



An emancipating space: Reflective and collaborative blogging

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This paper discusses the philosophy behind utilizing blogs to engage Postgraduate learners at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) University of New South Wales (UNSW). Digital diaries (Gleaves, Walker & Grey, 2007) were established to enable a reflexive and collaborative space in which students could discuss and reflect on their personal experiences while completing a compulsory arts industry Internship. The virtual learning environment (VLE) through *my eLearning Vista* allowed for a range of asynchronous communication initially in the discussion forum (DF) for these online learners to increase student engagement while completing their internship. The DF did allow students to collaborate and discuss their work practices in the arts industry it however, did not offer students the reflective learning space that a digital blog diary could provide. It will be argued that blogs are effective teaching and learning tool for engaging students proactively in a collaborative learning space in higher education.

Keywords: blogging, blog, online journals, postgraduate coursework, collaborative learning, writing online, online communities, reflective practice, digital learning, collaboration, digital diaries, educational blogging, constructivism, learning tool.

Introduction

'Learning to learn' as well as 'learning to learn online' have become key factors in the pedagogical frameworks in the teaching of disciplinary writing and research in the Master of Art Administration (coursework) at COFA, UNSW. The use of online collaborative learning (OCL) has evolved over the last ten years as learning management systems and VLEs have developed and changed to address the necessity of shortened teaching semesters and cost effectiveness in the teaching and assessing of coursework masters degrees. Time deprived instructors seeking to develop pedagogically rich and effective learning experiences have in recent times seen the value of utilizing VLE and web 2.0 social spaces as they do not place undue stress on the also time deprived Postgraduate student. An important aspect of this elearning landscape is to provide a well-planned OCL environment that supports the formation of an evolving learning community of practice (Levinson, 2006; Bullen, 1998). Powers & Guan (2000) suggested that the future of online learning spaces needed to include an emphasis on improving the outcome of OCL, with prominence being placed on the design of these elearning environments as well as the establishment of clear roles for both the instructor and the student within the virtual learning platform. Weinberger, Ertl, Fischer & Mandl (2005) recommended that emphasis should also have been placed on the importance of support and effective coordination of the collaborative learning process within the elearning environment through the provision of 'scaffolding' of thoughts and ideas. This paper examines the use of blogs for interactive, collaborative reflective practice as an enabler for utilizing social spaces in the web 2.0 environments, specifically analyzing its value for teaching and learning in higher education.

The notion of the digital native and the digital immigrant in higher education was first published in 2001 when Marc Prensky wrote of the digital divide. He discussed how these natives had "spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky, 2001, p.1). Students born into the digital generation were to feel more comfortable, process information at twitch speed and be able to learn using technology rather than the traditional face-to-face (f2f) teaching and learning environment. Prensky's (2001)

argument has been revised (2009) after further investigation into “digital wisdom” (p.1). As these so-called natives have now matured and reached Postgraduate studies they are not as evenly spread throughout the learning community as Prensky described (2001). Prensky (2009) now concurs there is less generational distinction and digital ‘know how’. His original argument did not consider impacts of social, economic or cultural factors in education that affect both the learning and teaching, but also the personal study arrangements and knowledge of digital learners. Nor did he consider the significant spread of chronological age amongst the student cohort. This is especially true in degree programs such as the Master of Art Administration (coursework) where students’ ages range from the early 20s to the mid 60s, with some of the mature age students having had earlier careers working in IT. The students who have been enrolled in the Internship who published their blogs in 2008/9 have displayed a variety of skills and knowledge from the novice to the ‘tech-savvy’ student who is comfortable and secure in Web 2.0 environments having “wisdom enhancement” (Prensky, 2009, p.3) and the language base to understand the technologies capabilities.

Social spaces = learning spaces

A wave of new technology has emerged in the last decade followed by discussions in the literature of its benefits to learning in higher education (Prensky, 2001; Salmon, 2000). Since web 2.0 emerged many educators across the disciplines have incorporated blogs and wikis into their teaching as both learning as well as assessment tool. Crowe and Tonkin (2006) suggested that blogs could be used as both a teaching and learning tool to "enhance student learning in higher education through reflective journals for individual, collaborative learning activities, learning diaries during internships and postgraduate research and forums for debate" (p. 2) and also as an indicator of effective pedagogy. In recent literature there has been a lot of focus on the educational use of blogs (Oravec, 2002; Farmer & Bartlet-Brag, 2005; Luca & McLoughlin, 2005, Sims & Salter, 2006; James, 2007; Song & Chan, 2008). Web logging has its origins in the emergence of Web 2.0 with its interactivity and social capabilities. The blog technology has evolved with each new blog server and the reduction of HTML formatting has made communicating through the user’s space outside a web page much simpler; including templates, video upload and tagging. Blogs as learning spaces for students in higher education have become more popular because of the collaborative and knowledge-sharing nature of the medium. As students self-direct and reflect on their learning they “gain a sense of empowerment and personal identity while learning how to interact with others online” (Oravec, 2002, p. 621). This has enabled Instructors to support elearning through less formal managed spaces such as discussion forums, blogs and wikis. Of these the discussion forum in particular, does not offer the reflective learning space that a blog provides. Davi, Frydenberg and Gulati (2007) suggested also that it is “important for students to become a part of the blogging phenomenon that is increasing in the real world” (p.1). The constructivists argue that this socially interactive approach to learning through self-direction, cooperatives and OCL can have benefits for the learner. Vygotsky’s theory that “cognitive development can be encouraged through stimulating environments and attention to the role of social factors in cognitive growth” (Santrock, 2005, p.130) is supported by the literature on blogs, that discusses the collaborative nature of writing a digital diary. Elearning material has also begun to incorporate the use of blogs, as online learning challenges the formal and structured LMS to further engage students towards becoming both independent and collegial.

Farmer, Yue and Brooks (2008) furthered Ferdig and Trammell’s (2004) suggestion to expand on the theories of Vygotsky and the nature of a blogs promotion of collegiality and interactivity to “usefully explicate the four central pedagogic benefits of blogging for students” (p.124):

1. Assisting students to become subject matter experts through a process of regular scouring, filtering and posting.
2. Increasing student interest and ownership in learning.
3. Giving students legitimate chances to participate and enculturating them into a community of practice.
4. Providing opportunities for diverse perspectives.

The Internship blog journal that this paper discusses has tried to work towards achieving these pedagogical goals which link to the teaching and learning as well as graduate attribute objectives currently being adopted at the UNSW.

Williams and Jacobs (2004) put forward the notion that “it would appear from a review of the literature on the subject and of current practice at universities that blogs and academic discourse are natural allies” (p.249). In the last four years, reviewed articles on the use of blogs in education have become more prevalent particularly as the technology is changing and developing itself into new bigger, better, slicker blogs daily. However, as William and Jacob (2004) concurred, most of the literature is focused on teacher

training and other professions that already utilize the learning tool of reflective journals and diaries. This is still the underlying focus in the literature in the humanities, sciences and medical teaching areas that are beginning to see the benefits through the needs of its students, for the creation of e-communities. The asynchronous discussion that takes place in a blog environment provides the user with a more personal reflective space compared to the more email labeled format of the discussion forum. There is little data in the learning and teaching literature about the benefits of using digital diaries, there is however, consensus into the use of reflective and recount journaling in digital diaries and how “blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 242).

Higher education has been writing of its venture into digital learning for some decades as it attempts to meet the challenges of a broad spectrum of students. The emphasis that has been placed on attracting more Postgraduates students in recent years, has offered a new challenge to Universities in Australia particularly as they work towards meeting the rising costs of education for students with shortened Semesters and tighter assessment turn around. COFA, UNSW has been utilizing blogs since 2005 when the first COFA blog server was established for students and staff use. This collegial and collaborative learning space offers students from multi-disciplines the opportunity to share, virtually exhibit, research and reflect on practice. As Davi, Frydenberg and Gulati (2007) suggested, “the power of a blog comes when others interact with an individual’s posts, creating a forum for discussion and conversation” (NPN). The web has enabled students to further investigate their research, their e-communities and elearning in the blended scholarship of virtual learning environments. The further evolution of interactive learning material, calibrated peer review and social networking tools have enabled learning and teaching to become more dynamic and user focused.

Blog social learning spaces in action: A case study

Some background

Postgraduate coursework students have used elearning management tools for some years in the Master of Art Administration (coursework). Each student cohort since 2002 has used WebCT and currently My elearning Vista alongside social networking tools both inside and outside the UNSW intranet. The Master of Art Administration students all undertake a number of courses that utilise OCL where they are expected to participate in digital courses both in a blended as well as fully online format. By the time these Postgraduate students start the required 240-hour Internship placement in the arts industry at the end of the degree, they have become fairly proficient with this fully supported VLE. A constructivist approach to scaffolding these learners’ needs in an environment where active and rich learning takes place through the effective use of web-based communication has had its benefits. Many of our students are physically distanced from the university community (often students complete their degrees in the USA, Asia or Europe), while others have indicated that their prior knowledge is not utilised in the web based setting (UNSW teaching and learning survey results, 2005-2007). It has been of vital importance to the learning and teaching in the Master of Art Administration courses that students ‘learn to learn’ online through procedural scaffolding. The small classes that were once a characteristic of Australian university study are now a thing of the past. In June 2001 the University of New South Wales adopted technology enabled learning and teaching (TeLT) as one effective way of giving students appropriate individual attention (Niland, 2001). The skills of collaboration and peer review that has been a hallmark of this degree have been enabled and enhanced by the OCL environment in a way that is superior to f2f learning.

Many of these second-generation web enabled learners have been excited to see the integration of their social networking linked into the VLE as well as the self motivating, collegial and scholarly benefits that journaling provided (Refer to: Figure 1).



Figure 1: Master of Art Administration (coursework) blog posting

The use of blogging as a reflective learning tool will be discussed using a case study example of Postgraduate students writing a digital diary. One of the reasons why this technology has been especially fruitful for Art Administration students is that it enables collaboration both in their learning and in their workplace. In the Internship course in the Master of Art Administration a digital diary was chosen as a learning tool as it provided a reflexive piece of learning technology as well as a platform where students could write, journal and share industry experiences without having to navigate too far away from their personal social networking sites such as *myspace* and *facebook*. As an interactive space it provided students with the opportunity to further develop their communicative, reflective and critical thinking skills previously employed in other course components within the degree. Peer review and OCL are key factors of the degree, which require students to complete blended and fully online courses in both writing and research. Arts organizations are chronically under funded and cannot afford the luxury of rigid hierarchical structures as a result the entire degree program has been configured to teach trust, teamwork and open communication (Refer to: Figure 2).



Figure 2: Student Internship blog posting

Participants

All students enrolled in the Master of Art Administration (coursework) complete a workplace learning internship that enables students to gain practical and supervised experience in the field of art administration. These fields include: gallery management in the public, private, commercial and not-for-profit sectors, community and public events management, curatorial practice, education and public programming and art writing. The Internship is completed towards the end of the degree after students had met the requirements of their core subjects in Arts Management, Art Law, Art Writing and Curatorial Practices and Exhibition Management as well as electives. The cohort of students consisted of forty-four Postgraduate students across four teaching semesters from 2008 to 2009. The total sample size represented a mix of local and international students, of this sample group the majority have come straight from undergraduate programs to Postgraduate coursework, aged between early twenties to mid sixties. Of the participant group thirty-three were females and eleven males. The sample (n=10) was randomly selected with every fourth blog journal being selected from the blogger dashboard fixed at the beginning of the teaching sessions to represent a quarter of the cohort. This study was carried out to evaluate how the students through a ten point evaluative system were utilizing weblog journals.

The online learning task

The original assessment for the Internship course involved an Internship supervisor: an industry professional, writing a 500-word report and the student writing a 1,000 word report at the end of the Internship period outlining the activities that were completed and the skills that were obtained. There was previously no interaction or contact between students where they could share internship experiences and learn from each other. Collaborative learning is an important factor of higher education particularly for Postgraduate students who can contribute a wealth of knowledge and understanding to the learning process. Taking these factors into account, in Semester one 2008, it was decided that students could benefit from writing a digital diary where they shared their experiences working in the arts industry in a weblog. For both the local and International student cohort, "blogs are an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to process their interactions" (Windham, 2007, p.6) in the virtual learning space.

The course designers and instructors investigated blog sites before deciding upon *blogger* (<http://www.blogger.com>) for use in the Internship course. *LiveJournal*, *WordPress* (<http://www.livejournal.com> and <http://wordpress.com>) and other open source software does provide web blog spaces where students could personally define their own reflections but also collaborate, discuss and share their Internship experiences. However, *Blogger* was ultimately chosen because of its simplicity as a managed system that enabled students to log in and discover their own and fellow students entire journals in an easy to use 'dashboard' design. There was also no need to develop HTML coding as used in the COFA blog spaces. Vista was still utilized for course information, instructor assistance and general discussion in the DF with the addition of a hyperlink to a sample blog homepage with instructions on how

to set-up a gmail account as well as how to create a digital diary. Democratically decided upon, the blog sites have been kept private, only users and creators read and contribute.

The philosophy behind using digital diaries as a learning activity for promoting student learning was centered around the need to shift from the more traditional 'teaching paradigm' to a more student centered 'learning paradigm' (Reigeluth, 1999) where students took more responsibility and self direction for their learning. It was important from the beginning of the Internship journal that the students were given ownership of the process, so to address this factor students were asked to come up with their own class journal etiquette. These students were divided up into groups in the DF where they were asked to create a list of the group's blog etiquette; the instructor then compiled a master list. The points on this list provide some insight into what aspects of the Internship journal were important to the students. They felt that frequent postings were necessary and that these entries should be anecdotal, they were aware that no racial/religious/gender/lifestyle prejudices or offensive language should be included. The students saw the importance of working collaboratively and offering positive advice, learnt in the online peer review component of the Research paper fully online course. "Confidentiality", they wrote, "was sacrosanct" and that no details should be left on the web "that may come back to haunt you". Respecting other's privacy and intellectual property by not disseminating or copying material was another factor they initially insisted upon. The issue of anonymity was optional "as the use of aliases and avoiding references to people and places could be potentially confusing" and possibly detrimental to people about to embark on a careers in the arts industry. They felt that images were essential, including video of curatorial practice, gallery invites and openings as well as that students should read and comment regularly on other student's blogs. Finally students expressed the need for their peers to 'keep their sense of humor' throughout the whole journaling process as they worked for experience and no reimbursement (Refer to: Figure 3).



Figure 3: Student Internship blog posting

The purpose of the digital diary was to foster collaboration between students as well as between students and academics and to create a supportive collegial TeLT environment. The online journal process provided an environment where students could practice constructively reflecting on ones own as well as peers professional practice in a supportive learning space. It also seemed to be a particularly relevant authentic assessment task for students to undertake who were training to enter the arts industry where writing, critiquing and reflection were prevalent critical thinking skills that needed fostering. According to James (2007), the idea of integrating a reflective learning journal with a blog as an assessment task could be a useful tool for promoting "active engagement and personal investment" (p.4) in the learning process. It also provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate their ability to use appropriate and self and peer established online etiquette as previously mentioned and ethical practice as well as share concerns, goals, interests and enthusiasm for the arts industry. Many of the students were able to forge open, supportive and ongoing communication links between their peers while on Internship. Collins, Harkins and Nind (2002) confer, "good learning is collaborative both because of the centrality of communication for learning and because thinking is, itself, a social practice" (p.110). This collaborative learning and teaching tool gave students a 'sense of community' in a digital learning space where they could freely share information, contacts and career opportunities that would have been very difficult to maintain with the DF. The process of writing provided an avenue for practicing the skill of developing one's thoughts, ideas and knowledge of the arts industry whilst reflecting on their learning and "hon[ing] their ability to make accurate and critical judgments on the quality of their ideas in general" (Gleaves, Walker, Grey, 2007, p. 632). By creating a blog, students were able to further improve their reflective writing, as well as video, photography and graphic design skills, all useful attributes worth developing for their future careers in the arts industry. Many of the students who completed their Internship in Session one 2008, were first time bloggers, however, the majority of blogs were professionally presented and visually interactive and engaging. The usage and visual presentation of the current cohort blogs also raises an interesting point, these blog journals have developed and evolved as the use of blogs in society has changed and grown. In 2007 www.masternewmedia.org posted its report into blogs and their usage, they found that the "blogosphere is now 70 million weblogs wide; about 120,000 new weblogs are created each day; 1.5 million posts per day; 1.4 new blogs are created every second and 17 posts are made every second".

Student's Internship journaling and asynchronous communication provided them with the opportunity to

value and learn from shared experiences, knowledge and understandings in a supportive online environment (Refer to Figure 4).

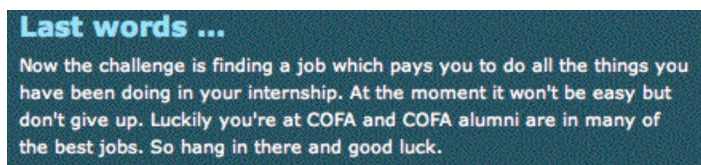


Figure 4: Extract from a blog posting

With this goal in mind, it was important to move beyond the LMS DF and onto a collaborative communication tool such as a blog. As Wise (2005) put forward “when the primary purpose is to collate a series of thoughtful opinion pieces with the option for comment on each of them, blogging software rather than forum software would be the infrastructure of choice” (p.3). The blog posts allow the author to manage their reflective pieces in reverse chronological order with the last post read first in the list or as the student wishes unlike the DF where student threads can become unmanageable. Each student in the cohort was encouraged to comment on twelve blog posts per session as a requirement of the course. It has been mentioned in the literature that many lecturers assign grades to comments made (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Davi, Frydenberg & Gulati, 2007; Song & Chan, 2008; Farmer, Yue & Brooks 2008) it was however, more relevant in this instance to be reflectively writing and contributing photographs and videos of the internships for the overall grade rather than the instructor posting comments on each students blog posts. The blog journal learning activity aimed to foster in students through industry placements and digital journaling, a practical application of theoretical knowledge as well as to provide students with the opportunity to engage in independent, collaborative and reflective learning. It was also envisaged that this blog would encourage shared and individual creative problem solving while improving students information literacy. The skill to locate, evaluate and use relevant information was also an important aspect of the journal as was developing student’s capacity for enterprise, initiative and creativity.

Procedure

Evaluative data was gathered at the completion of the teaching semester from a sample (n=10) from the cohort (n=44) over the last four teaching semesters. Participant blog journals were randomly selected from a cross section of blog users from the first to fourth teaching sessions. Every fourth blog was selected from the blogger dashboard determined at the start of the semester when the blogs are created and contributor permissions are made. Students were asked to make weekly or fortnightly entries and comments on peer’s blogs as they worked in the Arts industry placements. They were asked to write and reflect upon their workplaces: the role of the arts organization and describe their position and role and any learning that took place during their Internships. All students were given the same introduction and information in WebCt Vista. The Internship course begins with a f2f meeting of the student cohort to discuss the use of the digital diary, WebCt Vista and the role of the DF in setting up the blog, blog rules and devising the blog etiquette. This small yet diversified sample groups digital diary blogs were analyzed (Refer to Figure 6) using a ten point evaluative system devised by the researchers, which included identifying students ability to:

1. *Reflect on the process*: Evaluated for use of reflective language in relation to experiences and learning.
2. *Describe their workload (Internship)*: Discussed their workloads and hours worked.
3. *Describe their position (Internship) and what it entails*: This included discussion about the various roles and responsibilities they undertook in the sector.
4. *Post about personal/social life*: Mentioned outside activities from academic studies and Internship placement activities.
5. *Post apprehensively*: Described apprehension involved in the creation or entry of posts.
6. *Comment on their understanding/learning from the course (M. Art Admin)*: Indicated in posts issues arising from course subjects, learning process and relevance of the degree program to the industry based learning Internship.
7. *Write posts that were socially supportive*: Used social communication and writing style that indicate that they wanted to work as a social group.
8. *Post collaboratively*: Demonstrated knowledge of the contributor/reader presence in the writing style, suggesting an understanding of the collaborative process.

9. *Supplement posts with video/photography*: Linked their video and/or photographs to their diary entries, including curatorial practice evidence; hanging, presentation, exhibition spaces; invitations, graphic designs.
10. *Number of posts over the Semester*: The number of posts were analyzed for minimum requirements: at least 1 mention of Internship in each post.

A key was utilized to measure posts with each number representing the following: 1. Never; 2. Rarely; 3. Sometimes; 4. Usually; 5. Always.

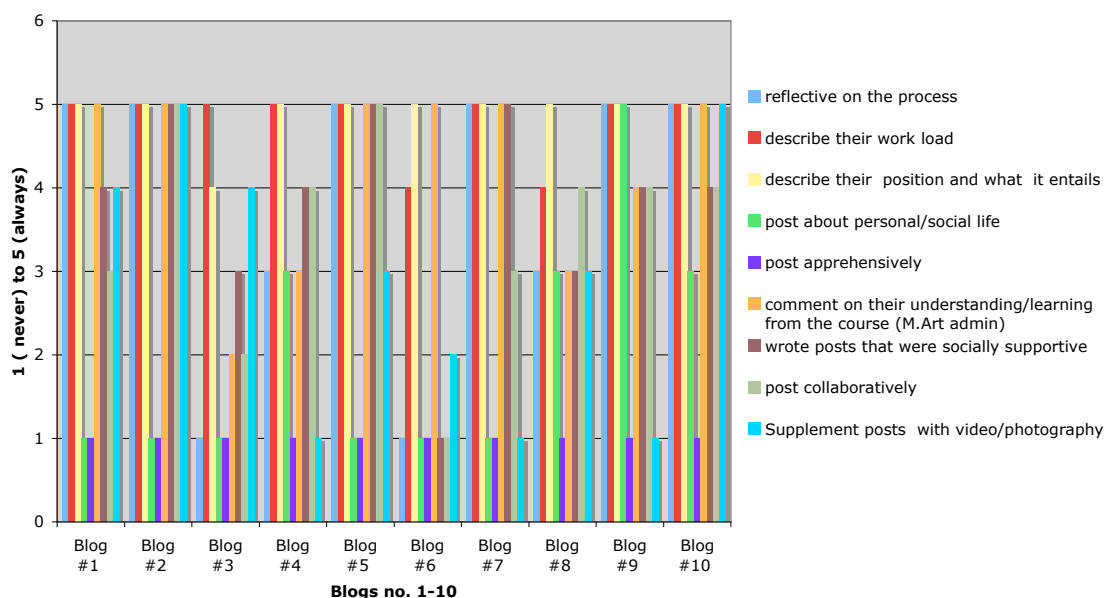


Figure 6: Blog analysis

Note: no. of posts have been removed from the graph (reported above)

Data analysis

The evaluation of Internship diaries has been ongoing since its implementation in March 2008. The data collection methods has included:

- Online observation and reflective accounts maintained by the authors
- Analysis of online discussions in WebCT Vista DF

Given that this content analysis is the first of its kind, the preliminary evaluations from the ten point evaluation has been most encouraging. Of the forty-four students that accessed blogger, the number of posts (averaging between 5 and 17) it is important to note, did not necessarily mean more reflective or collaborative writing as conferred by Song & Chan (2008). The requirement of 12 posts over the 240 hour Internship requirement which could be between 1 to 5 days a week varied from 5 to 17 posts in the sample, with entries ranging from a paragraph (4-6 lines) to a web page length each week. In the sample (n=10) none of the students discussed being apprehensive or tentative about posting. Of the student participants 60% of the sample used language to discuss reflectively about their internship and the use of a digital journal. The majority of the participants (80% of the sample) reflected on their workload and described the nature of the position and the duties they performed daily. Only a minority used their blog diaries to discuss their life outside of academia and their Internship placement (30% of the sample). Just over half of the participants (60% of the sample) commented on how their industry placement had supplemented their coursework degree. Only 20% of the sample frequently used photographs and video to supplement their posts. The majority of the student participants (90% of the sample) described their Internship position and their roles and responsibilities.

Discussion

By expressing Internship experiences through their blog journals, students have had the opportunity to demonstrate appreciation and show a respect for diversity, ethical practice and social responsibility. All these skills, knowledge and understandings reflect some of the UNSW 'Graduate attributes' that were

established in 2003. So far each Internship blog has fulfilled its pedagogical goal. Given the conditions that the M.Art Admin. (coursework) students are under, balancing academic study with life: the number of posts: considering the blog posts themselves were not assessable: were reflective, interactive and well written pieces about life as an intern in the arts industry. Motivation itself then is based on the students personal enthusiasm to cooperate and communicate reflectively with their peers. Using Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) model of the 5-stage Blogging Process, the blog journals can be seen to follow the steps outlined:

1. Establishment: as students create and develop their blog space, following the guidelines in the DF they discuss the process of blog creation, the ease in which they set up the blog, the reason for naming the blog a certain title or by introducing themselves to the group. There was awareness from the outset that each member, contributor of the blog is the audience, including the authors. In the sample, none of the students write of any apprehension or tentativeness in posting in a journal style environment.
2. Introspection: students were from the initial f2f meeting asked to record the events and roles and responsibilities of their Internships to their peers to introduce their position and what it entailed. The initial discussion is based on the different workloads of their positions in the Arts industry, the routine and hours worked while introspectively relating their emotions and feelings towards undertaking an Internship in a Postgraduate coursework degree.
3. Reflective Monologues: as the Internship along with the blog develops the posts become more reflective in nature. The language changes and "the writing appears to be for themselves, thus the naming of this stage as reflective monologue" (Bartlett-Bragg's, 2003, NPN). Students begin here in the process to post about their Internships, such as curatorial processes, the educational programs or the hanging and installation of artworks. This is in contrast to the initial introspection as they write about their feelings towards the course or choice of web-log software chosen as they find a voice. Some students also begin to posts about their personal and social lives, mentioning outside activities such as weddings and births, posting photographs and asynchronously socially supporting each other. As Bartlett-Bragg (2003) has suggested, they "start to become consciously aware of the full range of reflective process" (NPN), using social language in their communication.
4. Reflective Dialogue: as students develop their voice and knowledge of the audience they begin to "construct a type of learning conversation or dialogue" (Bartlett-Bragg's, 2003, NPN) with their prior learning. As self-directed students in industry based learning, the Internship is situated in the degree as a culminating learning experience; the blog offers a space to reflect on the learning process and relevance of the degree program to the Internship. These posts are critically reflective writing, journaling the knowledge gained.
5. Knowledge Artifact: as the course and the Internship come to completion the students become more aware of the audience and the sharing of knowledge. More comments are posted on the students writing and sharing of resources is evident from posts about artists and curators to "intentionally providing their experience and opinions as an opportunity for others to learn, so creating knowledge artefacts" (Bartlett-Bragg's, 2003, NPN).

Conclusion

The use of blogs in the Internship course will continue to be utilized in the future as each new cohort, new skills, new needs and new issues arise, it will be interesting to examine how the student's blogs change to address these challenges. Each blog has continued to remain private to the public outside of the author granted permissions for the group, instructor and teacher assistant. In the future the authors agree that blogs will have to keep up with the changes in blog share spaces and changes in the VLE. The contributors and readers of the blogs could have included the Professionals in the arts industry as writers within student's blog. It was decided that this could impact upon the reflexive, reflective and critical responses from students about their experiences and for the immediate future will not be offered until further research in the learning potential is critiqued. The potential of the blog in the future in this degree program and at COFA is exciting in itself as COFA looks to modernize its existing service and the University seeks to improve and change its VLE. The authors will also further research how students will respond to blogs as they recognize the potential of the blog space as a learning, teaching and research tool for assisting students in their collaborative reflection on their arts industry placement. The blog journals provided an opportunity for these students to write reflective 'train of thought process' journals about their internship experiences in a supportive peer environment. Making the vital link between classroom theory and real world practice is an important objective that final year courses in higher education should try to achieve.

The feedback the instructor received from students after completing their blog journaling task (2008 & 2009 Internships) was mostly positive. Students particularly commented that they found the process of reflecting on their work experiences worthwhile. As one student testified: “With this blog I have always just thought of it as a train of thought process and not over worked any of my posts with the organizations blog there is a lot more agonizing over what to write” (Student Internship blog journal extract, 2008). The students expressed their appreciation of having the opportunity to share their ‘real world’ experiences with their peers in a supportive non-judgmental learning space that was not assessment driven. Students also commented that they enjoyed the journaling process especially as it provided them with an author designed creative space to express their personal experiences and thoughts in. One student wrote in their online journal: “I am not that into blogs myself I have to say that it was a very interesting experience in changing the way I construct my writing from both a physical and language perspective” (Student Internship blog journal extract, 2008). As can be seen by just a sample of the student’s comments, the less-instructor driven nature of the blog space provided students with a chance to freely write their thoughts without the usual constraints imposed on them from writing academic assignments or writing in their arts industry internships.

Students in this fully online core course have been challenged and engaged as the Internship blog journal component of the course has evolved and developed into a more user centered approach that caters to the new twelve-week session at UNSW. Creating a new (e)learning experience for the Postgraduate coursework student had its limitations, the blog has however, opened a door to the students with a love of writing to develop a space to share knowledge, experience and co-produce a journal with peers. “Educational blogs employ technology to offer practice, thoughtful feedback and revisions based on feedback” (Drexler, Dawson & Ferdig, 2006, p.140) considered vital steps in the process of journal writing. Postgraduate students completing the degree have utilized social networking tools to move outside of the VLE and structured DF into a self governed and individually managed blog space. Here they have gained a sense of ownership of the learning space and become both collaborative as well as self-directed in their learning, important objectives to fulfill in higher education.

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Please cite as: Rourke, A.J. & Coleman, K.S. (2009). An emancipating space: Reflective and collaborative blogging. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*.
<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/auckland09/procs/rourke.pdf>

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