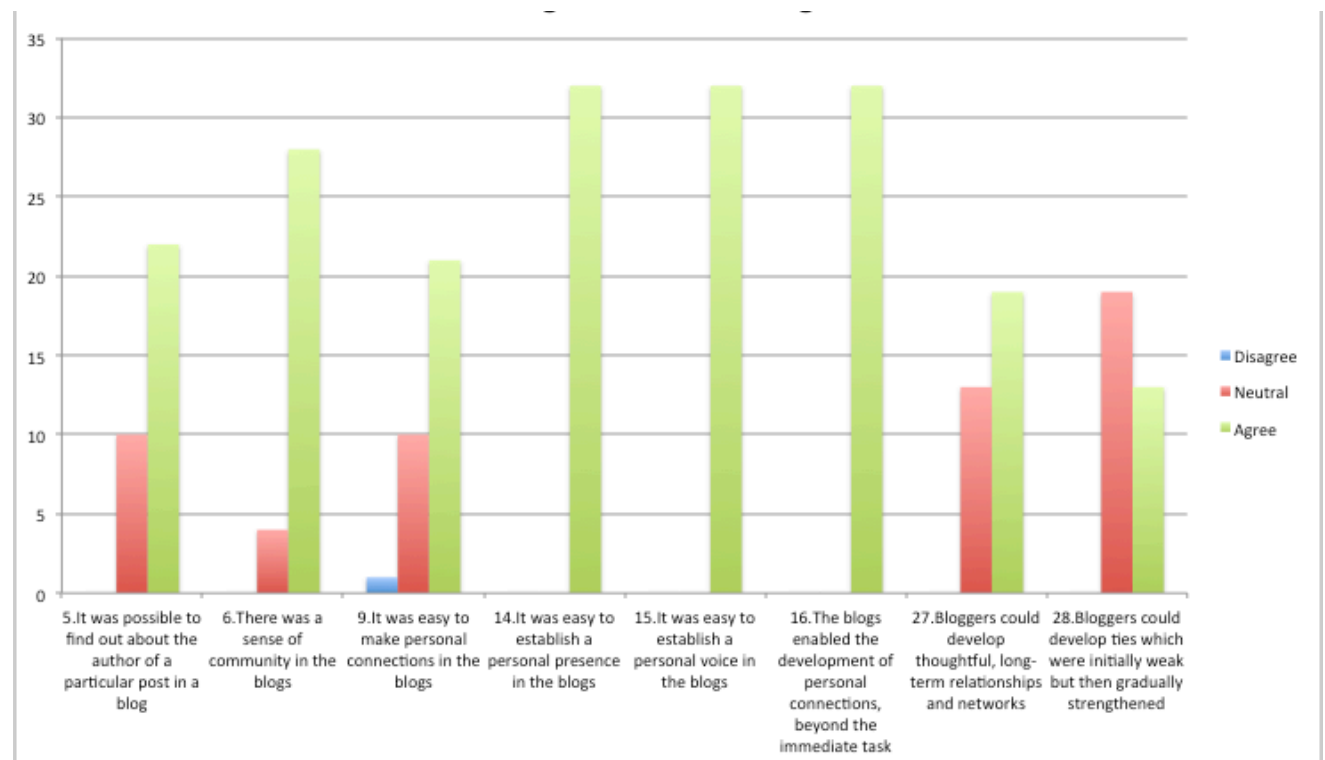
These themes emerged in the interviews too. C2 explained how important it was
to get a perspective on what she was going through in here learning by
comparing her experience to her peers, she drew strength from understanding
her concerns were shared by others:

> *In the infancy of my course, gaining as much information as possible was a*
> *priority – this could be done through web-based research, reading books and*
> *articles and discussions with tutors. Blogs were great for sharing this*
> *information, but I believe that for me they enabled me to rehearse my opinions,*
> *and assess them against the opinions of others in a safe and secure arena. By*
> *this I am referring to that feeling we get when beginning something new – Am I*
> *right in thinking…? Have I understood this correctly? Do others think the same?*
> *Not that I wanted to be synonymous to others, but I just wanted to know I was*

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on the right track. Reading others views on issues and personal feelings

enabled me to feel secure in myself; I was on the right track. I wasn't the only

person who felt this way.

This comparison of performance against other students was a relevant issue for

other students too, as B3 explained:

Finding the level was so important. I had done a Btec but this was a degree. I

was happy that I was reading the right sort of level. Usually on a course you

don't know what others are doing or what they think do you? Here you could.

One student (A8) explained that she felt a particular value for networking for

adult learners:

Connectivity is a good thing for college students. To give them freedom to talk

to each other about the course but not such a good idea for children because

they need to be controlled more by the curriculum and the teacher.

However understanding the community could create anxiety. C10 discussed how

she felt when she did not receive any feedback on her blog:

Gaining positive feedback from other bloggers in the group gave me

confidence. And the opposite is also true . If no one commented I could feel I

was not interesting or academic enough.

Many students spoke about the importance of community and how online

networking had moved during the course. This was particularly the case for

students in Cohort C as C3 explained:

The blogging did seem to stop and we all met on face book. It was easier to

post and see the others and it is quick to have all in one place.

As the use of blogs declined the community did not shut down but just moved to another place that was easier to 'meet' or network online, another place that gave more synchronous responses. As C1 added:

The lack of interaction and responses to blog posts caused me to abandon the

blog as it had seemed to run its course and didn't offer the same level of

stimulation or relevance that it once had.

There was a feeling that blogging created a student led community. For example A8 considered the majority of the blog work was written for each other and not to impress the tutor. As A8 explained:

To be honest we forgot that you (the tutor researcher) could read them.

B3 used the word 'connectivity' in her interview. This was a term used in class and was being applied to her own participation in blogging:

'I became part of a group and I could see what I wrote read and see others –

connectivity is vital to stay on track.

The community provided feedback as A8 describes:

Suddenly when I get followers I write as if someone is going to read it, so my

writing needs clarity and explanation. Before I mused for my own writing

putting a research diary where I could find it, all in one place -very useful

for me. The content becomes very accessible for all to use. It's not my

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property in my note book but by letting it go or externalizing it (Vygotsky)

others could comment, add to, disagree with or just read a bit till they get

bored in a much easier way than in a classroom debate.

Summary

This chapter shows that blogging was largely well received and provided a safe

space in which students could feel a level of autonomy and connectivity. Again

attitudes and behaviour are differentiated. Some as discussed further in the next

chapter seemed unable to break through inhibitions about blogging, others did.

Nearly all could recognise the opportunities blogs provided for learning as well

as emotional gains and emotional support. Some however would have preferred

a more focused approach to blogging; some embraced the opportunity for free

ranging discussion. Many did feel a sense of community.

There were several tensions in blogging. First the lack of tutor direction led some

to feel that blogging was not worthwhile and that they lacked the direction,

which would have helped to overcome feelings of anxiety and exposure. Lack of

control had left them out of control. Second the nature of the medium, while

providing opportunities for more reflective discussion, made participation more

challenging for some. Third the community created anxiety as well as comfort.

Chapter 7. Discussion

The discussion is organised around the three research questions:

1. Who amongst these learners blog?

2. Why students blog and what do encourages them to do so?

3. What discourages learners from blogging?

This is followed by a general reflection on the value and future role of blogs in teaching and learning, a discussion, which takes in romantic versus realist perspective on technology-supported learning.

Who among these learners blog?

All of the sets of data from the study are complementary and consistent - they point the same way. The interview and survey data complement the picture provided by the content analysis data also threw light on attitudes and motivations of the students.

The data on participation showed that there were differentiated levels of participation for example as shown by uneven distribution of number of blog entries per student (Chapter 4: tables 15,16 and 17). Out of a total population we identified non Contributors (n= 23); Uncertain Contributors (n=5) and Contributors (n=16).

The pattern of differentiated blogging activity could be observed across cohorts, albeit with small variations. It is important, however, to add that while nearly half of the students in Cohort B and C did not contribute entries to their blogs all

students became followers of the blogs as was seen in Table 23. All who created a blog succeeded in attracting followers, in some cases quite large numbers of followers.

The data on participation has been further analysed to investigate the most frequent contributors across the cohorts and their age and background in regards to literacy, numeracy and ICT. These bloggers were not necessarily those with the highest literacy numeracy or ICT scores (see notes in Chapter 3 which explains these levels). Nor were these frequent contributors the youngest in the group (modal age group was 21- 30) and in fact they tended to be older members in their groups. One of these frequent contributors was male (there were three males across the cohorts) - this is in rough proportion to gender distribution within the cohorts.

Table 26. The Contributors' profiles in regard to age and prior educational attainment.

Name	Age	Literacy	Numeracy	Dyslexia	ICT	Posts	Followers
A3	29	L2	L2		LL1	44	11
A8	38	L3	L2		LL1	49	21
B4	34	L3	L2		LL1	28	11
B5	31	L3	L3		LL1	24	10
C2	41	L1	L2	Y	ML2	13	7
C3	38	L1	L1		ML2	21	12
C10	43	L1	L2		ML2	20	10

Blogging should not be seen as a function of age or academic ability. Instead the students who blogged seemed to be characterised by particular internal motivations (these are discussed further in the later section 'what encourages blogging'). To a large extent this seems to fit the general literature. For example, as seen in the literature review, McGuigan and Normand (2011) found the relationship between being technically competent and blogging was not straight-forward in a study which took in college lecturers. For these authors the decision to blog was more a question of attitude and degree of social cohesion.

Turning to gender, it is worth noting that the vast majority of participants in this study were female. The literature seems to suggest that men are more likely to blog and perhaps more likely to represent themselves more strategically – even to the extent of simulation (eg Clarke 2002). It is difficult to make direct comparisons with this study as the women here showed very different patterns of participation and it would be difficult to generalise. There was one frequent male blogger (C1) but it would be difficult to describe how and to what extent his contributions were 'gendered', in that his blog entries tended to cover the same ground as other frequent bloggers. Gender was barely raised as an issue by students in the context of blogging.

Students in this study often seemed to be older, but not the oldest members of the cohorts, and this seems to counter assumptions that might be made about young people's digital nativism. In brief, Prensky (2001) argued that young people had an affinity with online participation due to having grown up with extensive experience of technology both at school but more particularly at home.

Digital natives engage in, and want to engage in, creating their own knowledge. Young people are happy to multi task and want to seek out interactive and multi-media material. Prensky's argument has been translated by some into the rather naïve assumption that young people's brains are 'wired differently'. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) share some of these assumptions but suggest that 'at homeness' with technology should not be misread as an ability to use technology creatively. At the other end of the continuum, Maddison and Hitlin (2005) stressed the varied make up of young people and disagreed that they had a natural affinity with technology. The debate will run and run. When it comes to this study there is no support for the notion that younger people are, by nature of their age, more disposed to participate; even if their wider engagement with technology does the facilitate its adoption by students. Furthermore it might be speculated that greater experience of life in general gave some of the older members of the cohort more confidence to contribute.

Why do students blog and what encourages them to do so?

Those who became bloggers were not especially skilled with technology or necessarily more academically able. Rather they tended to be people who saw the point of blogging and got satisfaction from blogging.

They were also able to develop strategies to overcome difficulties. For example, while some gave up because they could not manage the technology, some bloggers (as indeed they discussed on their blogs) were happy to show their uncertainty, find support from other people and were willing to learn through trial and error. They were not the most skilled technically but they became

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skilled, to the degree they needed, through practice. Blogging was considered time consuming and perhaps challenging, but those that blogged were prepared to overcome such constraints as they thought it worthwhile to use blogs to articulate their ideas and share their thinking.

Through their resilience contributors gained readers and received feedback on their blogs in ways in which uncertain bloggers did not (see for example Chapter 4.) In this sense contributors entered a virtuous cycles of participation with feedback feeding greater participation. The importance of feedback is discussed by Nardi et al. (2004) who explain that 'Blogs create the audience but the audience creates the blog.'

As for the reading of the blogs, students accessed blogs because they valued the content for throwing light on course material, extending the curriculum and offering multi-media formats. They could learn from others and as importantly they could contextualise their emotional and academic well-being with others. As B3 explained in their interview:

> *Finding the level was so important. I had done a B-Tech but this was a*
> *degree. I was happy that I was reading the right sort of level.*

For some students reading the blogs helped them feel a sense of belonging, in particular at the beginning of the programme, and the social aspects of blogging were as important as the academic side. In thinking about the value of blogs (such value is discussed at length in Chapter 2), whatever their shortcomings they provided a means of social and academic interaction that had not been previously experienced within the programme. This may have been

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particularly valued for these students when we consider the nature of the groups. These were returners to education, often early school leavers.

As seen in Chapter 1, returners have been theorised as having particular deficits and needs in terms of both confidence and ability (Lake 1999; Peters 1992; Wood 1995) and the challenges they faced were well known to the researcher and the programme team. It is difficult to decide whether the nature of the group may have led them to be less likely to blog (due to assumed deficits) or more likely to blog (due to a greater need for 'learner solidarity'). What however is the case is that the breakdown of participation and the problems experienced by this group seem very largely to fit the general picture as for example discussed in recent case studies of student teachers (Lee, Zhang and Yin (2011) and of adult returners (Griffiths et al. 2004).

Gaining a sense of community was a big motivator for students to take the time to look at the blogs. The community was student constructed and tutors made very few interventions beyond an encouragement by myself to do so. It is possible that while feeling part of a community was a positive motivator for bloggers and readers, they might also have felt a feeling of estrangement if they did not access the community. This point is well made by Garrison (1997) who looked at social structures and how identification with a group will encourage people to feel a sense of community and contribute to such a community. The opposite is also true: when a group cannot get social presence – the extent to which students can project themselves, and feel that there is someone out there interested and listening to them — group networking will drift out.

Those who contributed the most (the Contributors) appeared to take on a special role within the group. They felt a particular concern for other people's learning in some cases taking on a kind of mentoring role. For example bloggers in Cohort A sent encouraging message to 'newbies' in Cohort B, in particular explaining that the feeling of 'newness' associated with being a student would pass. It is not clear exactly why some people will behave in this if not altruistic at least 'other regarding' way and others will not. It is perhaps a mystery of personality that would be observable in any face-to-face situation, as well as online context.

However it could be said that Contributors' concerns had been triggered by a high level of empathy with students who were facing a context of high anxiety and limited support.   This puts a different slant on blogging that sometimes appears in the literature; rather than being self-publicists (eg O'Donnell 2006), bloggers might be read as being particularly community minded. Some research suggests that asynchronous (real time) discussions are more likely to allow for experience sharing than synchronous ones tend to (eg Schallert et al., 2009). There was an outward looking aspect to blogging and a realisation that, by blogging, the Contributors were reaching out to others and offering support and practical guidance.

As well as supporting others, blogging conferred advantages on the bloggers. For some blogging had a kind of self-scaffolding element - through blogging they could better understand ideas and concepts. This is covered to some extent in the literature (eg Lee and Green 1998; Salmon 1999; Overec, 2002) but the point is made more strongly here. Contributors felt especially connected to other

Contributors and derived support from this. It is impossible to turn the clock back and see how the Contributors would have progressed academically without blogging. All that can be said was that Contributors stayed on the programme and stayed engaged with concepts and ideas. However in terms of formal assessment their grades were as varied as their previous academic backgrounds might have suggested.

Can we associate more frequent bloggers with a personality style? The learners themselves were asked to consider who they thought would bloggers and they felt that there was a not a personality-type, just someone who saw it as useful and 'had time to do it'. As seen in Chapter 2 writers such as Rosanna et al. (2007) see the 'personality' of the blogger as affecting blogging patterns. Rosanna suggests that people who are open to new experience and high in 'neuroticism' –literally are more likely to be bloggers. However Stefanone and Jang (2007) argue that traits of bloggers is an under developed research field. These are helpful insights.

Key in understanding the data in is the context of returning to education. Students found themselves in a new context, in which they felt quite high levels of anxiety without clear tutor direction when it came to blogging. Under these circumstances some took on a quasi-pastoral role, as discussed earlier, but the content analysis also shows a high level of academic engagement and almost a tutor/organiser role (i.e. standing in for accredited tutors and facilitators). In IT circles people are often labelled as *champions* and expected to lead developments whether they have a formal role or not. These Contributors were

champions of blogging offering informal leadership within a distributed community.

It is tempting to compare these champions to the wider and well used categories of deep/strategic/surface learners. The concept of deep and surface learning grew out of the research of Marton and Säljö in 1976. The terms are best understood as ways in which students tackle their learning, rather than fixed or constitutional traits. Learners may use deep or surface strategies, or a combination of both throughout their studies. Put briefly, surface learners memorise or do just what is needed for the task; deep learners extract meaning and try to look for patterns and principles. It might be that the Contributors, or champions as labelled above, were deeper learners at times, interested in pursuing learning for its own sake. In contrast some of Non-contributors exhibited surface or strategic behaviours, in particular some failed to see the point of contributing to something not tutor led or tutor assessed. However there were undoubtedly Non-contributors who engaged fully with the programme and could in every other respect be considered deep learners, only they preferred to work in a more independent fashion or to discuss face to face.

Why students did not blog

There were several explanations as to why students were constrained in their blogging or why they did not blog at all: feeling vulnerable or exposed, time, access, online literacy, perceived value.

Being vulnerable or exposed.

The content analysis showed that some students were very self-conscious about presenting themselves and their learning to others. For example, early entries showed students expressing doubts about blogging and general nervousness which some seemed unable to overcome. In interviews, even very able students worried about 'looking dumb' and did not have a clear conception as to what was expected of them. Contributors and Non-contributors all expressed vulnerability. This has echoes of the literature discussed earlier - for example Bartholomew et al. (2010) and Davis and Merchant (2007) both showed distinct differences in quality and quantity of online blogging and many students had difficulty publically expressing their ideas. Other work (e.g. Dalgarno et al. 2013, Deng and Yuen 2013; Hammond 1999) has discussed how some students have a private self and do not wish to post thoughts or expose feelings about the course to others.

Vulnerability seemed to be increased when there was a lack of feedback. As seen earlier Contributors such as C10 explained 'When I was expressing my opinions about feelings and a certain subject, I felt an emotional link to the post, so when others showed no interest, on occasions I took this personally.' Contributors were able to overcome these feelings – indicating that anxiety is not a constitutional trait but rather a behaviour triggered by particular circumstances; certainly anxiety and vulnerability curtailed the participation of many. This is in line with some of the literature. The question of feedback is complicated. This was seen as limited in many studies on blogging (e.g. Delgarno 2013; Hsu 2007; Nardi et al. 2004; Pachler and Daly 2009 all mentioned that some students were dissatisfied with the type and quantity of their feedback in the blogs). Yet

feedback when given can be a challenge. For example Halic et al. (2010) showed that students on an undergraduate nutrition course did not welcome the feedback from peers because it did not add anything to their learning because assessment tasks were focused on individual rather than group activities.

Perhaps there is something within the asynchronous nature of blogging that generates anxiety. For example Hammond (1999) in discussing online forums described how students in his study were anxious about leaving a permanent record of their contributions, anxiety appeared to be increased as participants could not unsay things or clarify things in the same way as they would in a face-to-face context.

One means of addressing anxiety is providing anonymity. Postmes et al. (2002) argued that people who maintain anonymity can report more revealing information online due to a sense of depersonalisation and de-individualisation. The implications of this comment are difficult to trace for this study as the decision was taken not to be anonymous and to use the blogs to get a better picture of each other. Of course students could have presented their blogs as anonymised and indeed 'The diary of a first year degree student' was chosen by one student but she very quickly claimed authorship by posting a picture of herself on her profile and putting her name to entries. Anonymity seemed to clash with the idea of setting up the blogs in the first place. Another means of addressing anxiety has recently been offered by Deng and Yuen (2013) who suggested blog settings should be differentiated to private and limited or public setting as each student likes. There are no clear lessons for this study as the

access to other cohorts was welcomed in order to view the others on the course but the blogs were closed to this community only.

In the study there were some very personal messages as can be seen from the blog content (Chapter 5). Sharing this content had a value for those who blogged but may have been a constraint on others. Prentice–Dunn and Rogers (1982) felt that people with high public self-awareness and were more skilled in how they presented themselves to others may be more disposed to express themselves online. In contrast those who struggled with presentation, and could not 'get distance' on their posts, may have found blogging a greater challenge. Bartlett-Brag (2005), Davis and Merchant (2007) and Farmer et al (2008) found that vulnerability had inhibited students from blogging in case they could not express themselves clearly – thus raising a wider issue of online literacy.

Unable to develop an online literacy

There were at least two elements to online literacy. The first was technical and it was clear that using the tool Blogger presented the students with several problems such as understanding anti-robot measures within the blog, understanding the location of the blog and gaining the ability to post and comment seamlessly. This matches the literature. Deng and Yuen (2013), in a study that involved the software 'edublogs', and Dalgarno et al. (2013), a study in which students used 'Sakai blogwow', both report the students had technical difficulties that dissuaded them from blogging. Of course these technical challenges can often be easily overcome but they do create a block for students.

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As discussed in Chapter 6 Cohort C moved over to Facebook, as a space for social support. No doubt this created different technical problems for some students but Facebook was largely seen as more user friendly and having the advantage of grouping everyone's posts in one location. Facebook was a group blog, spontaneously generated by students, while 'Blogger' was seen as less user-friendly. There was a further element in that Blogs within Blogger were individual and perhaps more exposing whereas the Facebook page was a group endeavour. It would have been possible to create a group blog and this is one direction that future work could take. Indeed group blogs are of growing interest to researchers and Yang and Chang (2012) found them more able to motivate students to participate than an individual blog.

Perhaps more important than overcoming technical problems is developing a kind of online literacy that takes in an understanding of the audience and purpose of blogs, general writing skills and the confidence to contribute. For example Joinson (2001) saw feeling of vulnerability as linked to a lack of ability to imagine how others see you online and the audience for your text. Without seeing your text through the eyes of a reader, you may without realising disclose what was not intended and one's public and private selves may get confused. This might lead to revealing too much but also worries about ever starting in the first place. However, as with my study, Minocha (2009) argued that students' confidence both with the technology and with writing could develop with practice and feedback.

A more specific inhibitor of blogging in this study was students' worries about

writing and exposing their writing if, for example, they had English as a second language or low level of literacy. Some non-users of blogs explained they were not 'technology fans' but this seemed to take in much more than technology. Recent work has drawn attention to the genre of blogging as a kind of 'self-authoring', which improves writing skills (e.g. Recep et al. 2010, Bloch 2007, Ducate and Lomica 2008 and Wang 2007). It is now frequently argued that the online experience should be structured and supported in very specific ways (e.g. Xie and Sharma 2005 ,West et al. 2006 and Dalgarno 2011). Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) suggest that participation could be encouraged if tutors modelled the expected use of blogs and suggesting the need for access to computers in class (West et al. 2008 and Deng and Yuen 2013).

Time management

The questionnaires and interviews both showed a barrier to blogging was 'lack of organisation' and time management. Students were worried about the time needed to work on their blogs, fitting the blog around the study time allocated to them and the sense that the blog could become unmanageable. Blogs could seem as boundless – there were no time limit on blogs as opposed to face to face teaching sessions which were scheduled and time limited. As one student said 'once I start reading others, do a little comment on them, find another, I can spend a whole night.' (C2). This became an issue at particular periods during the programme, for example when there was an essay deadline or an examination.

The time consuming nature of blogs was mentioned in the literature as a reason not to participate (e.g. Freeman et al. 2006; Salmon 1999; Tu 2002) and the

difficulty of unstructured participation is well reported. Conversely some studies showed that blogging activity could be resented or appear too contrived if students were being asked to keep up with a postings schedule (Kerawalla et al. 2008).

Uncertainty over the value of the blog

The interviews illustrated that many students doubted that the blog had much value for their learning. Some for example saw their tutor as the mediator of their learning, the tutor would provide the structure, the feedback and the assessment, with grades and to discuss with peers would be 'going off target'. It is tempting here to suggest that these Non-contributors were showing more strategic or surface attitudes and behaviours in contrast to the deeper learning exhibited by Contributors as discussed earlier.

Some students doubted the value of the blog as blogging would not help them meet the assessment requirements and blog discussions could take them down different avenues which did not seem related to their work. 'The fact the blogs were not being assessed troubled me, why write it?' (C6). On a more prosaic level some Contributors, such as (C1) felt the blogs appeared trivial: 'it could be about their cat'. For others the social side was addressed well in the blogs but not the academic content. This has echoes of a study by Chu et al. (2012) who cast doubt on the value of the social aspect of blogging and argued for a more structured academic approach. Here Andres (2012) has argued that blogging should be closely scaffolded and monitored for use. Both Deng and Yuen (2013) and Delgarno (2013) have suggested that participation would increase if linked

to assessment.

There seems much to be said for tutors playing a greater role in promoting blogging. For example Salmon (2002) created a model to understand the multifaceted role of tutors online, a role that included administration, pedagogy, social connection, technology and pastoral elements. Anderson et al (2001), Arnold et al. (2001), Blignaut and Trollip (2003), Copolla et al. (2002), and Lally and Delaat (2002) all have offered models for tutors to follow in order to promote collaboration and deep learning. Like others Gold (2001) recognised the level of tutor involvement needed to be reasonable and Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) suggest tutors should be a guide on the side and not take on a full controlling or dominating role. Studies such as Kerwaller, Kirkup, Minocha and Canole (2008b) suggest that students' anxiety is lowered by tutor intervention, in this case an MBA course.

In retrospect an online presence might have been desirable as discussed in-depth in the literature or at least an avenue to investigate. However it is worth adding that such a role might have had the effect of losing the focus on autonomy and peer support which the blogging initiative was intended to promote, to say nothing about work load issues and implications for assessment. The blogs were not intended to directly support the curriculum but to offer an alternative space. In this way, the amorphous structure of the blog medium should be seen as one of its inherent strengths, providing choice and flexibility in terms of features and functionality.

As it turned out without a tutor leading the group there emerged *champions* -

one or two people in every cohort who took the lead role to develop and maintain a blogging community (as seen in the previous section).

Feedback: audience or lack of it

A key characteristic of blogging was the blog relies on an asynchronous exchange and absence of feedback deterred some students from blogging. As C1 put it 'I sense there is no one in, not at home for most of the time.' The very value of the asynchronous exchange might be a limitation – you could wait a long time for feedback unlike face to face synchronous discussion.

Some students were quite keen to write blogs but became disillusioned due to lack of feedback. In theory of course, and as seen earlier, there was some feedback on blogs and lack of feedback did not mean they were not read. (As a side issue one student had put a counter on their blog to count the number of 'hits' but felt on reflection this was not well received by other students). What seems to be the case was that the more active bloggers generated more feedback and this became self-reinforcing. In contrast less active bloggers perhaps did not get enough early feedback to enter this 'virtuous cycle' of blog - feedback – new blog – new feedback. Feedback was important to give emotional support to the blogger and to provide the blogger with an indication of the content and style of blogs which were best received. The importance of feedback is a theme well covered in the literature Hsu (2007), Nardi et al. (2004), Pachler and Daley (2009) Dalgarno et al. (2013) all reported feedback was limited in their studies.

A study by Xie et al. (2008) explained that students needed to receive feedback to continue with their use of blogs. However in Xie's view feedback is not without

problems. In his study the blog became more content heavy, and less about the process of learning (reflective practice) in response to feedback. Hall and Davidson 2007 analysed the blogging of students and reported that the majority of work was not reflective but again information heavy. Xi, Ke and Sharma (2008) felt that peer review stunts reflection on student blogs.

Optimism and pessimism about blogging and about technology

In reflecting on technology in HE Gousetti (2010) noted that ICT is beset by excessive optimism about the use of new technologies. Technology has undoubtedly the capacity to enhance teaching and learning, increase students' motivation and engagement and generally contribute to a transformation of formal education. As technology has evolved from being a repository of materials or a means of repetitive drills to supporting communication and engagement in learning important rethinking of pedagogy is possible. Digital technologies promise a lot in education but a lack of sustained and rigorous academic study of applications lead to short termism. Critical evaluation of technology can prevent fickle fads and explore what really works before moving onto the next 'technical fix' or 'pursuit of the new' (Cuban 1986).

The optimistic scenario associated with blogs and online spaces converges around aspects of community, community of practice, distributed learning, and a celebration of the learner, particularly the adult learner, with his or her inner drive and ability to overcome obstacles.

Those reading the literature, such as Andres (2012), might believe that eLearning through blogs and other online communications necessarily leads to

sexperience of successful learning, as well as enjoyment of authoring and an easy and productive mix of social and academic support. Andres (2012) among others suggests there is now a blurred boundary between the student as a recipient of knowledge and a knowledge provider. Technologies such as blogging, it is theorized, have led learners and tutors to create a new understanding of their roles.

This is one step to suggesting that there may be a need for a new learning theory and pedagogy to go with the new ways of learning using technology. The new paradigms for teaching and learning might, as in Creanor, Trinder, et al. (2006) incorporate theories of social learning (Vygotsky, 1978), conversational learning (Laurillard, 2001), the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and student-constructed knowledge or experiential learning (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994; Schon, 1983). Certainly, digital environments offer access to information as well as interactions unimaginable a few decades ago.

Researching digital literacies in large online MOOCs, Seimans and Downes (2005) contributed a new distributed learning theory that they named as ''connectivism'. Indeed, the romantic perspective on technology is that within the blogs and other digital tools education has shifted from controlled hierarchy of authority to an open democratic community. As a result, new specific pedagogical functions within the digital environments need to be acknowledged (Bertin et al., 2010; Salmon, 2002; Siemens, 2004).

This study showed some grounds for optimism in that when left unguided students did become a resource for each other and took information from the

wider world and showed it to others in the community, in a variety of digital formats. According to connectivism learning occurs through the use of both the cognitive and the affective domains; cognition and the emotions both contribute to the learning process in important ways. The study showed a considerable amount of emotional business was done through the blogs on students' own initiatives and this was valued by the community. Knowledge creation may be an elusive concept but was in evidence when students took media, filtered and decided what was valid and up to date in terms of their course work. In this study learning connections were not built according to a blueprint, but instead were grown, like a plant.

However it is important to remain grounded in discussing blogs and technology is general. Optimists make the assumption that because something is possible and desirable, it will happen. Instead any innovation needs to take in context. Constraints on participation are sometimes unexplored in the literature and participation taken for granted. Siemens (2008) said that now we have technology students can move from a learning environment controlled by the tutor and the institution, to an environment where they direct their own learning, find their own information, and create knowledge by engaging in networks away from the formal setting. Yet this like every other study shows constraints and difficulties. In fact we did not expect to find participation so problematic in this study though reviewing the case study literature all the barriers (time, access, online literacy, perceived value, vulnerability) have been well documented previously, they simply have not been underlined.

Rather than take either an overly optimistic or pessimistic stance this study suggests a balanced view is preferable. While participation was limited, blogs did create an opportunity which had not existed before for learners to support each other and scaffold learning. Online tools were not used exclusively and library research and face to face support was preferred by some. The students created a sense of community across three cohorts and by doing so aided each other in times of stress. They did achieve, albeit not on the scale originally expected, what we as blog designers had hoped they would achieve.

Could the blogs have been better used and is there a way forward that will make blogs a more powerful learning tool in HE? This is not easy as any new approach presents problems as well as solutions. Most markedly there is a growing literature on the role of e tutoring and support for learners, as well as assessment. Active tutoring may well encourage some to participate who would not otherwise do so but it might also lose the sense of student autonomy and impede the space for 'champions' to take on leadership roles for themselves.On this note Chen and Blonk (2008), Glass and Spiegelman (2007) have produced studies which show how grading and tutor input can improve participation, however these are quite directed pedagogical approaches and illustrate how new technology can be re fashioned for traditional learning. More usefully Maor (2003) and Salmon (1999, 2002) are amongst theorists that suggest the role of 'guide on the side has to change with technology in teaching'. This is true but such a role should not stop students who can take the role of creating their own support system, social place and educational development in their own way at

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their own pace.

This sense of opportunity and constraint is also captured in considering blogs as a medium. Asynchronous communication gives unlimited time, but unlimited time may cause tensions such as lack of feedback and a loss of audience. Texts are permanent but that too has difficulties in terms of privacy and lack of flexibility. Finally, what are perceived as the values of blogs will always be differentiated and there is no way around this.

There are, to sum up, two competing versions of learning. The first focuses on the individual learner and the learning that takes place in their head; the second learning that takes place by participating with others, e.g. Wenger (1998) and Simiens (2010). What we perhaps need, is to take account of both types of learning and not to see this as an either/or. We need to understand that learning is structured, artificial and individual *and* social and supported.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This chapter summarises the research carried out; draws out implications for different audiences and identifies strengths and weaknesses in the study. Finally I offer some thoughts on the personal significance of the study.

Summary of research

This thesis has analysed the situation of 52 students who have used blogging in the context of enabling collaboration and networking on a classroom based '2 +2 Early Childhood Studies course. The research involved 'non-traditional' learners in that they were mainly women returning to a degree course, a case of HE but initially based in an FE context.

This was a designed intervention which aimed both to provide practical support for learners and also to explore the concept of networking through blogs in a more removed fashion. A feature of the intervention was that while students were encouraged to blog they were free to write what they liked and when they liked. This was a mixed methods study with data on participation and data on the perception of learners collected through interviews and questionnaire. The study took place over three years. The findings contribute to several under-researched aspects of eLearning: the ubiquitous use of social software, learner control issues and the emotional impact of technology use.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis was divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study setting out the aims and the context of the study. It provided an

extended overview of adult returners to education and identified the reported need for support and a specific type of pastoral care due to 'learning shock'. Part of the transition back to learning requires a redefining of identity. The chapter also discussed some of the background thinking to the idea that education does not fit today's learners as it has not caught up with changes in technology.

Chapter 2 provided an overview of the literature on blogging. It described how the literature was accessed and how the review was organised. It finds that there was limited literature on blogging at the time of the study (though more recent literature has been added in Chapter 7) but it was possible to locate a respectable number of articles under particular themes. Here the educational use of blogs seems to be based on arguments over identity building, emotional support and instructional purposes. The wider role of technology and change, and the role of the educator, were also discussed in this chapter. The review also discussed the methodology used to research blogs and found that many researchers used a mix of questionnaires, interviews and content analysis. Overall it was suggested that many innovators have integrated blogs into everyday teaching so that innovation was tutor led, rather than developing a new paradigm in which learners could become both recipients and creators of knowledge.

Chapter 3 set out the methodology of the study. The key research questions;

Who amongst these learners blog?

Why do students blog?

What encourages or discourages students to blog?

This was described as an interpretive and exploratory study with a mix of methods used: semi-structured interviews, survey and questionnaires and observation of students' blogs and content analysis. The three cohorts of learners were described and a background to the students in this study was provided. This shows that prior formal learning was underdeveloped. The students had very little experience of using computer technology. The students' age, literacy numeracy and ICT scores on a Profiler programme were given, as well as an indication of whether they had started a blog. The ethical dilemmas were set out, including issues of quoting from blogs as well as questions of anonymity and respect for the students' rights. The research was action orientated and it was important that my research role did not get in the way of my tutor role.

In Chapter 4 the findings of data on participation were set out. Blogs were analysed by frequency and by number of words posted by each student. Students could be placed into three broad categories Contributors, Uncertain contributors and Non-contributors. However while blog use was differentiated there were examples of frequent Contributors in every cohort. The summary of Chapter 4 suggested about a third of each cohort were bloggers while who blogged did not seem significantly associated with age or profiles.

Chapter 5 presented a content analysis of the students' blogs using quotes from their text and counting and categorising the blog entries across the three cohorts of learners. The categories grew out of the data. There were blogs, or more

correctly units of analysis, on three subjects: about blogging, home and study. Blogs about blogging generated fewest posts   and was associated with the early phases of the programme. There were more entries on the theme of academic work than home. Feedback was given to authors but this tended to be limited. However Contributors did create a 'blogosphere' containing accounts of their own personal learning journey, offering exam study notes, comments on the course and so on. The blogs provided a venue for getting to know other cohorts on the same course, a space for out-of-class activity. The intervention did succeed in enhancing and extending the programme, but not to the level expected. All three cohorts were reported separately but the pattern of activities was similar so that the three studies could be counted as one case.

In Chapter 6, the findings from survey and interviews were set out. This chapter found that blogging was largely very well received and provided the students with some autonomy and safety to examine their own writing and thoughts. Attitudes and behaviours were diverse, but the students reported both cognitive and emotional gains from reading and writing blogs. The informal nature of blogs was well received. Many who only read the blogs felt a sense of community. Many found writing blogs was a cause of anxiety. Some found blogging technically challenging. The level of control by the tutor was a contested issue, because some wanted more structure and some liked the sense of autonomy within the blogs. There were positive gains reported, deep learning and memorisation as well as emotional support and a growth in confidence of using multi-media.

Chapter 7 was organised around the three research questions:

1. Who amongst these learners blog?

2. Why students blog and what do encourages them to do so?

3. What discourages learners from blogging?

Here it was found that, in the context of adults returning to education, students may or may not blog irrespective of gender, age or profile. There are differentiated levels of blogging. Every post could be themed into home or study units. The students who blogged were not characterised as deep or surface learners but did at times exhibit these kinds of behaviours. Of particular importance is that some learners did feel a responsibility for supporting others in their and succeeding cohorts. Some students read and contributed blogs to relieve anxiety by joining a community that could help them to understand the context of the course. The study showed context and content was important to students on a course. The Contributors became important in the intervention and they almost took on pastoral care and teaching roles that were not carried out by tutors.

The explanations for constrained blogging were as diverse. A prominent and constant issue was time to read and write blogs. Limits on access to the blogs, and challenges in using technology, did put some off but others overcame constraints, sometimes in a quite 'entrepreneurial' way. Some gave up blogging because they considered the blogs to be too fluid and not useful for their learning. Some had a view that the blogs should fit more traditional, learner centred pedagogies of teaching and assessment. Some reported a lack of

personal organisation. Some others perceived the return on reading blogs was not worth the effort due to frivolous postings.

The vulnerability of being exposed and open to comment on a blog affected others and they posted less or contributed safely. A possible lack of social cohesion was suggested within Cohort C but the most important issue in regards to a reduced level of blogging was that they had found networking opportunities within Facebook.

Strengths and weaknesses within the research

There are a number of aspects of this study that carry particular strengths but also some things I would have done differently and areas which were underdeveloped.

This was research carried out by an insider. This gave me added insight into the context of the study and every day access to students and their blogs. This also gave me a commitment to the study and a desire to carry the study over three years. However my personal involvement may have introduced an element of 'bias'. This was not a study of blogging in a vacuum, but blogging as an activity encouraged by a tutor. The students may have joined in blogging out of loyalty to me, or been influenced by my enthusiasm for blogging.

In terms of methodology, strength is that this is a mixed methods study allowing a triangulation of different data sources. Unlike many studies it seeks to access students' perspectives on blogging and Chapter 5 gives a good flavour of the writing styles and literacy patterns used by students. This adds interest and

authenticity. Another strength of the study is that examples of student activity can be traced back to the background data. The study was not a short term one and its credibility is enhanced in that patterns of interaction are sometimes repeated over three cohorts. However if doing the work again I would have liked to access student voice more directly, for example using techniques of stimulated recall, or 'think aloud' strategies, to understand the process of blog composition and I would have introduced focus group discussions. I would have re-thought my survey questionnaire as the survey did not allow me to access differentiated responses and although good interview data were collected this was in spite of my first schedule, not because of it. A further disappointment is that I did not make good use of a research diary. I kept notes and did (privately) blog feelings and experiences of my own during the research. However due to pressure of work I was unable to do this systematically and to make good use of the data provided.

In terms of action orientation this was not action research as such and I may have benefitted from taking a more action research perspective. In particular I could have altered the conditions as I went from cohort to Cohort, for example by offering a more structured approach to blogging in cohorts B and C. I could have used prior experiences to model the use of blogs better for a follow up cohort and see if that made a difference in their blogging. Nonetheless the decision to keep a light touch on leadership and control was done purposively. I was heavily influenced by theories of connectivism and wanted to resist imposing structure. An action research perspective might also have led me to consider aspects of leadership and change, which are under-developed in this study.

Implications of the study

I now turn to the implications of the study for different audiences.

First for students. This research has convinced me that there is a value to blogging and every student should take the opportunity to give it a try for some time. By all means students have the right to reject blogging (or similar kinds of social networking) but they are only able to make an informed decision by trying out the technology. It is up to the individual to use a blog as they see fit and at the level of exposure they can tolerate and enjoy. This level will become clearer through practice but also through reflections on blogs completed by other learners in the past.

For the college. The implication is that blogs should be promoted because students learn so much about themselves and their peers by blogging. There are organisational and other issues to address - for example which tools to use? What kind of assessment is appropriate? How can students without access or without IT skills be supported? How can realistic demands be made on staff time? However, colleges should find room for these kinds of initiatives; they are worth it as they extend and enhance the learning experience.

The message for practitioners is a similar one as for colleges in general. Think through the expected issues of time, support, assessment and so on but adopt iterative strategies – you will not get it right first time. In fact there is no ideal solution to the organising of blogs. As a practitioner you are faced with a tension between high direction and, perhaps, broader take up, against low direction and

narrower but more autonomous use.

The message for the research community is to move away from these optimistic vs pessimistic stances on technology and accept that technology brings opportunities as well as constraints. In this case the technology allowed the opportunity for students to communicate beyond the classroom and beyond a single cohort, but this brought with it the constraint of feeling vulnerable and an anxiety about self-disclosure. The asynchronous nature of blogs provided an opportunity for extended reflection, but also an opportunity to avoid responding and the anxiety of leaving permanent records of contributions.

Overall the contribution to knowledge from this thesis is to provide a rich account of a learner centred blogging intervention. The low level of tutor intervention created difficulties but also opportunities. This heavily unstructured approach has not been discussed in the literature. The study contributes to an understanding of what is appropriate in terms of research methodology and frames for analysis. It is carefully positioned as offering both encouragement and realism about blogging.

Personal significance of the research

This thesis has challenged me in every way. My previous MA did not really prepare me for the research skills I needed to develop to complete this work. I spent a lot of time writing and getting it wrong. I had to learn how to read literature and analyse the concepts. I learnt how to theme and systematically note-take. I tried out different tools to keep a track on what was read and where it was kept. I learnt more about the values I tried to subscribe to as a teacher and

felt my belief in promoting student self–regulation was both reinforced and challenged.

I gained confidence in writing and becoming a writer then lost it as my supervisor led me to different, more organised, ways of offering the thesis. At one point I became immobile feeling anything I wrote would be re-written and changed for the better and this was a valuable lesson in creating dependencies when students have dyslexia. Note taking was easy on the MA as the lectures helped me to structure ideas. I can honestly say my writing; reading, vocabulary and précis work has improved. Practices that good writers might follow automatically became opened up for me. My dyslexic style must have challenged my supervisor and it frustrated me so much. Losing work, re-doing the wrong chapter, muddling the order of things, drafting and redrafting everything over and over, all made each step so much harder. An outcome for me is that I have now learnt better organisation and work-saving strategies. I have learnt how to be clearer when speaking and presenting problems to others, no longer starting in the middle of a subject but taking people with me. The confidence in speaking, writing and listening to academic dialogue was my biggest gain from working on this thesis and this experience helped me to write papers and present to conferences with less fear of the dyslexic tendencies altering what I was trying to express.

I have a real interest in using technology to help the less academic learner to succeed but I have experienced first-hand that dyslexia thwarts the best applications due to short-term memory problems and severe organisation

defects. I have learnt some strategies, which I have taken into my teaching practice. I have remained interested and excited in this study because it presents so many aspects to learn from and improve my reflective practice in the world of teaching. In summary, I have something to say about blogs. This information is helpful to others and provides a record of a point in time when blogs were in their infancy. Although it has been the most difficult study I have ever undertaken it has not has not extinguished my curiosity or abated my appetite for more research.

Glossary

This section gives definitions generally adopted by researchers. Of course, some terms have contrasting definitions, the more so when applied to blogging, and these are discussed.

Action research: Inquiry or research in the context of focused efforts that have been used to improve the quality of an organization and its performance. Action research studies have been designed and conducted by practitioners who have evaluated interventions in order to improve their own practice.

Adoption: The decision to try a new technology, experiment with its capabilities, and then finally integrate its use into one's daily workflow and personal experience is a complicated process that has been described as adoption and appropriation.

Affordances: An affordance is a quality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action. For example, a knob affords

twisting, and perhaps pushing, while a cord affords pulling. The original definition described all actions that are physically possible. This was later adapted to describe all action possibilities of which an actor is aware. The term has further evolved for use in the context of human–computer interaction (HCI) to indicate the easy discoverability of possible actions.

Anonymity: Of particular relevance to the present investigation is the notion of relative anonymity. When individuals interact with others online, they may choose how much or how little information to reveal about themselves, allowing for some level of anonymity. When individuals perceive themselves to be anonymous, it may change the way in which individuals interact while on the web because they experience a sense of depersonalization and de-individuation. Applied to the concept of blogging, this suggests that individuals may report information on their blogs that is more revealing than they realize.

Asynchronous: Communication between parties in which the interaction has taken place at different times i.e. not taken place simultaneously. Examples include e-mail, bulletin boards, discussion forums, etc.

Asynchronous learning: Learning events that have taken place at different times and probably different places.

Autonomy: The ability to learn independently by exercising control over the content and methods of learning.

Blog: A web site that has contained dated entries about a particular topic in reverse chronological order with most recent first. It has been written by one

person or a group of contributors. Entries may contain commentary, images, and links to other web sites.

Blogosphere: The name given to the generality of blogs accessible on the world-wide web.

Collaboration: The act of working together in a joint intellectual effort and dialogue within teaching practice, school culture, and student learning. Blogs have become a significant part Web 2.0, where user participation and conversation has overtaken simple information presentation and dissemination.

Collaborative learning: Learners actively constructs knowledge through interaction with others.

Community of learners: participation in a group or community in order to acquire knowledge through solving real problems.

Constructivism: Philosophy of learning founded on the theory that learners have constructed their own understanding of the world by reflecting on their prior experiences and adjusting mental models to accommodate new experiences. In virtual education environments, constructivist models prioritize active participation, intentional communication, and collaboration among learners in authentic activities.

Connectivism: An emerging learning theory for the digital age, based on students finding and creating their own knowledge base with the tutor becoming facilitator and curator rather than transmitter of knowledge.

Digital dissonance: The tension related to learners' use of popular social technologies in formal school settings vs. informal settings.

Digital natives: Students born after the creation of the world-wide web and associated technologies have grown-up in a cultural environment shaped by popular communication tools such as Short Messaging Service (SMS), MSN Messenger, Skype and social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo or Facebook. Variously referred to as the 'N [for Net]-gen' or 'D [for digital]-gen'.

Digital immigrants. Digital immigrants (often teachers) may not be so familiar with the range of technologies available, creating the need for developing the e-skills of teaching staff. Digital immigrant instructors can be said to speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age) and may struggle to teach a population that speaks a new language.

Disruptive technologies: The democratization of educational environments challenges the established power relations between lecturers and students, forcing a rethink of pedagogical strategies and relationships in education.

Educator: In the era of social software the role of the educator will change as a tutor, a lecturer, a module leader or learning and teaching manager in different contexts.

eLearning: The use of new technology for educational purposes related to teaching and learning. This includes the use of computers by students both within the class and for private study; the use of electronic devices for teaching purposes within the class, such as data projectors, interactive whiteboards (IWB)

and tablet PCs; and the use of the internet, intranet or virtual learning environment (VLE) for communication between students, and students and tutors, and for storage and access to teaching and learning materials.

Information and communication technology skills (ICT): The technical ability to use common computer applications, such as word processors and spread sheets, carry out Internet searches and use email with attachments.

Identity: Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group.

Instant message (IM): Messages exchanged in real time via the Internet when all parties to the conversation are logged onto their instant message service at the same time.

Interaction: an attribute of effective instruction by which a learner has been actively engaged in an exchange of information with an instructor, other learners, or the learner's environment.

Interactive learning: This occurs when the source of instruction has communicated directly with the learner, shaping responses to the learner's needs. Computers and other modern technological applications have made it theoretically possible to provide effective interactive instruction to any learner on any subject. Although interaction between bloggers and audiences is possible, the conversation is usually directed, controlled and managed by the bloggers themselves such that the quantity and level of feedback are limited and

asymmetrical.

Learning community: The advent of Web 2.0 has brought development of professional learning communities built on the affordances of tools such as a blog-based portfolio for the critical reflection of teaching and learning practices as well as ongoing dialogues among peers about teaching and learning.

Learning shock: Students returning to formal learning may find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods. They may experience unexpected and disorienting cues and be subjected to ambiguous and conflicting expectations leading to acute frustration, confusion and anxiety.

Novice or Newbie: A beginner. Someone who has just started learning or doing something new and has little or no previous experience in the skill or activity.

Online: Participation in the web-based environment, activities requiring access to a computer network.

Online instruction: Instructional presentation formats delivered via a web-based delivery system.

Online learning community: A group of individuals focused on learning that have shared common interests and needs and whose main mode of communication has been the Internet.

Online learning environment: Also known as virtual learning environment, information technology applied via computer networks allows educational activities that are not dependent on location of either the students or the

facilitator.

Podcast: An audio broadcast that has been converted to a file format for playback in a digital player and made available to subscribers as news feeds.

Reflection: The emergence of blogs has transformed access to the process and outcome of reflection by connecting bloggers to a global audience and opening channels for feedback that may lead to deeper thinking and learning.

Returners to education/non–traditional learners: Part-time status and age are common elements of adult returners, e.g. school-leavers who leave early or do not go straight to HE, attend part–time, study while employed (often full-time). They may have dependents, be care-givers of sick or elderly family members, a single parent, etc.

RSS Commonly known as 'Really Simple Syndication', this allows users to receive timely updates of material such as blog entries, news headlines, etc. from their favourite websites, or to aggregate data from many websites.

Self-awareness: There are two types of self-awareness that individuals' experience: public and private. Individuals experiencing high public self-awareness are likely to be concerned with their public appearance and impression management. An individual high in private self-awareness is less focused on other individuals due to his or her spotlight of attention being focused on internal states.

Self-directed learning: Individual learners can be empowered to take more

responsibility for various decisions associated with their learning.

Student-centred learning: A learning-model that places the student at the centre of the learning process as active participants, learning at their own pace and using their own strategies. Student centred learning is seen as developing learning-how-to-learn skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking.

Student-directed learning: Knowledge obtained as the student has identified and pursued topics felt to be important for her/his own learning. The locus of control rests with the student and outcomes of lessons are based on student design.

Synchronous online learning: A real-time, instructor-led, online learning event in which all participants have been logged on at the same time, via audio or video conferencing, Internet telephony or two-way live broadcast.

Trolling: Participation in an online community with the intention of provoking attention to ones self, ideas, favourite theories, etc. thereby taking over the interactions.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): The components of a VLE might include: an online notice-board/bulletin board, information about the operation a programme of learning, email facilities, online conferencing tools, student home pages, metadata, management of assignments, assessments and synchronous collaboration tools such as whiteboards, chat and video conferencing.

Web 2.0: The emergence of user-centred web-based tools has changed the way individuals and educational institutions use the Internet. Educators can use web 2.0 tools to create engaging student-centred learning environments.

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APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONNAIRE

1.I was already familiar with blogging
2.The blogging community was friendly
3.There was no posturing and pontificating (showing off) in the blogs
4.There was a mutual respect between bloggers
5.It was possible to find out more about the author of a particular post
6.There was a sense of community in the blogs
7.Posting to the blogs created feelings of anxiety

8.There were no aggressive and directly personal challenges in the blogs

9.It was easy to make personal connections in the blogs

10.The blogs were not teacher-controlled

11.The blogs enabled personal sense-making

12.The blogs enabled self-expression

13The blogs allowed for the creation of an attractive layout in which to express ideas

14.It was easier to establish a personal presence in the blogs

15.It was easier to establish a personal voice in the blogs

16.The blogs enabled the development of personal connections, beyond the immediate task

17.It was easy to control who to enter into discussion with in the blogs

18.In the blogs the 'tone' of discussions met implicitly accepted protocols

19.The blogs fostered quiet, slow reflection

20.The blogs enabled 'ownership' of the publishing space

21.Bloggers could control the pace of discussion on their blogs

22.The blogs provided a protected space

23.Bloggers could build and protect their self-esteem in their blogs

24.The blogs enabled intensive personal learning

25.In the blogs you could make explicit connections between dissimilar concepts

26.Bloggers had time and space to focus on the development of discussions which went off on a tangent

27.Bloggers could develop thoughtful, long-term relationships and networks

28.Bloggers could develop ties which were initially weak but then gradually strengthened

29.It was easier to explore new, innovative ideas in the blogs than in the class

APPENDIX 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Section 1. The Attributes of Blogs in Educational Settings

	Transferable skills	Improved critical writing	Knowledge, collaboration	Identity building and projecting	Emotionally settling into a course	Personal reflection	Knowledge discussion and creation	Community building	Peer assessment/engagement	Deep learning and critical thinking	Autonomy of student
Andrés 2010							✔	✔		✔	✔
Baggertun and Wasson 2006					✔					✔	
Bertin et al. 2010											✔
Blau 2013	✔										
Bloch 2007	✔										

Boud and Lee 2005					✔				✔	
Bresica and Miller 2006			✔	✔	✔	✔				✔	
Cambell 2005											✔
Cameron and Anderson 2006				✔							
Chen and Bonk 2008		✔						✔			
Churchill 2009							✔				
Countinho 2007							✔	✔			
Dalgarno et al. 2013						✔					

Davi et al. 2007								✔		✔	
Dickey 2004					✔			✔			
Downes 2004		✔								✔	
Ducate and Lomica 2008	✔						✔				
Duffy and Bruns 2006									✔	✔	
Edbauer 2008		✔									
Ellison and Wu 2008		✔					✔	✔		✔	
Farmer et al. 2008								✔			
Fenton 2011								✔			

Ferdij and Trammel 2004		✔				✔	✔			✔	
Forte 2005					✔			✔			
Freeman et al. 2006					✔						
Halic et al. 2010						✔	✔				
Hammond 1999						✔					
Hramiak et al. 2008						✔					
Hine 2000				✔	✔			✔			
Instone 2005									✔		
Jacobs 2003		✔									

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Johinson et al. 2000					✔					✔	
Lave and Wenger 1991				✔							
Lee and Green 1998					✔					✔	
Loving et al. 2007								✔			
Miyazoe and Anderson 2012b							✔				
Nardi et al. 2004					✔			✔			
Oravec 2002		✔				✔		✔		✔	
Coutinho 2012								✔			
Ray and Coulter 2008						✔					

Rocco 2010						✔					
Salmon 1999					✔	✔		✔		✔	
Sharma 2010						✔					
Top 2012							✔				
Tu 2002				✔							
Wang 2007	✔										
Ward 2006				✔			✔				
Williams and Jacobs 2004						✔		✔			
Yang and Chang 2014						✔					

| Zeng and Harris 2005 | | ✔ | | | | ✔ | | ✔ | | ✔ | |

Literature Section 2. Problems of Implementing Blogs

of	Too fluid and lack of	Too rigid/too task focussed	Use for learning	Pedagogical problems	Time consuming	privacy/vulnera ble resistance	Broadcasting not	Not reflective	Limited blogging	Limited Feedback	Add on to a course/not	Don't value peer feedback.	Difficulty in use of technology
Burgess 2006	✔												
Chen and Bonk 2008									✔				
Dalgarno et al. 2013	✔	✔				✔				✔			✔
Davis and Merchant 2007						✔							

Deng and Yuen 2013						✔	✔		✔					✔
Ellison and Wu 2008									✔					
Freeman et al. 2006					✔	✔								
Halic et al. 2010												✔		
Hall and Davidson 2007								✔						
Hammond 1999						✔								
Hsu 2007										✔				

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13
Kerawalla et al. 2008		✔											
Nardi et al. 2004										✔			
Pachler and Daly 2009										✔			
Stiler and Philleo 2003						✔							
Tu 2002					✔								
Wasko and Faraj 2000					✔								
West et al. 2006	✔		✔										

Wopeneis et al. 2010									✔				
Xie and Sharma 2005	✔			✔								✔	
Xie, Ke and Sharma 2008													

Literature Section 3. Recommendations to Teach with Blogs

	Closely scaffolded blogs	Closely monitored blogs	Modelling blog samples by tutor	Individual blogs	Share experiences/	Teach and check and assess	Reading others helps	Attitude of teacher needs to be	Teach affordances of blog	Alter settings to private and public	Make computers accessible
Andrés 2012	✔	✔									
Bhattacharya and Chauhan 2009			✔								
Blau 2012				✔	✔						
Delgarno 2013						✔					
Deng and Yuen 2013	✔					✔			✔	✔	✔

Dufour et al. 2010						✔					
Lee, Zhang and Yin 2011						✔					
Lim and Chan 2007								✔			
Lim, Pagram and Nastiti 2009								✔			
West et al. 2006									✔		✔

Literature Section 4. Gaps in the Literature about Blogs

	Factors that facilitate or inhibit blogging.	Bloggers experience and perceptions.	The effect of the audience on blogging.	The traits of bloggers.
Deng and Yuen 2013	✔			
Kerawalla et al. 2008		✔		
Nardi et al. 2004			✔	
Stefanane and Jang 2007				✔