



Expanding to fit the (blog)space: Enhancing social work education through online technologies

Susan Young

Social Work and Social Policy
The University of Western Australia

Leitha Delves

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Multimedia Centre
The University of Western Australia

Social Work education has for some time laboured under the tag of being somewhat behind the times in relation to the use of elearning, and at the University of Western Australia (UWA) this idea rings true. One reason for this is that pedagogies within Social Work tend to hold true to the people-oriented nature of the discipline, and it has been difficult to see how technology can replicate this aspect of the field. Nevertheless, the problem exists that Social Work students are very often lacking in some of the digital literacies that are increasingly becoming important in the workplace, and as in other discipline areas, it is incumbent upon educators in this area to provide their students with opportunities to develop such competencies. The challenge, then, was two-fold: find a way to introduce technologies that are of relevance to the discipline, *and* overcome the resistance Social Work students show toward such technologies in general. Blogging was trialled in an upper level Social Work unit at UWA which focussed on the development of communities and community practice and, despite uniformly negative feedback from the students on the perceived “difficulty” of the technology, the blog entries and comments themselves showed clear evidence of the students having developed as a community of learners. This paper describes the degree to which the students used the blogspace as it was intended - as a common, owned space for expressing, reflecting, sharing, collaborating and supporting – and shows the depth to which an online communication tool can have relevance to Social Work education *beyond* the attainment of generic skills.

Keywords: Blogging, Social Work, community practice, social learning, digital literacy

Introduction

The place of blogging in education

Of the many social networking trends and technologies that have made their way into education, blogging has been quite speedily adopted and has become a commonly used tool in the processes of both research and teaching and learning practices. Evaluations of, and research into, the effectiveness of using blogs, particularly in a tertiary education context, have been quite extensive and relatively unanimous in terms of general findings. Many researchers have pointed out that so-called “transmissive pedagogies” seem to have become the primary feature, and primary failing, of online learning, particularly with the widespread utilisation of what are now considered traditional Online Learning Environments (OLEs) such as WebCT, Blackboard, etc. (Farmer, 2006; Burgess, 2006; Farmer, et al, 2008).

In discussing the use of blogs in education, both James Farmer (2006) and Jean Burgess (2006), for example, have stressed the need to “reconceptualise online learning,” that is, to move away from the trends of simply delivering content through OLEs, or having learners produce static pieces of digital media. For both authors blogging is seen as one part of a solution for both of these problems. For example, Farmer sees the blog as providing a re-centring of knowledge communication within the *learner*, de-emphasising the learning *environment*, and similarly Burgess sees the blog as a means of contributing to the “reconceptualisation of students as critical, collaborative, creative participants in the social construction of knowledge.”

New literacies

Blogging has become as much an important part of the digital literacy of academics and other tertiary educators as it has of the literacy of digital age learners. The term “literacy,” or “literacies,” has itself been heavily worked over as off-shoot terms such as “networked literacy,” “digital literacy,” and “new literacies” come to the fore. Warlick (2007) points out that blogging has a very distinct relationship with literacy, since it requires a reiterative process of reading, thinking, re-reading, commenting, evaluating, reading more, and so on. Collectively these activities, brought together within the learning task of blogging, become the new literacy, or learning literacy, of Prensky’s (2001) “digital natives.” Warlick also contends that the teaching of literacy in a traditional sense can become more beneficial to these learners if it is re-defined to include other contextual aspects such as “networked” literacy and the information overload that characterises the online landscape within which digital age learners come into contact with the world. Burgess (2006) seems to support this view, stating that blogs provide the means and the opportunity for the learner to develop literacies that are appropriate to the “networked, technologised” environments they encounter in various social contexts – school, work, community etc.

As a central component of these newly emerged literacies Burgess stresses the development of generic competencies as an inherent benefit of using blogs in education, and as a strong rationale for their introduction to courses. She characterises these competencies as critical technological literacy, creative literacy, and the previously mentioned network literacy. The first of these, critical literacy, she describes as the strong development of an informed understanding of online technologies and the social contexts that define them. Creative literacy is the competence, and confidence, to play with technology for the purpose of producing content that is appropriate to the online environment that houses it, and serves its social goals. Network literacy, arguably the most vital to learning literacy, is the ability to manipulate multiple technologies for the communication, collaborative construction, and sharing of knowledge.

Social learning

A key point evident in Burgess’ definition of network literacy is the social practice that both characterises and directs the learning process. These social practices are particularly evident in blogging activities which educators typically define as learning through conversation (Warlick, 2007; Farmer, 2006; Burgess, 2006; Farmer, et al, 2008; Fessakis, et al, 2008). In a tertiary context, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, learners have traditionally expressed their knowledge in the essentially private context of submission of written work to a lecturer/tutor. As such, conversation in this context is brief, non-reflective, and typically, on the tutor’s side, consists in large part of a small amount of summative feedback.

The conversation conducted within a blog brings the learner into a new social realm, that is, a community of learning, and of learners. This community clusters learners together and brings them into a vastly expanded learning experience with elements of social participation that engages them in a conversation about their growing knowledge. Farmer, et al (2008) point out that as part of this “reconceptualising” of online learning we must acknowledge the limitations of other communication tools in comparison with blogs. Email, for example, offers very little in the way of management of knowledge, while wikis, although collaborative in nature, cannot generally be said to engage learners in a “conversation” around learning. Likewise Burgess (2006) highlights the conversational aspect of blogging in the communal, or networked context, with the emphasis on commenting, linking to external resources or even classmates’ work, discussion of each other’s work, and the integration of experience gained in other learning communities. Downes (2004) quotes Will Richardson, of *Weblogg-Ed*, as saying that blogging “offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a lifetime, and c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking”, thus encapsulating the cyclic process that many educators now accept as being central to the pedagogy of blog use. In fact we might even extend this further to say that the student blog is a *dialogic* work, in Bakhtin’s sense of the term, within which a conversation is sustained within this environment with other “works” and “authors.”

With its capacity for the facilitation of higher order thinking and learner reflection, blogging as an educative practice seems to have been firmly placed within the realm of social constructivism.

Social constructivists Vygotsky, Ferdig and Trammell are often quoted for their 2004 proposal of four main pedagogical features of blogging (Farmer, et al, 2008):

1. Development of knowledge through reading, analysing and posting;

2. Willing ownership of learning;
3. Enculturation into a community of practice
4. Opportunities for the exploration and expression of diverse perspectives.

This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1986) earlier stressing of the crucial role social interactions play in the accumulation of knowledge. The key then, is active participation in social activities while learning (Fessakis, et al, 2008; Burgess, 2006), and educational blogging, it is argued, not only fosters this active participation, but also feeds into the "social connectedness through technology" with which digital age learners are already familiar (Quinn, 2007).

Digital identity

A key element in any social interaction is projection of self and this can best be seen at work, in an educational context, in the face-to-face tutorial where interactions are immediate and received according to the elements of self that are expressed via various physical and verbal means. This is also where, for some learners, projection of self can be severely limited, or hindered, due to shyness, lack of confidence, or intimidation by stronger, more outspoken communicators. To a small degree discussion boards, being the primary means of communication in many traditional OLEs, have offered more introverted learners a safer environment within which to communicate their learning, but with limited capacity for development of an "effective social presence" (Farmer, 2006). This is largely due to the uncertainty associated with discussion boards as to whether posts will elicit a response, or even be read.

The greatest difference between a discussion board and a blog is arguably the extent to which an individual learner (or even a group of learners) can take ownership of not only the conversation they are conducting, but also the space within which it is being conducted. This ownership typically takes the form of creative manipulation of the online environment to personalise the learning space, and establish an individual (or group) social presence. Where discussion boards allow little more than the expression of ideas through basic text entries, the blog space allows manipulation of its physical appearance to suit the tastes of the user, as well as the inclusion of interactive rich media elements such as hyperlinks, images, sound files, videos and animations (Burgess, 2006). The discussion board is static and generic, while the blog space is dynamic and personal. Thus the blog offers the learner much greater control of their means and mode of expression, and therefore greater opportunity, and motivation, for projection of self.

By means of these combined elements of personalised space, projection of self, dialogic expression, and of course an unlimited pool of potential participants in an open, online, conversation, the learner constructs an undeniable social presence - a digital identity (Farmer, 2006).

The notion of the digital age learner, has had a huge impact on the field of research into Education and has gained particular currency at a tertiary level where it is often claimed that educators are not paying enough attention to the learning styles of this new breed of student. As Bennett (2008) represents it, one of the main claims made about digital natives is that they are "active experiential learners dependent on... communications technologies for accessing information and interacting with others," and that they are more proficient in their use of technology than their teachers. The most salient point for educators, therefore, is the argument that they have different learning preferences from previous generations of learners.

The Social Work context

There are several reasons why Social Work teaching at UWA has been slow to embrace elearning in general and more specifically a blog, despite there being several examples of its effective use to teach practice issues such as child welfare (Ballantyne and Knowles 2007) and advocacy (Fitzgerald and McNutt 1999; McNutt 2001); about controversial issues (Cooper 2001); subjects such as Social Work history (Faux and Hughes 2000); and general course materials (Cauble and Thurston 2000). Some of the concerns for Social Work learning through web-based technologies ably identified by Waldman and Rafferty (Waldman and Rafferty 2008) have also been concerns for Social Work at UWA, such as equity, hardware issues and lack of teaching staff expertise and confidence. As they note, Social Work has been the 'tortoise' versus the technology 'hare' in its recognition of the value of elearning. But perhaps more significantly, Social Work remains a 'people' practice and pedagogies tend to try to replicate as far as possible the experiences of working directly with people rather than interfacing with technology.

Social Work students expect to be working directly with people who ask for or need their assistance to address the issues they face in leading productive and satisfactory lives. They will also be working

directly with other professionals to provide necessary services and within organisations where there is a high degree of interpersonal interaction. They therefore expect teaching and learning to focus more on the interpersonal and do not consider technology to have a major place in their tuition.

The teaching and learning environment for Social Work has traditionally been the face-to-face, small group interaction in which interpersonal skills are learned and practiced. There is a great emphasis on being able to critically reflect on presenting issues and contributing environmental factors and one's own responses, to the extent that Social Work education is arguably at the forefront of producing graduates with higher order cognitive skills. This alone would make it a suitable candidate for elearning where these skills are emphasised. However, technology to enhance learning has, in the main, consisted of video to record role-plays of interviews and other activities to be used for reviewing and reflection to develop skills.

Not only does Social Work teaching require a high level of educator involvement, it also requires a high degree of student involvement with the educators and their peers. Often it is interaction with peers in a collaborative setting that contributes to better learning. Social Work students differ little from other students in having family and other caring responsibilities, as well as the need to financially support themselves, but their ability to avail themselves of fully flexible learning at this University is circumscribed by a curriculum which values the learning of Social Work skills through interpersonal and collaborative work. This means, that in many cases, they must physically attend classes.

Nevertheless, it is also true that increasingly a great part of Social Work involves interaction with technology in the form of gaining and receiving information, or recording and disseminating information such as client details. This often takes student Social Workers by surprise, especially when they go on their first field placement and find themselves required to use possibly unfamiliar computer programmes quite extensively - far more than they engage with clients.

Despite Social Work's continuing desire to be recognised as a scientifically based profession it still relies on a constructivist theoretical framework to guide its practice and, by extension, its teaching. Consequently individuals make meaning of their experiences and situations and encourage clients to make meaning of their own circumstances to determine how to address them productively: so too in the preparation of new professionals meaning-making is a central activity using reflection and collaboration where students are both learners and teachers, contributing to others' learning. Pedagogical strategies to support such learning typically rely on critically reflective activities, such as journaling, and group projects requiring a collaborative effort.

The reluctance of Social Work education in the main to actively engage with web-based educational mechanisms also rests on the experience of its educators, who, for the most part, have learned their Social Work skills in a world in which technology had a minor role in the interactions between people. They are now having to learn new skills, however, with the exception of those educators who contributed to the special edition of Social Work Education in 2008 and a few others, this tends not to extend to actively embracing what appears to the outsider to be a never ending and rapidly changing technological environment. Social Work educators still engage the students face to face and assist them to learn interpersonal skills without the assistance of technology. Added to this is the paucity of Learning Objects suitable to digital teaching. Creativity in the classroom is impeded by the lack of resources and the time to develop materials.

Finally, there exists a real philosophical challenge to Social Work in on-line tuition which encourages the creation of digital identities (Farmer, 2006). Social Work practice rests primarily on authenticity, which a creation of an on-line identity may compromise unless this forms part of the teaching and exploration with students as to how to maintain an authentic identity in the digital space created by the student.

In order to engage with the digital era, which will increasingly be the norm for Social Work students, not only must the educators be willing to be digital learners, but they must also re-conceptualise the learning environment where students both form communities of learning and take charge of their own learning in a more facilitative process than in face to face classrooms. 'Electronic pedagogy' (Palloff and Pratt 2000) requires this re-formulation.

The experience of using the blog in the Community Work unit in 2009 showed that there was indeed the creation of a communicative, collaborative digital space, of which the students took ownership, and shared their knowledge and experiences. The detailed postings and on-line interaction demonstrated this quite clearly. This was an objective of the course for community work students, but for it to be achieved on-line was a bonus, especially as the feedback throughout and at the end of the semester suggested

resistance to the use of the blog. However, given the perceptions of the students, it is clear that attention needs to be paid to helping students recognise their progress and acquisition of these attributes throughout.

As mentioned previously, Social Work tuition focuses on developing reflective practitioners which is mainly addressed through the production of individual reflective journals, although some small group activities allow for reflective feedback and comment from the students to others. One of the blog requirements was for students to comment individually on others' work which was challenging in firstly having to publicly make their positions available for all to see and to provide critical feedback publicly. Without exception the 2009 class rose to this challenge with care and consideration as well as being able to provide sometimes confronting insights into beliefs or suggested strategies.

The Social Work elearning experience

As can be seen from the literature, these arguments for making teaching and learning practices more relevant to the skills and learning styles of digital age learners are especially prevalent in the consideration of blogging as an educational tool. For the authors of this paper this prompted the question: How does this fit with the teaching of Social Work at UWA? While elearning is becoming more commonplace in Social Work courses (Ellis, Goodyear et al. 2006; Quinney, Hutchings et al. 2008; Rosenthal Gelman and Tosone 2008; Zeman and Swanke 2008), Maidment's (2005) finding that Social Work teaching tends to rely more on non-web-based technologies remains the norm. This is so at UWA where the general perception is that Social Work students tend to be less skilled with computers than students in other disciplines. Feedback from library staff, for example, notes the poor ability of Social Work students to use the library catalogues and databases effectively despite repeated classes and the mandated library skills units. Comments in Social Work classes about the use of web-based technologies are almost unanimously negative. There may be many reasons for this, but anecdotally students state their discomfort and lack of confidence with the technologies.

With the question of "good fit" between elearning and student preference in mind, the argument for making the teaching practices more closely aligned with the learning preferences of the students is largely redundant if the students typically seem not to be "digital natives," despite being, for the most part, in the age group identified by Prensky. The greater argument, therefore, is that these non-natives need assistance with the development of the new literacies identified above, as well as needing to be provided with opportunities for social learning experiences, so that they may be better prepared for the workplace beyond university, where these literacies and experiences have become vital. From a new literacies point of view then, it was hoped that using a blog in an upper level Social Work unit would foster the development of skills qualitatively different to what a Social Work degree at UWA typically provides in the traditional face to face context, particularly the development of meta-cognitive skills in higher order thinking. From a social learning point of view it was hoped that the blogging activity would lead the students to experience the implications of public ownership of, and responsibility for, the provision of feedback on another person's or group's work. An equally important element was the fact that community development is a key aspect of Social Work, and so blogging would allow the students to engage in community development in a technological sphere.

Community practice: A case study

Community Work teaching is one of the core areas for Social Work learning, taught often through interactive workshops with elements of simulated practice. Recently at UWA this teaching has incorporated practice learning from actual rather than simulated situations with student groups undertaking activities off campus. As another intensive educator-involved activity that requires a high level of student interaction with each other, this mode of teaching demands a great deal from students in time, collaboration and self-directed learning. The discipline of Social Work's first experience of elearning was the use of on-line resources to assist in this process, both to allow students to engage in the necessary collaborative interactions and to permit lecturer-student communication without students having to come onto campus for face-to-face group meetings or consultation with the lecturer. It was not intended initially to take the place of face-to-face interaction entirely, remaining mindful of the essence of community practice which, for many community work practitioners, is in the formation of relationships and the public work carried out together in a place.

One of the important aspects of learning in this unit is to learn from each other about different projects, which was only possible by devoting lecture time for all groups to tell each other what they were doing. While this was useful, students tended to treat it as a formal presentation, spending a great deal of time in

preparation and wishing to be assessed on their work. This rather overtook the simple aim which was to learn from and teach others. Consequently, in following years students were asked to post to a blog on what they were doing, which resources they had found useful, to ask questions, and generally to engage with groups outside of their own. This too needed to form part of an assessed piece of work and encourage the use of the blog to communicate with each other. Hence the use of the blog developed into a more structured and more extensive set of activities, albeit replicating as far as possible the pedagogical strategies used in the classroom. The blog exercise now requires the students to post collaboratively as a group to a blog set up specifically for their group, and to post individually to a central Unit blog. In this case study, there were nine group blogs and one Unit blog.

The group blogs (one for each student group) were given a name and a structure of the group's own choosing, and allowed each group to present and reflect on their work, engage with the work of other groups, and to reflect on their own learning as a result of these engagements. The individual posts to the Unit blog required that each student give an evaluation of the project and work of one other group.

The following transcript of one of the individual posts gives an idea of the level of engagement with the blogs. (Transcribed unedited except name deletion)

Posted by <name deleted> at 21:40 on Thursday, 07 May 2009.

Hello,

Wow, you guys are amazing!! It's a Great topic and you have certainly done your research. I have enjoyed reading through your findings. I can see that you have spent a great deal of time connecting to the community. I like that you have included both private, public and non-for-profit when interviewing, you have even covered the church, which can be at times overlooked for all the good that they do in immediate communities.

I feel that living in Perth, in a small city, somewhat sheltered from the harshness of the more evident problems that a larger city would shove in your face, we neglect issues like this.

Reading through your blogs I particularly liked the idea that these "homeless" people are still people who a) have present skills or b) can be upskilled. Though for a variety of reasons they are living a life without a place of residence, they have a great deal to offer the community. I am looking forward to your presentation and to your choice of strategy.

I am tentative about making a suggestion due to the massive amount of information you offer and the great job you have done at covering basis, but may I suggest that you look at the "Family Centre Project" mentioned in Shannon and Young (2004, p52). This is fastly becoming a great resource for me.

What was it expected that the blogspace would represent to the students in Social Work?

As a social learning experience the blogging activity held great potential for bringing the students into a social space with many layers of meaning. Within the context of a unit focusing on the development of communities in Social Work, this space was represented by the blogspace, which had a number of physical layers (that is, different pages for Home, Assessment, Help, and the individual blog pages of each group), as well as figurative layers which represented a variety of constructs. These figurative layers can be characterised as follows:

- *Writing space* – The blog activity would require that the students post entries to their own group blog, giving expression to their group experience and their group project, as well as comment on the work of other groups.
- *Thinking space* – The students would be required to reflect on the style and content of the posts of other groups with a view to both learning from them and giving feedback on their work.
- *Owned space* – Each group having its own blog would allow them to have a learning space over which they had ownership and could therefore use to project a group identity through their labelling of the space and the material posted to it.
- *Sharing space* – Both the Unit Coordinator and the student groups could use the blog site to provide additional resources to be shared amongst the groups. These could be links to external sites, or each other's blogs, images, video etc.
- *Collaboration space* – the posting and commenting aspect of a blog would allow for collaborative learning by the students being able to provide input into the projects of other student groups.

- *Support space* – Through the sense of community engendered by this activity the students could make, or ask for, *explicit* offers of support to each other through the dialogues going on within the blogs, or feel *implicit* support through the shared experience of the activity.

Feedback and findings

The evaluation at the end of this year's project has been instructive and has led to both this paper and further ponderings on the appropriate use of web-based technologies for teaching skills which are essentially interpersonal-focused. The University of Western Australia offers its staff a valid and reliable teaching evaluation system called SPOT (Student Perceptions of Teaching) which draws on a databank of survey questions to be administered to students. In addition to SPOT items targeting the teaching within this unit, further questions were constructed which specifically targetted the blogging exercise. These anonymous surveys were administered in class at the completion of the semester by a staff member not involved with the unit. Questions aimed at the blog exercise asked the students to score the usefulness of the blog for the development of skills; for its contribution to their knowledge and their ability to research; and for the production of their assignments. One question asked them to score the accessibility and ease of use of the blog. Unsurprisingly, given the experience of the semester, the blog was almost universally perceived to be difficult to use and access.

Students also gave qualitative feedback on the unit in general via a questionnaire completed in class. Although designed to be anonymous, several students provided their names alongside their responses. These questionnaires were sealed and not analysed until after all unit marking had been completed.

What did the quantitative feedback show?

A summary of the data for each of the nine questions is as follows:

1. 60.8% of students believed the objectives of using the blog were clearly defined either strongly or agreed, compared to 12.9% who either disagreed or strongly disagreed.
2. 78.2% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied that they had developed the necessary skills in the unit compared to 12.8% who strongly disagreed or disagreed. (Note, the question is ambiguous – they could have been referring to blog skills or overall skills).
3. 65.1% of students found the blog to be valuable in facilitating collaboration for the group project either strongly or at the agreed level compared to 17% of students who strongly or disagreed.
4. 69.7% of students found the blog valuable for communicating at the strong to agreed level compared to 21.6% who strongly or disagreed.
5. 21.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the blog was easy to access and use compared to 60.7% who strongly or disagreed.
6. 65.1% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they understood why they were using the blog compared to 30.3% who strongly disagreed or disagreed.
7. 43.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the blog helped them to clarify concepts used in the unit compared to 30.3% of student who disagreed strongly or disagreed.
8. 43.4% of students strongly or agreed that the blog assisted to structure research for the unit compared to 30.3% who strongly or disagreed.
9. 39% of students strongly or agreed that the blog assisted in helping them to reflection the key concepts for the unit compared to 34.6% who did not agreed or strongly disagreed that it didn't.

Analysis of this data shows a number of points of interest: skills expected in this unit included collaboration in groups and communication skills in addition to those skills expected for a community worker such as group work, planning, researching etc; there was a high positive response rate, well over two thirds for each category, indicating students believed they had developed these necessary skills; students were less confident that the use of the blog had assisted in their ability to clarify, research or reflect on the main aspects of community work through the use of the blog, with all of these receiving less than fifty percent agreement; and while over two thirds of students understood why they were using the blog and that the objectives for doing so were clearly defined, a corresponding proportion (just under two thirds) maintained that they found the blog difficult to access and use.

While some of these results were quite pleasing to the Unit Coordinator, and do strongly support the achievement of pedagogical objectives associated with the unit, one particular stand-out result is that which shows that most of the respondents struggled to some degree with the technology.

What did the qualitative feedback show?

New literacies

From the responses given in the qualitative questionnaire, there was strong evidence of the students' attainment of the new literacies associated with the blogging exercise. As with the quantitative results, the qualitative feedback showed that the students were almost unanimous in their characterisation of the technology as "daunting", "difficult", "confusing" or "challenging," and many suggested a need for an actual tutorial on how to use the blog. Nevertheless all were successful in completing the task without it, despite perceiving themselves as having inadequate skills. Most seemed to have no prior experience of blogging and therefore did not have the benefit of familiarity with blogging conventions or terminology, and yet most saw the exercise as useful in the context of the unit's focus on social policy and community practice, and as contributing to the skills gained through completing the unit. Further evidence is offered by the blogs themselves, where it was noted that the majority of the posts and comments made by the groups were lengthy and comprehensive, hence the blogs seemed not to hinder expression. Likewise the writing styles demonstrated by the students reflected both personal and academic nuances in their appropriate contexts, showing that the students were able to discern the difference. For these reasons we might argue success in the development of some of Bennett's "generic competencies."

Social learning

The qualitative feedback also gives evidence of the students' social participation that engaged them in a conversation about their growing knowledge. The students made clear statements of having read other groups' postings *and* having learnt from them. The blogs themselves show conversations conducted both between, and within, groups, including comments on each other's posts as well as their projects. In fact the posts give clear evidence that through this *shared* space, the students were successful in creating their own community of enquiry.

In addition, the students showed clear signs of having reflected on the consequences of expressing oneself online through a blog. The feedback shows reflection by some on the public nature of this form of expression. For example, one respondent felt emotionally "challenged" by the giving of individual comments on another group's work in such a public and "live" manner. Another found the posting of their group's work in the public domain as confronting, and felt unclear as to how this was to be of benefit to them.

Digital Identity

Use of an internal, non-commercial blog system meant that the students had very few avenues for strong self-projection, or the establishment of a digital identity, since they had no control over the page appearance. Despite this, each group found the space to project a group identity through their labelling of their *owned* space and the material they posted to it. This labelling acted concurrently as both their blog title and their group name.

Conclusion

Social Work teaching and learning at UWA is unlikely to engage fully with an Online Learning Environment in the foreseeable future, mainly because its educational philosophy is to produce an experience as close as possible to that which its graduates will enter. Not only do students expect skills development which focuses on the interpersonal, but interpersonal interaction is still the predominant experience in the work environment. However, increasingly there are expectations in the workplace that graduates will be at least familiar with the basics of computer usage. Graduates who are digitally literate, who can use new technologies effectively and creatively, and who can assist their clients to become familiar with and use new technologies are going to be valuable employees. Despite the hesitations and resistances to learning online and the difficulties experienced with the technology, this year's experience in the Community Practice unit produced both expected and surprising results. It demonstrated that students performed what is generally expected from blog use. They generated learning communities where they contributed to each other's learning and through reflection enhanced their own; they learnt and developed collaborative skills in a variety of environments, especially the digital environment; and they became increasingly able to manipulate the technology creatively, developing their digital expertise. What was surprising for the Unit Coordinator was that these results were achieved in spite of the fact that the Coordinator was herself unfamiliar and unpractised with the nuances of blog use and learned along with the students, unable to assist them technologically, and only able to encourage and trust the processes of collaboration and student cooperative learning.

What remains left undone now after this experience is to feed back their successes to the students and identify further with them what they have learned and the skills they have developed through using the blog. In our future planning, attention needs to be paid to ensuring that as far as possible the technology used does not impede students' learning experience; having educators skilled in on-line learning techniques and processes; and engaging more with students on the Social Work dilemmas of online learning, such as authenticity and the nature of confidentiality.

This research adds to our knowledge about on-line learning in two main ways. Firstly this experience of social work education using elearning methods has demonstrated that the skills traditionally taught in the 'face-to-face' context can also be learned and used competently in the digital medium. As an extension of the use of technology for networking purposes, and for including other groups/agencies in community activities (Rosenthal Gelman and Tosone 2008) for example, these students practiced on-going collaborative planning, implementation and reviewing through their digital interactions leading to highly polished and successful project presentations in the 'face-to-face'. An exciting addition was their demonstrated competence in 'public' work. Although challenging, the outcome was professional, competent and constructive. For community development learning this was invaluable. This experience has moved the conceptualisation of social work learning at UWA from on-line technologies being primarily useful as "transmissive pedagogies" to the possibility of their use in developing and fostering the "people" skills traditionally reserved for small group laboratory settings.

Secondly, while social work educational practice focuses on students as contributing to the learning of others, the experience of the blog has demonstrated how central they were in actively engaging in the social construction of knowledge, as Farmer (2006) envisaged. This community of learners became a learning community. Without being prompted, groups and individuals used the technology to transmit knowledge, to critique, and to collaborate across groups in order to create greater understanding. The students could have performed required tasks and received good marks. Instead they used the medium and processes to enhance their own and each other's learning, clearly demonstrating their connections to each other.

While other disciplines' use of on-line learning is probably more advanced technologically, the use of the blog in Social Work at UWA represents a clear demonstration that social work pedagogy can embrace technology to learn, practice and become competent in the types of interpersonal skills mostly learned in the interpersonal.

References

- Bennett, S., Maton, K., & Kervin, L. (2008). The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(5), 775-786.
- Burgess, J. (2006). Blogging to Learn, Learning to Blog. In A. Bruns & J. Jacobs (Eds.), *Uses of Blogs* (pp. 105-114). New York: Peter Lang.
- Ballantyne, N., & Knowles, A. (2007). Enhancing Student Learning with Casebased Learning Objects in a Problem-based Learning Context: The Views of Social Work Students in Scotland and Canada. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 3(4 December), 363-374.
- Cable, A., & Thurston, L. (2000). Effects of interactive multimedia training on knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy of Social Work students. *Research on Social Work Practice* 10(4), 428-437.
- Cooper, L. (2001). Using online technology to teach controversial issues. *New Technology in the Human Services* 13(3 & 4), 11-21.
- Downes, S. (2004). Educational blogging. *Educause Review*. September/October 2004. (pp. 14-26).
- Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P. et al. (2006). How and what university students learn through online and face-to-face discussion: Conceptions, intentions and approaches. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 22(4), 244-256.
- Farmer, J. (2006). Blogging to basics: How blogs are bringing online education back from the brink. In A. Bruns & J. Jacobs (Eds.), *Uses of Blogs* (pp. 91-103). New York: Peter Lang.
- Farmer, B., Yue, A., & Brooks, C. (2008). Using blogging for higher learning in large cohort university teaching: A case study. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 24(2), 123-136. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet24/farmer.html>
- Faux, T., & Hughes, C. (2000). A comparison of using the Internet versus lectures to teach Social Work history. *Research on Social Work Practice* 10(4), 454-467.
- Fessakis, G., Tatsis, K., & Dimitracopoulou, A. (2008). Supporting "learning by design" activities using group blogs. *Educational Technology & Society*, 11(4), 199-212.
- Fitzgerald, E., & McNutt, J. (1999). Electronic advocacy in policy practice: a framework for teaching technologically based practice. *Journal of Social Work Education* 35(3), 331.

- Maidment, J. (2005). Teaching Social Work Online: Dilemmas and Debates. *Social Work Education* 24(2, March), 185-195.
- Prenkys, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- Quinn, D. (2007). Blogging: Infusing engagement, enjoyment (joy) and reflection into learning. In *Enhancing Higher Education, theory and scholarship. Proceedings of the 30th HERDSA Annual Conference*. Adelaide, South Australia, 8-11 July.
- Quinney, A., Hutchings, M., et al. (2008). Student and Staff Experiences of Using a Virtual Community, Wessex Bay, to Support Interprofessional Learning: Messages for Collaborative Practice. *Social Work Education*, 27(6), 658-664.
- Rosenthal Gelman, C., & Tosone, C. (2008). Teaching Social Workers to Harness Technology and Inter-Disciplinary Collaboration for Community Service. *Br J Soc Work*: bcn081.
- Waldman, J., & Rafferty, J. (2008). Technology-Supported Learning and Teaching in Social Work in the UK: A Critical Overview of the Past, Present and Possible Futures. *Social Work Education* 27(6), 581-591.
- Warlick, D. (2007). *Classroom blogging*. Raleigh, NC: Landmark Project.
- Zeman, L. D., & Swanke, J. (2008). Integrating Social Work Practice and Technology Competencies: A Case Example. *Social Work Education* 27(6), 601-612.

Authors : Dr Susan Young. Email: Susan.Young@uwa.edu.au
Ms Leitha Delves. Email: Leitha.Delves@uwa.edu.au

Please cite as: Young, S. & Delves, L. (2009). Expanding to fit the (blog)space: Enhancing social work education through online technologies. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/auckland09/procs/young.pdf>

Copyright © 2009 Susan Young and Leitha Delves

The authors assign to ascilite and educational non-profit institutions, a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to ascilite to publish this document on the ascilite Web site and in other formats for the Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.