

‘AN ENGAGING AND DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE’: BLOG POSTING IN A HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES TEACHER EDUCATION UNIT

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ABSTRACT

There is a relative paucity of detailed exemplars which reflect upon the use of blogging as a tool to examine pre-service teachers’ pedagogical development and which explore the nature of their thinking about blogging in specific disciplinary contexts. The purpose of this study was to examine pre-service teacher reflections about their practice through blogging in relation to a third year Bachelor of Education unit at an Australian university focused upon Humanities and Social Sciences education. Blog posting proved to be an effective way of promoting high quality practice, thinking, and reflection in relation to some of the key issues that the unit content sought to emphasise about Humanities and Social Sciences education. The pre-service teachers’ reflections on the positive features of blog posting picked up on the value of collaborative learning, the benefits for their own learning of responding to others, and the value of receiving specific feedback on how to improve their work. They also pointed to how they saw blogging as a resource for their future professional practice and as an outlet for creativity and thinking about the affective dimensions of assessment feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Blogging - a form of electronic journaling - has been identified as an effective means to help pre-service teachers to construct and communicate meaning from their experiences in asynchronous and on-line learning contexts (Black, 2005; Coutinho, 2007; Miller & Williams, 2013; Reupert & Dalgano, 2011; Rinke, Stebick, Schaefer, & Gaffney, 2009). Pre-service teachers can post their teaching and learning ideas and rationales for their peers, read different points of view, re-draft their work in the light of feedback, and justify their arguments as well as share academic resources which underpin their understanding. Blogging can be an effective method of connecting a community of like-minded learners to provide each other with encouragement, feedback, and support. Blogs also enable students to ask questions and exchange ideas (Meinecke, Smith, & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2013; Richardson, 2010). Furthermore, there are positive claims made for blogging in educational contexts around its capacity to promote higher order reflexivity (Farmer, Yue & Brooks, 2008; Rettberg, 2009), critical thinking (Novakovich, 2016; Yang, 2009), and an enhanced sense of teacher identity (Kehrwald, 2010; Luehmann, 2008). However, there is a relative paucity of detailed exemplars which reflect upon the use of blogging as a tool to examine pre-service teachers’ [PST’s] pedagogical development and which explore the nature of PSTs’ thinking about blogging in specific disciplinary contexts (Noel, 2015: 618. Also Garza and Smith, 2015: 5). The purpose of this study was to examine PST reflections about their practice through blogging in relation to a third year Bachelor of Education unit at an Australian university (the University of Tasmania) focused upon Humanities and Social Sciences [HaSS] education.

It is worth underlining that the central drivers in designing the blog-posting assessment task discussed in this article were not deepening PSTs’ understanding of peer review, the power of reflexivity, the advantages of collaboration and communities of practice, or the benefits of blog posting. These were seen as valuable professional learning side benefits (although intentional teaching strategies were deployed to underline these value-added dimensions of the activity). Rather the working hypothesis was that the framework and genre of blog posting was likely be a productive and fruitful way of exploring and communicating key aspects of HaSS education understanding and of suggesting engaging learning activities in this curricular area. A blog posting assignment was a means to achieving this quite specific initial teacher education end. A learning approach was adopted that sought to engage the PSTs in complex, authentic, real-world assessment tasks which resulted in the creation of artefacts that represented their learning (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010).

Designing and assessing the blog post assignment

Good practice guidance points towards assignment topics having an appropriate scope and structure which provide students with a focus, but which also offer them some freedom of choice and a range of possible ways to demonstrate their emerging knowledge and understanding. For PSTs topics should also directly reflect curriculum requirements in order for the blogs to be seen as making a meaningful contribution to their professional learning (Meinecke, Smith, & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2013). Additionally, educators need to put in place the building blocks of an effective learning community, with clear expectations outlined in relation to the nature of peer collaboration and engagement (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010). To develop a strong online

blogging community, instructors are advised to specify detailed requirements concerning administrative and logistical arrangements, participation, assessment criteria, and the development of a unit-specific blogging community. They should also explicitly spell out the claimed advantages for learning and provide (and model) a sustained online teaching presence, by facilitating discussions and signposting key features of the designated learning (Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2009). All of these aspects of pedagogic good practice were implemented and applied within the PSTs' on-line learning platform for this unit with key messages further consolidated and underlined through lecture presentations, news items, recorded synchronous web conferences, discussion forums, and tutor reminders.

The learning outcomes for the HaSS education unit were fourfold:

- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of content, concepts and skills required to teach HaSS education;
- Critically appraise HaSS education pedagogical approaches and curricula (including the work of peers);
- Demonstrate and develop communication skills appropriate for audience and purpose; and
- Reflect upon working collaboratively with peers and demonstrate adaptation of planning and thinking in the light of on-line involvement and feedback.

The specific task (Appendix 1) is outlined below.

METHODOLOGY

The research project was undertaken within the scope of a 'Reimagining Online Learning in Education' project being undertaken within the University of Tasmania's Faculty of Education. Tutors initiating innovations within their units articulated a teaching challenge which they sought to explore through action research. The challenge in this case was expressed as 'seeking to enhance the formative engagement of students around a blog posting assessment task'. In two earlier well-received and favourably evaluated iterations of the unit, also encompassing a blog posting task, relatively few of the PSTs had participated in offering feedback to their peers on draft blog posts (an opportunity built into the assignment) and (related to this) few of the PSTs had taken the opportunity to re-draft and improve their work in response to the formative assessment opportunities offered in the task. In this iteration of the unit, for the first time, a proportion of assignment marks was specifically allocated to the quality of feedback offered to others. Specifically, 20% of the pre-service teachers' overall mark for the task was devoted to 'Reflection upon working collaboratively with peers and demonstration of adapting planning and thinking in the light of on-line involvement and feedback' (See Appendix 2 for the assessment rubric).

The research followed conditions set out in a minimum risk ethics application, which granted permission to access the use of natural data produced by the pre-service teachers during the unit implementation, subject to only using data from participants who had given their consent and after the unit had been fully finalised. Of the 180 PSTs enrolled on the unit, n.= 28 gave permission for their data to be used. Of these 28 PSTs there was a preponderance of students from the top end of attainment (7 High Distinctions; 13 Distinctions; 5 Credit; and 3 Pass papers). Overall, however, achievement was good across the enrolled cohort with 65% of students attaining above Credit level for their final unit grade. Information about both the over-arching project and the specific unit project were posted on the relevant My Learning On-line (MyLO) learning platform news page. Constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) was deployed in a qualitative analytical study of the data which analysed the pre-service teachers' blogs alongside their reflections on the blog posting process. Qualitative data reduction strategies were used in order to identify themes through individual categorization and interpretation of the data.

As part of the wider project, the pre-service teachers responded to an online survey (The Pre-service Teacher Readiness for Online Learning Measure (PTROLM) with 18 Likert statements) near to the beginning of the semester to gauge their attitude to and 'readiness' for online learning. If the students were enrolled in more than one participating unit, they completed the survey only once. They were invited to complete the PTROLM a second time after the semester was finished. Of the 16 students who completed both the first and the second survey half of them had attitude gains to on-line study by the end of the semester. It was encouraging to find that all but one of the 28 respondents either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that 'I think that my lecturer has a positive attitude towards my on-line learning', indicating that they had appreciated the inclusion of blog posts as an assessment task. In anonymous, centrally administered evaluations at the end of the unit several of the PSTs provided comments indicating their appreciation of the blogging task. For example, 'I really loved the idea behind the blogs - it has provided food for thought with regards to my own classroom and ICT for learning' and 'I enjoyed the formative assessment for AT1 and the creativity we could bring to the blogging task'. I Moreover 17 out of 28 students in the PTROLM survey 'strongly agreed' that 'Students can help each other with on-line learning'.

Pre-Service teacher comments on the benefits of blog posting and collaboration

The overall educational and pedagogical case for blog posting as being a beneficial form of student assessment was made eloquently and persuasively in the following three student observations:

‘Using the blogging website Wordpress was an engaging and different experience. Unlike other assessment tasks, it provided a platform for ongoing peer assessment and allowed us to make alterations to our blogs based on the feedback we received. As a pre-service teacher it is vital to be comfortable in both giving and receiving constructive feedback (Topping, 1998) as we are entering a profession that values sharing and constant improvement of practice. As such, I feel learning how to be part of a community of practice is an essential skill to develop.’

‘Through the creation of three blog posts on civics and citizenship education, history and geography/sustainability, I was able to provide, receive and respond to feedback whilst exploring the value of collaborative learning platforms and the impact feedback has on students.... Presenting the assessment through online blogs ignited a sense of excitement and engagement with the opportunity to creatively express my learning. I found that following others, and giving and receiving feedback, enhanced the learning experience and maintained my enjoyment towards the task.’

‘Being an online student means working in isolation. Engaging in peer feedback, on my blog and my contribution to other peers’ blogs provided opportunities for participation in each other’s learning, creating a greater sense of understanding and appreciation of peer perspectives. Peer feedback offered the opportunity to reflect on the work of peers and on my own work, leading to increased learning, new ideas and reflection on how my work compared with others.’

Since information on blogs is electronic, students are not temporally limited regarding when they can create and read posts. Blogs also archive posts and viewer contributions, which enables students to keep a record of their learning. The PSTs often supported their positive assessments of the value of blog posting with relevant references from the academic literature (e.g. Du & Wagner, 2006; Halic et.al, 2010; Kim, 2008; Noel, 2015).

The use of online blogging inherently brings with it an expectation to work collaboratively. There is a cumulative process of posting draft ideas, receiving feedback, and reflexively modifying and adapting ideas in the light of peer and tutor responses (Ertmer et al., 2007). Students generally commented positively on the collaborative peer review processes in the reflective component of their assignment. They valued the opportunity to view each other's work and were especially appreciative of the comments and suggestions they received from their peers and tutors on how to improve their work. Several of the students commented upon their experience of collaborative learning. For example:

‘The blogging experience proved an engaging assessment format and a refreshing relief from essay writing. The communal approach provided constructive comments for areas of need that might otherwise have been overlooked. Meanwhile, reading the work of others coincidentally provided “feedback” for my own writing.’

‘Wordpress creates a virtual learning community that enabled me to receive constructive feedback from my peers; furthermore, it enabled me to critically reflect upon each blog’s content and discover areas that needed adjustments (Keppell, Au & Chan, 2006).’

Another PST noted that ‘This assessment utilises Dewey’s philosophy of collaborative learning engaging students in sharing their viewpoints, and providing constructive feedback in a tolerant environment’. Moreover, one enterprising student took the notion of collaboration one step further in terms of also making connections to social media: ‘I was able to link my Wordpress page to my Facebook peers, this allowed my blog traffic to increase, therefore increasing my peer feedback.’ Like other blog spaces such as Edublogs and Googleblogger, Wordpress provides a personal writing space where it is straightforward to publish, share, and collaborate and it becomes natural for users to build connections and learning communities. As another participant put it, ‘It enabled a bond between students who may otherwise never relate, allowing for avenues of alternate thinking to be explored and new ideas to be shared’. Some of the specific benefits of blog posting identified in these students’ reflections merit closer scrutiny and exploration.

A resource for future professional practice

An unexpected but very welcome feature of the reflective responses to the assignment by some of the pre-service teachers was the links that they made projecting forward to their own use of blog posting as qualified classroom teachers working with students and parents in the future (See Barrs & Horrocks, 2014; Risinger,

2006). As one student put it, 'Posting my own blogs required me to think about strategies I could implement as a practicing teacher to facilitate students to become active and informed citizens.' This was consistent with one of the survey question findings which showed that 24 of the 28 respondents either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement 'I am confident about applying learning from an on-line course to a teaching context'. Some expressed this link to professional practice simply but effectively as a consequence of practice and experience. For example,

'Using Wordpress for the creation of blogs provided me with an authentic learning opportunity allowing a feeling of confidence in my ability to demonstrate blogging to students in the future'.

'I feel like I am walking away from this assessment task with practical and creative ideas that can be applied in the classroom. I can see how collaboration between colleagues can be a hugely successful tool when planning for student learning'.

But others were pleasingly specific in terms of some transferable ideas which they had taken away from the activity:

'Being new to the world of blogging, this experience has been a fabulous learning opportunity. Having preconceived notions of weekly communication with parents of my future class, I see blogging as a viable option. Morris (2013) has blogged to parents of her students for numerous years claiming the online communication format has developed into a fabulous tool with educational benefits. Some of these benefits I have seen through my own blogs and feedback: literacy skills; social skills; ICT skills; and community spirit.'

'Sharing ideas, resources, and opinions through online blogs posts provides a beneficial method for teachers to learn and gain knowledge to improve professional practice. Moreover, reading others' work can assist learning influenced by knowledgeable educators to broaden one's own thinking as observed through Louise Fitzpatrick's education blog site Tales from the Sandpit (Oliver, 2014).'

'After acknowledging the benefits of collaboration in on-line spaces it is important to transfer these ideas to students in a classroom context. Rosen (2010) argues that the vast majority of teenagers have created what critics are calling 'mindless junk' on the World Wide Web. It is the responsibility of us, as teachers, to harness this creative energy and turn it toward meaningful, education-related projects.'

The assignment extended the PSTs thinking about using Information and Communication Technology [ICT] to expand curriculum learning opportunities for students and also enhanced their appreciation of ICT resources that can extend and enrich students' learning and possibly enhance parental engagement (Australian Graduate Teaching Standards 2.6, 3.4, and 7.3, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011). It was encouraging that so many of the PSTs recognised and articulated the relevance and value of the blog posting task for their future professional practice.

Benefits of giving feedback

It has been argued that students who author comments on the blog entries of others experience an enhanced process of knowledge construction through participation in a collective environment of reflective learning (Hall & Davison, 2007). And Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick (2006) noted that providing critical and constructive commentary on the work of peers enables students to develop an improved understanding of criteria which can then possibly be applied to their own contributions. These findings were certainly mirrored in a number of the pre-service teachers' responses to this task. For example:

'Applying a criteria based framework to giving feedback seemed to activate and enhance perspective in my own thinking that I found empowering and useful when modifying and attempting to add value to my own blogs. I had to read, compare and question other people's ideas which challenged my own knowledge. In order to suggest modifications, I needed to ensure that my own understandings were of a higher standard, thus leading to increased learning. I naturally compared the standards of other posts to my own and as Liu, Lin, Chiu and Yuan (2001) propose, this motivated me to make improvements'.

'Throughout the peer review process I found that, as Lundstrom and Baker (2009) identified, I gained more through the process of reviewing than from being reviewed. It caused me to undertake a process of self-evaluation and reflection. It was through these reflections that I clarified and modified my blog postings to include more detail to enable the reader to understand what the lessons were designed to achieve for students.'

Some of the pre-service teachers were explicit about how and why they responded to peers in the way that they did. Most sought to identify both strengths and areas for development, often in the form of the ubiquitous feedback sandwich:

‘I employed Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) feedback structure by balancing positive comments with constructive examples to ensure my peers recognised the value of current drafts and identified the supportive nature of my suggestions. I was fortunate to predominantly receive similarly arranged feedback.’

‘As I preferred comments that provided direct correction I tried to do this for my peers also, as well as providing reflective and praising comments for their work where necessary. I tried to also include how the lesson could be extended further with the involvement of a variety of aspects including place-based learning, which is a topic that links with both education for sustainability and civics and citizenship education.’

The research literature tends to indicate that while socially valuable, affirming blog posts that solely praise and do not offer some criticality or challenge to ideas fails to lead to reflective practice (Chang & Chang, 2014). One student wrote insightfully about the benefit of approaching the drafting of feedback with a critically evaluative mindset superseding a social mindset:

‘While the social aspect of the peer review process is important to initiate reciprocal peer reviews it is important to critically evaluate feedback given and received in a way that does not let social relationships create biases. Utilising a method similar to de Bono’s (1985) ‘Thinking Hats’ could be an approach to help students put them in a critical evaluative mindset rather than a social mindset.’

While praise can build confidence, constructive criticism is more effective for creating opportunities to improve. The best feedback posts offered both components and the pre-service teachers generally recognized this:

‘I found personally ‘cognitive feedback’ or direct correction (Cheng, Liang & Tsai, 2015) was most helpful rather than the reflective or praising comments. These were helpful to know that I was on the right track but didn’t help in the improvement of my writing.’

The activity thus contributed to the process of moving PSTs from novice to expert assessors and offered a grounded and specific opportunity to support the PSTs to improve the quality, consistency, balance and tone of feedback they provided in collaborating with their peers (cf. Boase-Jelinak, Parker & Herrington, 2013 and Grainger & Adie, 2014).

BENEFITS OF RECEIVING FEEDBACK

In terms of receiving feedback from peers, a large number of participants found it a helpful process – ‘The support of other students was extremely valuable to my learning throughout the assessment task process, as you are able to bounce ideas off each other and collaborate’. Several reported examples of feedback which had led to them making changes to their posts in relation to teaching strategies, questioning approaches, or forms of student assessment:

‘After completing my blog postings, I found it helpful to have received feedback from my peers, that gave me an insight into ideas or sections I could change or add, to enhance my blog. I incorporated most changes that were suggested to me by my peers.’

‘Peer feedback enables students to receive advice and edit their draft to a higher standard prior to submission. This was certainly true in my second blog as I received valuable constructive feedback. The feedback enabled me to rework my Indigenous-focused lessons to become more focused upon the school itself and entwining a stronger civics and citizenship aspect. Another suggestion reminded me to include the voice of the Indigenous people themselves, an important consideration that I adjusted with the involvement of a local Elder.’

It was a specificity of responsiveness from peers that was most appreciated by the PSTs:

‘I was able to utilise the feedback I received to make improvements to the content of my blogs by including elements I had not previously considered. Peer feedback provided the insight that the chosen task in my first blog was too advanced and not engaging enough for the year level it was aimed at. My second blog did not create enough empathy for the people the students were researching, and my third blog required the chosen activities to have more depth.’

‘A conclusion was added to the Civics and Citizenship blog, questioning aspects were changed to allow for more open-ended questions to be asked. Added into the Geography post were curriculum connections, assessment activities and introduction activities to assess student’s prior knowledge and thoughts on the topic. Within the History post a reflection activity was added to gather students’ opinions and learning acquired from the activity.’

‘Suggestions were made and applied to improve the level of whole-class discussions within each of my blogs, such as guiding questions that promoted a deeper level of thinking and understanding, I found this a very helpful improvement to my lessons.’

Sometimes posts named-checked and specifically thanked the individuals who had made suggestions that they had picked up. For example,

‘Both x and y commented on my inclusion of the five ‘R’s of Significance, incorporated to demonstrate my understanding of the important criteria needed to ensure that what students are being taught is actually significant (Counsell, 2004). The feedback from v and z in my third blog on historical misconceptions stimulated my thinking about the importance of students’ understanding of stereotypes and acceptance of others.’

Other students referenced the benefits of accessing multiple perspectives and receiving more feedback than from the instructor alone and of being ‘exposed to a different type of thinking’ (cf. Guascha et. al, 2013; Liu & Lee, 2013).

Affective dimensions of blog posting

The blog posting task contributed to the creation of a collegial and social learning environment, characterised by participation and interactivity for both students and tutors. However, some PSTs were honest enough to admit to being worried about critical judgement from peers and consequential reduced self-confidence. In fact the blogging space was an environment where tutors did not report a single example of disrespectful or unprofessional comment or feedback. Nevertheless, several of the PSTs acknowledged the affective dimensions of giving and receiving feedback. Most did so giving due weight to the feelings of others on receiving what might be seen as critical feedback. For example: ‘When writing feedback to my peers I found it challenging to be tactful in the way I gave critical feedback as I did not want to depreciate their effort and ideas’. Others referenced their own feelings:

‘When responding to and receiving feedback from my peers I am quick to gloss over the good points of the evaluation and focus on the negative points that need attention. I think this adds to a negative self-image and I need to be more balanced by acknowledging my success with equal or greater weight to my failings’.

‘I found the opportunity to amend errors and incorporate the advice given by my peers was a daunting experience. The need to perfect my posts seemed greater and although I wanted to include many of the new ideas others had given me, I was hindered by the word count.’

One student made the connection to their future assessment practice with school students: ‘When responding to peer blogs, I was conscious to remember that their submissions were the product of their time, effort and ideas - as I would with my future students’.

Scope for creativity and good writing

Several of the PSTs mentioned a licence to be more creative as another positive element of blog posting – as one of them put it, ‘I was able to be as creative as I wanted through the use of words, images & video clips. I also found the more creative my blogs were the greater detailed feedback I received.’ The PSTs consistently used multimedia features such as embedded images, film clips and hyperlinks to support their ideas. They could experience for themselves the power of visual hooks and representations in supporting high quality learning. One noted that, ‘I found that the blogs provided a valuable format for adding relevant visual and/or media information to help bring the lesson plans to life for myself and my audience.’ Another PST noted that:

‘The blog posts were a fun interactive way to learn the content....Through the feedback I received, I was able to improve my blog posts and lesson ideas by making them far more engaging with the incorporation of online videos and activities suggested to me that I had not thought of.’

The blog posting process thus catered for individual self-expression, creativity and socially driven learning.

It has been argued that the process of blogging creates an awareness for clarity and provides a purpose for engaging writing to be created (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Rettberg, 2009). Gomez Delgado & McDougald (2013) inquired into the role that peer feedback played in the development of coherence in non-fictional blog writing. Their findings suggested that peer feedback in the context of blogging in an English teacher education programme in Columbia could act as a boosting factor in enhancing levels of coherence in text. Whilst few of the participants within this study’s assessment and blogging context explicitly reflected upon how the process might have affected their writing, the comparative brevity of the required text for each

blog (550 words) and the need to convey a range of learning ideas in this defined space placed a premium upon clarity, a sense of purpose, coherence and thoughtful word choices. Blogging disrupts the traditional writer-reader relationship, providing opportunities to make that relationship more interactive and dialogical and the PSTs were aware that they were writing for a more public cyber-audience than their normal assessment tasks. And unsurprisingly it was often the quality of writing that accounted for the highest quality student assignments. In reviewing summative assessment feedback to the seven PST participants who secured an HD mark, various feedback comments picked up on their quality of communication. Posts are described variously as ‘lively’, ‘fluent’, ‘engaging’ ‘rich’, ‘channelling local passion and enthusiasm’, ‘pedagogically sophisticated’, ‘a total pleasure to read’, exemplifying ‘deep exploration of the content matter’ and demonstrating ‘well-referenced reflexivity’ and a ‘skilful, compressed writing style’. All of these comments evidenced the vibrancy of writing deployed in the most effective blog posts.

Elements of high quality humanities and social sciences learning: Channelling the power of place and locality

The blog posting assessment task enabled a drawing in of local passions and expertise from PSTs based in diverse locations. Several outstanding blog posts developed themes and issues which drew upon the Tasmanian context to explore issues drawn from the primary HaSS curriculum. Examples included an integrated Year 5 History/Civics and Citizenship sequence of learning focused upon media debates around the recent sale of the Van Diemen’s Land company to a Chinese dairy company. The unit linked back both to colonial settlement in the far north west of Tasmania and to Chinese involvement in Tasmania past and present. A Geography/Civics and Citizenship unit helped Year 5/6 students consider the ‘Living City’ re-development plans for the north-west city of Devonport. And a Year 5 Burnie housing and streetscape project brought questions around heritage and urban development into interesting focus and had students looking at the local council’s ‘Making Burnie 2030’ and actively participating in contributing a youth voice to the city’s future vision. Another Geography post asked students to compare re-development plans for the iconic Tasmanian tourist destination at Cradle Mountain with comparable projects internationally. And a Year 4 Geography project had students exploring ways to improve a central Tasmanian river and promote awareness of the importance of sustainable waterways. A History post focused upon indigenous history linked to the school grounds of a Southern Tasmanian primary school. There was a nicely structured research activity finding out about the local Aboriginal group and a great commitment by the school to create a bush tucker garden and to display artefacts found on their site. The project planned environmental activities working within – and possibly re-naming - a nearby Lagoon Park. This was both historically valid and undertaken in partnership with local Tasmanian Aboriginal groups and elders. In different ways these PSTs were all planning to bring contemporary events and issues into the classroom and integrate curriculum content in engaging, active and experiential ways. This in itself had the effect of educating peers about historical, geographical and citizenship learning opportunities in diverse Tasmanian locations and a ‘soft’ building of pedagogical content knowledge in an area where PSTs regularly plead that they lack depth of knowledge

Ongoing challenges of blog posting pedagogy

It is not suggested here that blog posting pedagogy represents an unproblematic panacea. There are some research findings which are cautious about the potential of blog posting and alert to ongoing obstacles. Some evaluations of blog posting projects have reported low level or reluctant student participation in reflection (e.g. Kerawalla et. al., 2009). Hall & Davison (2007) found that only 20% of the blog postings they reviewed showed meaningful reflection by students. And other research shows that on occasions learners contribute minimally to their peers’ blogs, due to time constraints (Deng & Yuen, 2011; Halic, Lee, Paulus & Spence, 2010). These issues were sometimes visible within the blog posts within this teacher education unit but represented outlier concerns in the midst of generally high quality and professional responses. An elephant in the room was the tyranny of assessment instrumentalism. Full-time, time poor pre-service teachers might be undertaking four units of study per semester and balancing part or full-time work, academic study, and family commitments and assessment deadlines for their teacher education programmes which tend to come in clumps. This can create a culture of minimalism on the part of some students. Reflective discussion and professional interchange with peers can come to be seen as perhaps helpful and supportive but ultimately not a core priority. Some students acknowledged this quite frankly:

‘The peer review process for this blog task, as with any interactive assessment task, should have allowed for deep conversations on the topics being discussed within each blog post, as well as enhancing the blog before it was to be submitted and marked. However, due to people, myself included, posting their blog posts not long before the submission date, it lost some of this advantage.’

This is akin to ‘coming to class when everyone else has left the room’ (Black, 2005: 9). And some student feedback was mundane or restricted to the surface nuts and bolts of grammar, communication, and infelicitous

phrasing. Whilst this sort of administrative housekeeping had its place, it was evidently not the central point of the feedback exercise. A minority of students remained unimpressed with the feedback which they had received from peers: 'It seems that critical analysis is a skill that some reviewers lack. "Put more pictures in" is not helpful academic feedback, and often, in personal experience, peer feedback processes produce this sort of advice.' Overall, however, this assessment task prompted little shallow feedback.

Other more cautious literature in relation to blog posting rightly raises questions around the role of the instructor. On the one hand the ability to use blogs to generate authentic reflective conversation through peer feedback is difficult without proper facilitation from the unit co-ordinator and other tutors (Hall & Davison, 2007; Kerawalla et. al., 2009). On the other hand, this creates additional workload demand on instructors and may not represent optimal student-centred learning. One option (favoured by econometric university senior leaders keen to encourage tutors to ration their teaching time and commitments) would be complete instructor withdrawal from the formative feedback process. There is a pedagogical case for this - tutor feedback invariably tends to carry greater weight with students but it may make the on-line discussion space less democratic and put off peer responders. There is a grey area around the extent to which students discover the power of connectivism for themselves or are directed towards what this might mean by clear signposting and exemplification.

CONCLUSION

What did blogging add to a teacher education course? In addition to offering a different form of assessment and enhancing PST's engagement in participative and collaborative learning, it proved to be an effective way of promoting high quality practice, thinking and reflection in relation to some of the key issues that the unit sought to emphasise about HaSS education. In both giving and receiving feedback on their HASS planning choices, the PSTs were able to deepen their thinking about the planning, implementation, and detail of their design of historical, geographical, and citizenship learning opportunities for primary students. This experience in turn conveyed some powerful wider professional messages. As one PST summed it up:

'Receiving and providing feedback is a worthwhile process, offering pre-service teachers the opportunity to develop their knowledge of effective teaching pedagogies. Teachers in the classroom also benefit from collaboration with co-teachers, sharing ideas, experience, philosophies and pedagogies (Loughran, 2010).'

Overall, enjoyment and satisfaction were the main feelings communicated in the PST's reflections – with this participant's response being quite typical:

'This assignment was enjoyable for a number of reasons: it allowed us, as pre-service teachers, to exhibit our own ideas and to share these with people who would be able to guide and assist us in turning these ideas into activities and learning opportunities that we could use in real-world classrooms.'

Future iterations of this unit will seek to do even more to encourage a culture of discussion which values the creation of 'a text of talk' for its own sake and sense of involvement in an emerging group of professional practitioners. One way to do this would be to share different anonymised good practice examples of reflective talk and feedback from past cohorts of students.

The PSTs' own reflections on the positive features of blog posting picked up on the value of collaborative learning, the benefits for their own learning of responding to others, and the value of receiving specific feedback on how to improve their work. They also pointed to how they saw blogging as a resource for their future professional practice and as an outlet for creativity and thinking about the affective dimensions of assessment feedback. Blogging as an assessment tool is thus recommended enthusiastically to fellow PST educators, particularly if the practice will bring freshness and variety to a programme. In an article giving voice to student views on blog posting it is appropriate to conclude with an articulate testimonial to the benefits of blog posting through a pre-service teacher's eyes:

'The blog posting and peer feedback process utilised in this assessment provided an invaluable opportunity for personal development, learning and growth. The task of posting my work in a public forum, and then providing my peers with feedback, created opportunities to think critically about my own and other people's work, while also developing my overall knowledge of each topic. Blogging as a form of online journaling for pre-service teachers, is an effective method of connecting a community of like-minded learners to provide each other with encouragement and support'.

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Appendix 1

Assessment Task 1: Three weekly blog postings + participation and reflection on the peer review process

This task requires you to create three 550 word blog entries using Wordpress as the platform for your blog. Around 20% of your mark will reward the quality of your feedback to others and your reflexivity in responding to peer and tutor feedback. There is a specific topic for each of the three blog entries. In each case you are to refer to at least four academic texts or journal articles that have informed your thinking. You should only use a limited number of direct quotations, but they must be referenced correctly and they must not make up more than 10% of the post.

Week 2 (Civics and Citizenship):

There is an argument that civics and citizenship education is not worthy of the name without including an active citizenship, participative, community involvement and/or make a difference dimension. Outline an active citizenship project - for a primary year group of your choice - drawing upon the draft Civics and Citizenship curriculum for Years 3-6 or the Early Years Learning Framework (from ages 3 to 7) which links to a current contemporary issue in your local area. Select an issue where you have a passion and interest, there is a clear curriculum validation, and students can be engaged and enthused.

Your blog post – in addition to its outline of teaching and learning ideas - will need to ensure that you convey a deep and nuanced understanding of the meaning(s) of ‘active citizenship’.

Week 3 (History and Civics and Citizenship education):

Develop a Year 2 or Year 5 History project which explores, investigates and ‘activates’ the significance of some aspect of the past in the present. The concepts of significance, empathy, and perspectives are identified as key historical concepts to address within both year groups. Your blog post challenge is to bring the curriculum language to life through outlining overview plans for a local history project that makes meaningful and exciting connections between History and Civics and Citizenship education. You can assume that you will be able to include a field trip or learning outside the classroom opportunity.

Weeks 4-5 (Geography/Sustainability): Choose ONE example of a Geography/Sustainability theme for ONE year group from ages 4-12 that you would like to develop. Explain how you could assess at least TWO dimensions of students’ Civics and Citizenship knowledge and skills in Geography or Education for Sustainability lessons or learning experiences devoted to exploring this theme. The more engaging, active, interactive, community-oriented, real, and/or participative the better!

In addition to creating these three blog posts you should provide feedback to at least three of your peers and include evidence of this feedback in your final assignment. You should also include 350 words of reflection on how you amended your own blog posts in the light of feedback received and your thoughts upon the value and processes of feeding back to others. This component of the assignment is weighted at 20%.

Your blog posts are assessed within ‘Wordpress’ – so you will need to provide an accurate, working web link on your cover sheet/template. Please look at the assignment rubric carefully.

You are strongly advised to have completed first drafts of your three blog posts at least two weeks before the submission date. This will ensure that you allow yourself enough time and space to provide feedback to peers and to adapt/revise/improve your own blog posts in the light of feedback received.

Appendix 2 – Assignment Rubric

Assessment criteria	HD: 80 – 100	DN: 70 – 79	CR: 60 – 69	PP: 50 – 59	NN: <50
1. Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of content, concepts and skills required to plan and teach History, Geography, and Civics and Citizenship education (20)	Highly detailed and creative planning for student engagement across the three blog posts. Provides an insightful, critical and well-argued framework for curricular and pedagogical decisions.	Thorough and thoughtful planning for student engagement across the three blog posts. Provides a critical and well-organised framework for curricular and pedagogical decisions.	Well-organised, conscientious planning for student engagement across the three blog posts. Provides a coherent framework for curricular and pedagogical decisions. A workable and realistic translation of curriculum documents into classroom learning activities	Some relevant planning for student engagement across the three blog posts. In justifying planning considers some curricular and pedagogical decision-making factors in broadly sensible ways.	Partial and/or basic understanding of the key concepts of the unit. Relatively simple (or uneven) planning for student engagement across the three blog posts. Describes what is planned rather than discussing the reasons for the approaches adopted. The organization of learning lacks coherence.
2. Critically appraises HaSS education pedagogical approaches and curricula, making effective use of the relevant research and professional literature.(20)	Demonstrates excellent use of research and professional literature in appraising HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. Shows a sophisticated understanding of the essence of historical, geographical, and citizenship pedagogical content knowledge ([PCK]. Significant and thoughtful engagement with a wider academic literature.	Demonstrates good use of research and professional literature in appraising HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. Shows a thoughtful understanding of the essence of historical, geographical, and citizenship PCK. Good engagement with a wider academic literature	Demonstrates capable use of research and professional literature in appraising HaSS education pedagogical approaches and curricula. Shows a sound understanding of the essence of historical, geographical, and citizenship PCK. Engages with wider academic literature in appropriate ways	Some attempt to link theory with practice, with inconsistencies in the effectiveness of establishing this dialogue. Some relevant use of research and professional literature in appraising HaSS education pedagogical approaches and curricula. Some evidence of deployment of relevant wider reading.	Limited use of research and professional literature in appraising HaSS education pedagogical approaches and curricula. Limited and/or unpersuasive analysis of curricular and pedagogical planning decisions. Inadequate wider reading.
3. Demonstrates professional reflexivity and creativity/imagination in applying curriculum content to primary classroom contexts (20).	Demonstrates excellent critical and professional reflexivity in applying HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. Sophisticated and rich translation of curriculum documents into classroom	Demonstrates effective critical and professional reflexivity in applying HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. Lively and active translation of curriculum documents into classroom	Demonstrates sound critical and professional reflexivity in applying HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. A workable and realistic translation of curriculum documents into classroom learning	Demonstrates some critical and professional reflexivity in applying HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. The lessons would make some sense in a classroom context and have some solid curricular justification. Some effort to	Only basic critical and professional reflexivity in applying HaSS pedagogical approaches and curricula. The organization of learning lacks coherence. Little awareness is

	learning activities. A rich and persuasive appreciation of the possibilities of active and integrated History, Geography and Citizenship is conveyed.	learning activities. A well-argued sense of the possibilities of active and integrated History, Geography and Citizenship is conveyed.	activities. A professional and grounded sense of the possibilities of active and integrated History, Geography and Citizenship is conveyed in the annotation commentary.	demonstrate incorporation of active and integrated History, Geography and Citizenship – possibly inconsistently realised.	demonstrated of what makes for effective History, Geography or Citizenship learning.
4. Reflection upon working collaboratively with peers and demonstration of adapting planning and thinking in the light of on-line involvement and feedback (20).	Reflects deeply and intelligently upon the process of collaboration and the value of feedback in planning learning sequences. Impressive evidence of sustained involvement within the on-line learning environment responding to the work of peers and of adapting thinking and planning in creative, interesting and exciting ways.	Reflects critically upon the process of collaboration and the value of feedback in planning learning sequences. Good evidence of involvement within the on-line learning environment responding to the work of peers and of adapting thinking and planning in professional and meaningful ways.	Provides quite thoughtful observation and reflection on the process of collaboration and the value of feedback in planning learning sequences. Shows evidence of conscientious and well-informed involvement within the on-line learning environment responding to the work of peers. Responds sensibly and coherently in adapting planning in the light of feedback.	Demonstrates evidence of working with others in sound and sensible ways in planning learning resources. Some appreciation of the value of feedback. Shows some involvement in the on-line learning environment and provides some evidence of adapting planning in the light of feedback.	Shows little or no evidence of having engaged with peer feedback in planning learning sequences. Little or no evidence of participation in the on-line learning environment in terms of providing feedback to peers, or of adapting planning in the light of feedback received from peers.
5. Demonstrates communication skills appropriate for audience and purpose of a blog posting drawing upon an appropriate academic literature. Deploys appropriate academic writing conventions and APA referencing (20)	Highly engaging and precise writing and communication. Impressive capacity to use ICT in a creative and effective manner to add to the appeal and rigour of the posts. Accomplished use of APA referencing conventions and accepted conventions for scholarly writing,	High-level clarity of communication. Uses ICT effectively to add to the appeal and rigour of the posts. Enthusiasm channelled with clear thinking. Accurate use of APA referencing conventions, spelling, grammar and different formats as appropriate for the assignment.	Appropriately structured writing. To be awarded a credit the student must demonstrate through their blog postings a sense of being engaged in the unit. There will be an enthusiastic energy coming through in the writing. Some minor inaccuracies in the use of APA referencing conventions, spelling, grammar.	Appropriately structured writing. Meaning usually but not consistently clear. The blogs are fairly basic – minimal colour, images, links. A few inaccuracies in the use of APA referencing conventions, spelling, grammar.	Does not meet the minimum expected requirements of academic writing or communication in a HaSS context. Little thought, time or energy has gone into the blog postings. Referencing is inconsistent and/or incomplete.