

## The 5 C's of Literacy and Literary Skills Development: Conversations, Community, Collaboration, Creativity, and Connection

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The use of blogging has been explored on how it can enhance and extend support for student participation and learning: as collaborative learning spaces, for increased participation and interaction amongst students, as a valuable asset to the learning schedules of large cohort university teaching, for promoting writing skills. The limitations and lack of perceived benefits have also been acknowledged in some studies. At our university, blogging has been applied in a course to enhance the engagement of students in the study of literature, to extend community with peers, and to build skills for future employability. It is precisely because of the less formal nature of the blog, one more in harmony with students' own social networking practice, that this Web 2.0 tool segues so effectively from students' native skills into the academic arena. The increasing use of social media in academic contexts has however, raised the question of whether the largely informal nature of Web 2.0 can act as a pathway to develop students' writing or if this could hinder the development of competence in academic discourse.

Keywords: Blogging, Affordance, Literacy, Literary, Digital

### Introduction

The authors present preliminary findings into which aspects of blogging support students' development in literacy and literary competence. However, the authors also affirm the *affordances* of this social software in its capacity to facilitate a "participatory culture" amongst students and provide "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, [strong] support for creating and sharing one's digital productions" (Jenkins 2006, p. 3).

### 5Cs: Conversations, Creativity, Community, Collaboration and Connections

This preliminary analysis has been derived from the blogs of a selected group of first year (literature) students. Students have been required to complete a weekly blog entry of around 120 words responding to a series of questions (both creative and critical: <http://michaelgriffith.livejournal.com>). They are also asked to write at least one peer review each week of around 150 words. At the end of semester, students then have to shape their blogs into an e-Portfolio (created within WordPress/ currently Mahara). This e-Portfolio gives them an opportunity to showcase their best work and to write a critical, summative report on their experience over the semester.

The **conversations** that are enabled through these contexts are equally extensive: educational, social and creative. Students converse with each other in ways that are not possible within the busy lifestyle of a modern university and they are able to engage with their teachers in ways that break down barriers and create new opportunities for learning. One of the most powerful conversations that is realized through this technology is that which opens students to the world beyond their own unit of study and beyond their own campus. Tomes (2001) argues that technologies create new opportunities by "capturing the collaboration and communication between groups of learners and teachers in a form which allows that collaboration to become an educational resource for other students" (p. 222). There have been cases of students whose creative work has been noticed by professors in other parts of the world. Here are the beginnings of real global synergy.

**Creativity** is one of the strongest features that this technology gives access to. Students who have never had an audience before, suddenly find a space where creativity is released and responded to. Typical responses include: "I never knew I could write poetry before" and "It is wonderful to have a ready-made readership of my writing".

In writing critical and creative blogs on authors and topics students are collaboratively engaged in a **community** creating a digital context which supports their individual work on literature. This is a powerful agent for meaningful engagement. No longer is the student studying an author or idea in relative isolation, now they are sharing their enthusiasms and questions; they have a real sense of how their peers as a whole are engaging with the content. It is not necessary for them to wait till class to hear what others think. There is a living continuum of engagement with vitally meaningful content available at the click of the button on their iPad.

**Collaborative** learning is strongly sustained by the peer review process that is part of our teaching/ learning strategy. Peer review is an essential component of enhancing and developing a student's capacity in the areas of both literary and literacy development. Typically students are asked to peer review each other's work at least once each week (i.e. one student per week). While encouraged to be supportive in their comments they are also asked to make constructive criticism where appropriate. This allows the cohort to support collaborative learning as well as the development of editing skills, some of which are subject specific.

The interactive contexts for students using this technology are extensive **connections** are created. These engage students with a whole range of resources, human and technological: their peers, their teachers, the academic skills support sector outside their discipline, the array of digital contexts that offer themselves as an ever-growing cornucopia of expressive tools.

## Impact on Literary Development

A student's literary development is deeply enhanced by expressing their understanding in written form in a forum where they can be heard by their peers and by their teacher. In the best cases it acts like an extension to face-to-face class time where ideas are expressed and critiqued both by peers and teachers. Some students who are less willing to share ideas in a face-to-face forum find their voice in this context. Because of the nature of the language requirement for blogs, students are also less inhibited to express what they really feel and often link their observations about literary texts with aspects of their own experience. This is something that can be well illustrated by student examples.

The word "literary" here refers to both a student's grasp of the specialised language of literary criticism, but also to their capacity to find their own creative voice through the imitation of an author's style (across all genres) or through being stimulated into writing their own original poem or short prose piece based on their own experience. In a blogging context, the word "literary" is expanded even further by virtue of the fact that students are no longer writing in a two dimensional media, but in fact have the full resources of the multimedia environment at their disposal. "Literary" now means not simply finding the *mot juste*, but also finding the capacity to embed creative or critical words in a context of well selected visual and/or aural elements -including all aspects of visual style enhancement- and through bringing a higher order of creative ability to their expression.

## Impact on Literacy Development

The development of a student's literacy is a central concern for all users of this technology within a higher education setting. While the creative, literary developments that blogging can enhance are a central driving force to the use of this technology, the enhancement of a student's literacy, their ability to master the distinctive discourse of their subject specialisations, is of major concern to academic institutions always keen to enhance their academic credibility. It is for this reason that this study has this twin agenda: to explore the literary and also the literacy development of students' writing capacities, through the agency of blogging.

In the context of the Systemic Functional Linguistics school of thinking (SFL), Colombi (2006) argues that "the fundamental interconnectedness of language use, and the social context..." (p. 149) informs the basis of a course for developing academic literacy. This provides a strong argument for the underlying components of "educational blogging" as a powerful creative underpinning for what is required in the academic arena.

This also accords with what Starfield (2007) says about not "devaluing the multiple discourses students bring with them to university ... " (p. 878). The embedding of academic skills into this process indeed builds on such language capacities that they already have and further brings to the students' attention the conventions of

academic literacy and an awareness of how register changes according to the audience and purpose.

Literacy Development within this context has of course one further connotation and that is the development of a student's digital literacy. This is something that many students already grasp well, being, as we know, "digital natives"; however the implementation of blogging as part of their academic discipline creates a new demand for them to develop their capacity in this area of literacy to a new level of competence. This is in fact what we have discovered, namely that some students have developed and mastered areas of their digital expressive powers- their digital literacy - in ways that they could not themselves have foreseen.

Pegrum has tellingly predicted:

... education must also prepare students for a social future where they have the technological and personal literacies to build their own digital identities and author their own individual narratives. It must prepare them for a sociopolitical future where they have the participatory and remix literacies to intervene in societal narratives. It must prepare them for a global future where they have the cultural and intercultural literacies to contribute to world narratives. The future of our individual liberties, our democratic political systems and our planet demand it. (Pegrum, 2009, p. 54).

## Discussion

Students are tempted into writing informally on topics of great personal significance (issues of personal identity they encounter in reading literature along with the triumphs and tragedies of the authors and their characters) and then find themselves deeply engaged with their own lives and with other lives (both those of their peers and those of the authors they are studying) (Pegrum, 2009).

Such engagement inevitably leads to a discovery that writing is a tool that liberates students' understanding and it is upon this basis that further engagement with academic skills is supported. At our university we have underpinned this organic process by embedding the work of our Academic Skills unit directly into Arts and Education degree literature units. Students find that work on their blogs can lead to an enhanced understanding of what is needed to improve their writing skills both as a medium of creative expression and as the central part of their academic equipment. Moreover there is a wonderful synergy created between the following key elements of a student's experience at University: their academic work, their fellow students, their lecturers, their academic skills support unit and finally with the technology that is the most powerful and ever advancing component in their armoury of equipment (Pegrum 2009).

An educator of some real standing in the American community, Parker Palmer, writing well before the onslaught of the digital age, has expressed powerfully a profound justification for the ways in which Web 2.0, in particular blogging, can achieve the highest educational aims:

... to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.... I need to spend less time filling the space with data and my own thoughts and more time opening a space where students can have a conversation with the subject and with each other... (Palmer, 1998, p. 120).

While students demonstrated a remarkable capacity in their blogs to engage both critically and creatively with the literature being studied, an initial discourse analysis of the responses to critical tasks revealed that many of the first year students had not yet achieved full control of the conventions of formal academic writing. In order for them to be able to display their work in the e-Portfolios to its best advantage to possible future employers, it was proposed to embed the development of academic literacy into their literature course.

## Challenges of Managing Large Classes

The use of digital technologies like blogging, brings with it a plethora of challenges especially for large classes:

- Managing students' feedback in a timely manner,
- Managing students' expectations,
- Load issues for staff and students.

Some of the strategies that we are currently exploring include:

- a) Use of peer review to provide feedback (Tomes, 2001)
- b) A network of informal support comprising other staff, for example embedding academic skills support
- c) Use of semi-automated quality feedback (Burrows & Shortis, 2011)

## Conclusion

The work that is proceeding in this paper, will extend the current research to a wider group using design-based research; it will continue to look at literary and literacy skills development and implications for sustainable practices; it will comment on the use of semi-automated quality feedback, cross-faculty model of blogging; it will further explore the involvement of academics and especially the embedded involvement of academic skills. It is the authors' intentions to study closely the impact of these technologies on a cohort of students over the next three years. This then is an ongoing study which, it is hoped, will fine-tune the strategies for effectively implementing Web 2.0 technologies as part of the deep learning process in Higher Education across the curriculum. It is anticipated that a further discourse analysis of the students' work will be conducted during the second semester concentrating on systemic functional linguistics (interpersonal; logical) with a focus on what students are actually learning through the agency of blogging.

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