



The Public Necessity of Student Blogging

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The Scholarly and the Digital

This article is part of a series addressing the issue of scholarly and academic recognition of digital work. The goal is to investigate how digital work is regarded and produced in today’s academy. The discussion is ongoing — see [all articles in this series](#) or [the original call for papers that prompted them](#) and consider [adding your voice](#) to the conversation.

“If the history of educational technology teaches researchers anything then it is this: what begins as fresh,

OPEN TO CHANCE? —

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innovative and edgy quickly evolves to tired, redundant and banal.” —Tara Brabazon, [Journal of Urban and Regional Analysis](#)

All educational technology needs to be fit for purpose, and the supposed ‘blog’ tool inside many proprietary learning management systems (LMS) is not. For example, a popup description in the Blackboard LMS says that “Blogs are an open communications tool for Students to share their thoughts.” This is a misapplied description. The LMS is simply not an open platform and cannot, by definition, host a blog.

A learning management system is designed to facilitate communication between cohorts of staff and students in a given unit or course of study. It allows submission of assessment tasks in a secure way and typically houses relevant course content such as readings. An LMS is a way for an institution to maintain control over who has access to material its staff have created.

The term ‘blog’ is a shortened form of ‘web-log’, meaning a series of timestamped posts on a site available on the web. Carlos Scolari [suggests](#) that “Weblogs are founded on the free distribution of information” and are “socializing the production and distribution of contents”. Blogs are open, public, and networked. They are as such useful for students learning to write in public as they potentially expose the work “not for rarified audiences, but for unexpected ones,” as [Jesse Stommel and Sean Michael Morris put it](#). But a blog locked away from the web and not allowed to interact with it can hardly wear that definition at all.

Bloggging has been a popular tool of the academy for a decade or so. [Marcus O’Donnell](#) has argued bloggging is “a situated practice that must be brought into appropriate alignment with particular pedagogical and disciplinary practices”. It has been conceptualised both [as a research method by Rebecca Olive](#) and as an [object of research by Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess](#).

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The presence of a blogging tool within an LMS is therefore fairly uncontroversial. It [sits alongside](#) such inclusions as rubrics, wikis, surveys, analytics and grading tools as a standard inclusion.

David Leonard contends that “[Public writing and scholarly writing do not stand in binary opposition to one another nor are they mutually exclusive.](#)” Jay Rosen [also argues that blogging is about doing work in public](#), in such a way that the whole activity is visible and rigorous, by virtue of the fact it is much more findable and able to be challenged than in previous decades:

Blogging is not the post I wrote that appears at PressThink or on LinkedIn — or Atlantic.com if they pick me up.

“Blogging” is the whole thing: accepting the invitation, tweeting the questions, creating a clip by asking what is good to blog about later, publishing the step-back explainer, crafting a distribution plan and negotiating for a make-shift guest shot at AVC.com, participating in the comment section...

However, the learning management system is the anathema of these characteristics. Instead of open to the public web, it is closed to only those correctly enrolled in a given course or subject. Instead of being networked with others, it aims to [“build a fence around the students in the classroom, dividing them both from the web users outside the course and from each other”](#).

My current institution — where I am course director and lecturer for a suite of degrees in communication at both undergraduate and postgraduate level — [promises](#) potential students that they “will learn how to communicate information to diverse audiences...develop writing and presentation skills for communication industries and an understanding of a variety of communication disciplines.” It is likely that the majority of ‘diverse audiences’ with whom students are expected to communicate would be public given the nature of modern communication industries. Further, since we make a

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concomitant ‘commitment to undergraduates’ of “[education based in practice](#)”, it is reasonable that opportunities be provided to these students to participate in public writing. Such writing could be in the form of blog posts, or newspaper articles, or social media content, but only when it is designed and intended for distribution beyond the walls of the LMS.

This article was borne out of my frustration, admittedly with both my own practice and that of my colleagues, in asking students to produce work only to have it locked away for a limited audience, mostly the marker but occasionally small groups of fellow students. We have the technical capabilities and infrastructure to push student work into the world via [web streaming](#), our [on campus radio station](#) and [national newsroom](#), and our [text-based news website](#), but too often we were returning to the supposed ‘blog’ module in Blackboard or similar limited-audience environments.

The practice of writing in public on the web is fundamentally different to the practice of writing for a limited, closed audience of the student cohort and different again to that of writing for an audience of one (the marker), whether the work is submitted and marked electronically or by paper. The difference lies in not so much the practical mechanics of writing and posting but the ability for web-posted work to connect with broad audiences. Stommel and Morris [broach this difference](#), noting that “the promise of digital publishing is one that begins with the entrance of the written, and one that concludes with distribution, reuse, revision, remixing — and finally, redistribution.” [Moreover](#), “digitized words...are not arrested upon the page; rather they are restive there.” These comments highlight the affordances of writing placed in public, digital spaces on the web. For students moving into professional worlds in which they will be constantly communicating in public, and having those words scrutinized by unknown audiences, the LMS cannot be considered practice-based.

The web has specific affordances that are not inherent to the

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operation of the network upon which it is built (the Internet). [Wired](#), in an article lamenting the death of the web in favour of closed networks utilising the Internet, characterised the web as “open, free, and out of control.” Application-based websites like our learning management systems tend more toward “[rigid standards, high design, centralized control](#)” than the open web. Both systems are still ‘online’ in that they operate through the connection of two computers via a commercial network, but there is an essential difference in philosophy, style, and logic between them, including the logic of the public audience.

A common concern from colleagues is the potential for public systems to attract trolls or abusive behaviour. And, [as Marta Burtis notes](#), well-meaning or risk-averse staff “are concerned about what happens when it breaks.” However, I’ve rarely encountered the issue of trolling, even with hundreds of students taking part in these programs. When it breaks, “[You tell them: Good! It broke.](#)” The perceived risk ought to be further mitigated by recognising that, in part, the pedagogical set up to this process involves developing students’ ability to handle negative interactions and unexpected interruptions by doing work on the ethics of blogging, discussing trolling and other negative behaviours, and equipping them to fix things. This is because our students are public communicators, so there is a strong need to have them working with this kind of thing early and developing skills in dealing with these known issues.

Clearly, some students, such as women and those from minority groups, are at greater risk of attracting trolls, and so part of our responsibility of care in asking students to do this work is providing extra support for those students. A public-by-default approach shouldn’t prevent private submission in compelling circumstances and most of the popular tools will allow students to upload password-protected posts if necessary.

I have used several blogging systems with a number of student

cohorts at different universities. These include student-run WordPress sites and my own blogs on [Medium](#) and [WordPress](#). The aim of using public blogs rather than the university-supported LMS is to engender a learning community that extends beyond the student cohort, to encourage network activity, and to develop the students' confidence and ability to write in public, given that we are primarily preparing them to be communicators to a wide range of audiences.

The actual practice of student blogging is twofold. Firstly, I sometimes write posts loaded up with links, information, references, videos and other resources. Unlike pages in other formal course spaces, these are not intended to appear as formal, final, or even authoritative. They are the start of a conversation. Such posts contain ideas and prompts for students, and sometimes request their interaction or response, either as a comment or on their own blog (in an ideal blend, the publishing platform Medium turns useful responses into original posts within the user's feed, similar to @-reply tweets). Secondly, students have their own self-hosted or shared-hosting blogs, on whatever platform they wish (usually WordPress.com, sometimes the open source WordPress, occasionally Medium or even Blogger). This approach means they own the blogs and the content and they can do with it what they wish, in addition to their scholarly activity. This technique is inspired by but not identical to the [Domain of One's Own program](#) of the University of Mary Washington and other institutions, and shares the pedagogical goals of those programs: to develop spaces for independent thought and work. Our emerging professional communicators will be producing work for exactly the kinds of public spaces they encounter in these programs.

The use of blogs in this way allows for open discussion and interaction with the professions by not assuming students only become part of their profession post-graduation. It encourages them to engage with current practice in their field and reach out to and get the attention of professionals, which is good for

both the student and the university. Additionally, the learning community is active and expansive (as opposed to exclusive). It extends across multiple cohorts of students, through different years and classes, and continues to operate after the particular subject has ceased. By contrast, inside the LMS, the work disappears into the digital ether when the institution ends access to the course. Students are lost to their own work at that moment.

In order to stimulate skill development and learning for students who will be public communicators, there is an urgent need to do away with closed platforms that purport to mimic open web functionality, but actually instigate severe limitations upon students' ability to engage with the world at large. The LMS is good at certain things — administration, secure submissions, communicating grades, distributing licensed resources — but it should be limited to those things and not claim to be something it is not.

The outcome of helping students to be networked public writers is that they leave our programs equipped to engage in public conversations, civic life, and work because they have already been doing so for years. In writing in public, students are forced to confront ideas and positions that contradict their own as others comment on, challenge, and respond to their work. They develop technological skills by using platforms and tools they might not have otherwise engaged in. These capacities are as important as their ability to write, as they also encourage students to listen and think; the act of communicating is not merely about speaking.

About the Author



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and the internet.

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