

Learning Bytes: Session 16: Tuesday 01 November 11, 12:15-13:15

The use of Blogs and Wikis in Teaching and Learning

The session was facilitated by:

- Sue Folley, Academic Development Advisor: an introduction to blogs and wikis and the pedagogical benefits of using these tools; whether to choose institutional or external tools.
- Andy Raistrick, Senior Computing Officer – setting up Blogs and wikis in UniLearn

Practical application

- Cheryl Reynolds: Senior Lecturer, School of Education and Professional Development
- Liz Bennett: Course Leader, MSc Multimedia and e-Learning, School of Education and Professional Development
- Cath Ellis: Course Coordinator: School of Music, Humanities, National and University Teaching Fellow

Sue Folley – Computing and Library Services

Blogs

The word 'Blog' is short for weblog and is an online or electronic version of a journal/ diary; entries are displayed in reverse chronological order. A blog can be private, shared with specifically selected people or public – open to all. For use within a teaching and learning context students can be asked to blog individually in groups or by class.

Benefits to students of blogging

Using blogging within a teaching and learning context can allow students to practice their writing in a safe and informal environment. It can give a purpose to writing, and provide a space to explore, develop and refine ideas. It can encourage reflection and learning from others. Students can be encouraged to be creative and personalise their own space. As a tool blogging can be used to encourage engagement and interaction with a wider audience, which can in turn develop reflective and critical thinking skills. It can be seen as the beginning of building a digital identity and raising awareness of the public nature of publishing on the web. A sense of ownership, choice and the enthusiasm for writing can all be fostered.

The benefits to lecturers of getting students to blog

Blogs provide a route for lecturers' to find out how and what their students are learning, to spot if there are problems with understanding and thus provide an opportunity to address issues sooner rather than later. In this way teaching can be improved because of this feedback. As entries are date and time stamped it is possible to follow progress.

Wikis

Wikis are a quick way of publishing collaborative web pages, without the need for HTML programming skills. Wikis keep a record of the revision history and can be either private, shared, or public, and for individuals, groups or classes.

Benefits to students of using wikis

Wikis provide an effective asynchronous tool for enabling students to collaborate on group projects, publish work quickly, share progress and showcase their work. Real-world collaboration skills can be promoted, with the tool pulling together the strength of many. Tasks could include asking groups of students to all contribute to a collective of resources for example a bibliography or Glossary.

The benefits to lecturers of getting students to use wikis

Using wikis with students gets them involved in creating content and working collaboratively. It can encourage them to learn from each other and engage and motivate via giving a sense of inclusion e.g. all contributing to the building of resources. Lecturers are able to monitor the activity of their students, see who is contributing and who isn't.

Institutional versus external resources

The University's VLE: UniLearn has the option of using inbuilt blogs and wikis within either individual modules or external to modules but still within the system. Whether you choose to use this option or an external resource is dependent on the skills and comfort level of you and your students and the stage of learning they are at. Using UniLearn will give you more control, security and privacy and may be more suited to undergraduate first and second years or to small group work. Whereas the use of an external resource may be more appropriate for a Masters or PhD student who wants to engage with a wider community/audience.

External resources

blogs: [Blogger](#), a free weblog and publishing tool from Google, for sharing text, photos and video
[WordPress](#)

Wikis: [Wikispaces](#) and [PBworks](#)

Andy Raistrick – Computing and Library Services

Setting up blogs and wikis in UniLearn

Within the UniLearn module, switch to 'edit' mode, go to 'add interactive tool' and select '**create campus pack blog**' a form will open in which you need to fill out certain fields for example, title, description and select from one blog (for entire module cohort), one blog per group or one blog per person. Choose whether to create a 'grade book entry' which allows the blog to be given a mark once created. Once the form is complete click on 'add'; if you come out of edit mode and go to 'learning resources' – you should see your newly created blog.

There is an identical procedure for setting up a wiki; except that you choose '**create campus pack wiki**'

Templates

It can be off putting to contributors to be faced with a blank page so using a template provides a way of 'scaffolding' to give direction to students in developing their blogs and wikis. Scaffolding can also be outside of the blog or wiki in terms of explaining the purpose of their use, what the learning activities and outcomes are etc.

To create a template you need to talk to your School's Learning Technology Advisor, who will be able to set it up for you and delegate permissions. There are some inbuilt templates within UniLearn and some that have been developed 'in-house' for specific requirements. Once set up templates should be seen as a starting point as they can be edited and changed by contributors.

Cheryl Reynolds – School of Education and Professional Development

Cheryl chose to use an external blog ([WordPress](#)) with the cohort of the MSc Multimedia and eLearning course. An external tool was chosen due to the nature of the course and to encourage students to engage with available tools and techniques. The blog also offered students more options to personalise their spaces. Cheryl set up a 'course' blog that she controlled and that all the students had access to, and this central blog linked to all the individual blogs. Using this central blog Cheryl designs and sets weekly tasks prior to the start of the year, which were set to be released at specific times. The first task students are asked to do is to set up their own individual blogs, they then send the web address to Cheryl who creates a link to each of the students' blogs on the central blog. Cheryl then subscribes to RSS feeds for all the individual blogs, in this way she can keep track of when her students make updates and what she has and hasn't read.

Andy Raistrick is currently studying on the course and fed back that he is really enjoying contributing to a blog as part of an assessment as opposed to writing an essay or report. He is learning how to write in a more accessible way, and it has helped to build a community of practice with his fellow students. He has found it to be a productive experience although somewhat daunting to be publishing to the web where potentially anyone has access.

Cheryl sets up critical friendship groups within the cohort and as a minimum the students are asked to read and comment on the work of those within their group. In terms of assessment Cheryl is looking at the way students present their thoughts using images and multimedia. Wordpress can take a bit of getting used to but there is a site called 'learn.wordpress.com'. From a tutors perspective although there is work to do in setting the blog and affiliated tasks up initially, the materials can be adapted and reused from year to year.

Liz Bennett – School of Education and Professional Development

Liz has also used an external tool, but this time a wiki developed with [PBworks](#), this was initially created as a central place where Liz could collate information for her students on issues relating to e-learning. It was used for collating group work and for getting students to share knowledge and expertise. However Liz found there was a certain amount of work involved in organising the content

and a danger that it could become unwieldy and confusing to the students. It can be a risk to use external systems, as companies may disappear. Liz advises not to use external tools for assessed work. However it does teach students to be aware of real world practice, to keep work backed up in case it is 'lost' through no fault of their own.

Cath Ellis – School of Music, Humanities and Media

Cath has been using blogs within her teaching for around 5 years, these are rolled over each year for subsequent students to add to, so a rich body of information is built up over the years. Cath provides a series of questions for the students to research and post their findings on. It is possible to see the history of posts/versions and revert if necessary. The principle behind the exercise is to encourage the students to understand that there are things they don't know about. Another collaborative exercise via blogging is to produce a glossary of terms, students are asked to add words to the glossary that they come across but don't know and then go and find a good reliable definition. The students appreciate working together on this kind of activity and it is something that can grow quite quickly and be of benefit to all. Cath always explains what is expected of a task prior to the students starting on it and then tends to use some form of table to structure the blog page. There always needs to be a reason for students to engage and contribute to an online activity, it will be beneficial to their learning but may need to be rewarded via some form of assessment to initially get them to engage.

Students do often have some anxiety with this kind of collaborative work which tends to be centred on editing or deleting other students' contributions.

Sue Folley - Computing and Library Services

As an example of how creative and visual it is possible to make wiki content Sue showed examples of the wiki currently being created by the VLE support assistants, placement students who are each working within one of the Schools. This is a resource designed for the support assistants' to share their work and ideas. There is a central page which link to their individual showcase pages.