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Morris, A. and Kelly, T.

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The Virtues of the Virtual

Creative Writing Online

Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly



This article discusses the virtues of online teaching and learning, alongside digital projects engaged in by the creative writing team as part of the teaching and research programme at Coventry University.

Our primary focus will be on the multi-faceted dimensions of student blogging, but we will also look at online teaching delivery and student engagement.

Accompanying the emergence of blog technology as a dominant online publishing paradigm is a growing interest in its educational benefits and applications. (Deng and Yuen, 2011: 441).

Our activities have been informed by the innovative research conducted in 2011 primarily in Asia. At the University of Hong Kong, Liping Deng and Allan Yuen investigated the value of blogging in higher education and highlighted four areas of importance: self-expression, self-reflection, social interaction and reflective dialogue. Also, C. Yang and Y. S. Chang, from the National Chiao Tung University and the

Chung Chou Institute of Technology in Taiwan, researched and assessed the effects of interactive blogging on student attitudes towards peer interaction, learning motivation and academic achievements, exploring, “The use of blogs, and how student attitudes towards online peer interaction and peer learning, as well as motivation to learn from peers, may differ when using the blog comments feature, and when students are encouraged to read and comment on each other’s work.” (2011: 126–135)

For our own research purposes, we drew on Chang and Yang’s study of individual and group blogs in order to evaluate the impact on learning engagement. These were “solitary blogs [used] as personal digital portfolios for writers” and “blogs used interactively to facilitate peer interaction by exposing blogging content and comments to peers”. Their research results suggested that interactive blogs are associated with positive attitudes towards academic achievement in course subjects and in online peer interaction.

Like Geniuses

We're like geniuses but not. A collection of stuff produced by students from first year English and creative writing. Mostly poems and descriptive prose. Hope you enjoy :-)

Wednesday, 20 November 2013

Prose: describing a place

My prose piece, updated. I made a couple of minor changes, but I'm not entirely happy that I didn't get around to describing the tastes.

To the south of the West Orchard shopping centre in Coventry, sitting in the shadow of two vast concrete tower blocks which rise above everything else, is the quiet street of Market Way. It's out of the way of the big shopping centres, away from the bustling market and the lines of High Street stores – indeed, there are very few stores there besides a Poundland on one side and a titanic BHS on the other. In between these two retail giants there are silvery metal tables and chairs dotted around, gathering in pools like gossiping hens, because this is the place where the street vendors park their carts and ply their trade for the day.

Blog Archive

- ▼ 2013 (39)
 - ▼ November (6)
 - Prose: describing a place
 - Prose draft: describing a location
 - 3 poems for CW1
 - NaNoWriMo Extract: what do you think?
 - This is Easy! The creepy Redraft...
 - ▶ October (33)

Contributors

Like Geniuses, First Year Undergraduate Group Blog

Chang claims that although blogs did not originate in the education sector, they have become useful on various educational levels and in various educational settings, and in particular as a form of authoring tool. For example, blogs often function as digital portfolios of student assignments and other outputs. (2011: 441-451)

Judy Robertson from Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University, who also refers to the research of Deng and Yuen in her article, discusses blogging as self-directed learning, and includes a section on blogging as an "educational tool".

To be successful university learners, students need to develop skills in self-directed learning. This encompasses a range of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills including generating one's own learning goals, planning how to tackle a problem, evaluating whether learning goals have been met, and re-planning based on this evaluation. The educational affordances of blogs offer opportunities for students to become self-directed learners in a supportive social environment. (Robertson, 2011: 1628)

One practice we endorse at Coventry is students keeping a reflective diary on their writing, much like a process diary used to inform their reflective commentary (appended to their creative coursework). Robertson discusses reflection as the process of exploring an experience in order to learn something new. This is an important aspect of self-directed learning, and she draws from Zimmerman and Tsikalas' research in 2005, that, "Self-reflection is a phase in the cyclical model of self-regulation where the learner makes judgements about her performance during a learning task." There is an important emotional component involved too, whereby Robertson refers to Boud's research in 2001, which claimed, "Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred. It involves exploring often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them."

A written journal can be a place both for recording learning experiences and processing them in order to understand their implications. Occasions which can be appropriate for reflective journal writing include writing in anticipation of events, reflection in the midst of events, and reflecting

after undergoing a new experience.

Robertson also discusses Boud's debate on the barriers to reflective writing including ethical issues relating to privacy, and to what extent students feel comfortable writing about emotional components honestly, knowing these reflections will be read by peers and staff; this is compounded by the fact that learning journals are often assessed. Students find it difficult to write about misconceptions or problems they have with course material in case this results in a negative assessment of their abilities. Thus there is a need to explain to students who their audience will be, and how the commentary will be marked.

With the increase of popularity of blogging with our students, we need to explore and utilize its learning potential for creative writing education, reflection and feedback. Robertson drew on research by Williams and Jacobs (2004) who concluded that "Blogs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers." In a survey of 104 MBA students' attitudes to blogging, they found that 77% of students believed that writing and commenting on blogs enhanced student interactivity and increased "the level of meaningful intellectual exchange between students". They recommended that it

Tags: death, Demon, Fairy, Horse, Kelpie, Monster, supernatural, Water Comments RSS feed

1 Comment:

December 10, 2013 at 8:23 am

It's pretty good! It just seems like sometimes you're repeating imagery, like about the teeth and the 'bones' like snapping... Also I think some of this is a bit disjointed and some of the rephrases need re-writing, maybe consider re-wording 'greatly weakened' I think it disrupts the flow... I think that maybe you should try and integrate some semi colons? The only punctuation that seems to have been used is full stops and commas. 'unable to cling to wakefulness' I think this also needs re-wording, when reading that bit aloud it doesn't make sense really. But overall good, very very dark!

Reply

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Feedback: Calastiel First Year Undergraduate Student Blog

is important to give students direction about *how* to blog and what *benefits* they might expect to experience from it.

Ferdig and Trammell (2004) commented on the potential benefits of blogging in an educational setting, remarking that they are ideal spaces for students to make meaning and publish their reflections, thoughts and understandings for an authentic audience. They identified the comments feature as useful for promoting peer feedback and *scaffolding* of new ideas. Additionally, in their view, blogging can increase student ownership and interest, give opportunities for students to legitimately interact within a community of practice and celebrate diverse points of views.

Over the past two years we have experimented with blogs in our creative writing workshops. Digital learning has become a ubiquitous part of educational practice, in creative writing as in other disciplines. Blogging, virtual lecture delivery, *flipping*, interactive workshops, and online chat have become commonplace in universities. Not to mention the professional sphere in which writers promote their e-books via the Internet, and in particular through the rapidly expanding social media sites of which Facebook and Twitter, if not the geriatric members, now firmly belong within the middle-aged.

We used blogs with our undergraduate students on our BA English and Creative Writing course, and as a first year target, they were asked to create a writing blog for poetry and their explorations of *descriptive* prose. This could be a collaborative blog if they wished. Their blogs were then used as a method to display coursework assignments such as poetry and travel articles.

We already had a general creative writing blog called *Coventry Words*, a site for creative students at the University. This blog (using Tumblr) was set up by a third year student. At the time, he felt that Tumblr was the most utilized site by young people. However, we recommended the students choose their own social media sites, and the most popular were indeed Tumblr, then Wordpress, Wattpad and Blogger.

There were no particular problems setting up the blogs for writing. Students could design them in any way they wished and they all helped each other in the set-up. One or two students already had blogs, though these were in



Scribbler's Cube

Matt's corner Jack's corner Caleb's corner Reni's corner

Matt's corner

What people say, and how I wish I could respond

People say that I should always concentrate on writing, that I should sit down for hours and write, that it would make me rich, it would get me girls, or it would cure the diseased. Of course I grin and cough out a shallow laugh, vaguely aware of my own meagre talent and much too embarrassed to take any of the rabble's praise too seriously, otherwise I might just do something rather productive. Heaven forbid.

Scribbler's Cube Collaborative Blog

the minority.

There were a few problems encountered with producing travel articles, where creative layouts were tricky unless you were adept with web language html, and students had problems uploading photos and displaying their articles with a professional design or published format. However, they appeared to enjoy the experience and are continuing to upload their creative work onto their sites.

One student said,

What I like about blogging is that it's accessible everywhere, and for everyone – we can share our writing with teachers and fellow students. Another nice thing about using blogs is that we open up the things we do in a closed workshop, we can show the world – friends, family. For me, a positive thing is I like working on my computer and phone on-the-move. It's better like that as I can share everything quickly.

Another student commented on keeping up-to-date,

The University should use blogs to stay up-to-date with what their students are working on, changing,

diary of a...
Ginger

Saturday, 23 February 2013

Chasing the snow

When the snow did arrive in Coventry, I leaped at the opportunity to try out my new snowboard, Edgar. Accepting that snow probably isn't going to return till December, I will have to make do with driving around in my little Ford Ka, Oscar, which can only just fit my snowboard, to the various snowdomes that are scattered across England. All this is part of the big lead up to March. When I will be hopping onto a coach, snowboard bag in hand, which happens to be bigger than me and heading for the snowy mountains of Tignes, which a lot of people class as the Ibiza of the snow world.

Previous Posts

- ▼ 2013 (1)
- ▼ February (1)
- Chasing the snow

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Travel Article on Diary of a Ginger Blog

redrafting etc. What was problematic was that staff and teachers are not up-to-date on this type of technology.

There are downfalls to this sort of online publishing. Anything published in full, online, normally will not be taken on by a print publisher, and students need to be aware of this. For work they consider print worthy, they should only put “extracts” online, in line with current practice for established writers who are marketing their work via their blogs or websites, Twitter or Facebook.

For coursework assignments, these first year undergraduate students presented their work on blogs and emailed their links to us. It was a tidy way to submit coursework. For second year students they used blogs for flash fiction and short stories.

One student said that blogging enabled him to talk freely about the creativity and production, and to request responses to his work,

I like blogs because you can keep people up-to-date and talk about how your writing is coming along. It's like a mini newspaper! Putting a story on a blog felt a bit bizarre at first, as it's your story out there, and you can see how many people have read it, and how they found it via Facebook or Google. Try googling: "Roderick Stone: The Wonder in the West" and there's my work! I like all the tricks to get people to read your

blogs. I used to get a thousand hits a day – I was having a great time. One message I posted became the blog of the day and it was put on the front page of WordPress – it was one of the most read posts of the day.

Peer feedback has proved a key developmental tool, particularly facilitated via the group blogs. As an example, take the following exchange from one of the writers' groups in our first year Poetry and Prose Module:

Student A: *They're good poems, (name), but if you want to talk about metre then I'm afraid you're going to have a hard time. There are a few examples of specific metre within the first two poems, but not throughout the entire poem. However you can probably talk about the imagery and what inspired these poems instead.*

Student B: *Thanks (name). When u say metre within the 1st 2 poems, could you point out where to me so I have a better understanding for myself?*

Student A: *"Strong in stature, muscled shoulders..." That part is in trochaic tetrameter (four pairs of syllables per line with the stress on the first syllable in each pair). The same goes for the first two lines of the next verse: "Underneath an angry tension, bringing forth a vicious roar."*



Home About

Posted on February 14, 2013 Next →

1) Roderick Stone: The Wonder in the West

Roderick Stone had discovered Billy Puckett's camp in the derelict desert during sunrise. He had spent endless weeks trailing Puckett who was scrambling the bare land after stealing a ruby the size of a strawberry. Wherever Roderick went there were "Wanted" posters. The reward had just grown to \$3000.

"Wanted Dead or Alive"

His camp was in a desolate location with no chance of a trap. Fortunately, Stone was a master of transformation.

8:00am: An old bishop on his donkey strolled towards Puckett, politely asking the bandit for water.

Reaching a Wider Audience: Roderick Stone

The same sort of thing is going on with "Does a tiger have a stripy bum?" and "Is the blob fish always glum?" The difference with that poem is that they have a pause in place of the final syllable.

Student B: *Thanks (name) I get it now.*

Whilst the analysis and feedback may not be perfect, it is pretty good, impressive even, and certainly exceeded our expectations of first year undergraduates only a few weeks into their degree course. And what we can also see from the exchange is the level not only of technical knowledge, but of mutual support and commitment to each other's work within the group. Note that this is just one example and we have many.

Online teaching delivery was not new to us, but we made an exponential leap in its use on our second year Short Story Workshop module. Using the module as

pilot, or perhaps more accurately as guinea pig, we transferred lecture content to the web. This consisted of online video lectures and online multimedia slideshow presentations, the latter being automated PowerPoint slideshows with audio voiceovers. As workshops continued to be face-to-face, issues arising from the lectures could be dealt with promptly, despite the separation of tutor and student in the online situation. In order to ensure student engagement, the lectures were followed up with online quizzes, testing comprehension of lecture content, which fed into coursework assessment. Hence students were obliged to watch the lectures or lose coursework marks.

The quizzes were set up to enable automated marking and hence reduce one of the more onerous tasks of the tutor. Until now (this module is still running at the time of writing) student engagement with the lectures has rated at just over 93%, a considerable improvement on

the face-to-face model.
One student commented,

I actually don't mind them at all. In a weird way it's like having a lecture one on one, without the distractions of a classroom etc. Having the quiz is important, though, definitely. Temptation to text through lectures will be avoided knowing that someone will test you at the end of it!

Another wrote,

I personally enjoy the online virtual lectures. It's actually easier to engage and take in information – especially as it's all from the comfort of your bed! It's also easier to make notes because you can rewind and pause it to write or make note of something you didn't understand or hear properly. It's short and precise – you pick up the main important things you should know. Doing the quizzes afterwards also helps to cement exactly what you've learned from the class.

One further aspect worth mentioning is the use of virtual coursework submission and assessment on our third year module, Writing for the Theatre and Radio. We changed the radio drama submission last semester from script to production and coursework submissions took the form of mp3 files containing the drama and spoken reflective commentary. So not only was this non paper-based but non text-based. All assessment and feedback was fully virtual and done via Moodle. This has been done as an experiment in digitality, and student feedback has to-date been extremely positive. We are currently planning to make the radio dramas available on the University's main website.

Our projects on blogging, digital teaching and learning (in keeping with the University's current initiatives promoting digital literacy) enhance key learning skills, and, in relation to student learning and engagement, have the following benefits:

- Shy students are not so intimidated as by face-to-face situations;
- Students can attract a public audience for their work, including a national and international one;
- Students pay more attention to the editing and proofreading of their work;
- Students can share their work;
- Students reflect and give feedback on their peers' work and have access to considered and constructive peer feedback;



Quiz	Quiz 1: Introduction to narrative form
Question	The narrator and author
Completed on	Monday, 27 January 2014, 10:37 AM
Question 3 Correct Mark 1.00 out of 1.00	<p>Which of the following best describes the relationship between the narrator and the author of a story?</p> <p>Select one:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> a. The narrator is another word for the author.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> b. The narrator and the author are the same person.</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> c. The narrator need not be the same as the author. ✓</p> <p><input type="radio"/> d. The narrator and author are never the same, not even in biographies.</p> <p>Your answer is correct. The correct answer is: The narrator need not be the same as the author.</p> <p>Make comment or override mark</p>

Image 6: Short Story Workshop Online Quiz

- There is a positive effect on student motivation;
- Students find it easier to express themselves emotionally;
- There is an increase in social engagement; and
- Students gain experience in online publishing.

There are some benefits specific to the teacher:

- Less time spent in class; and
- Greater control of teaching and learning content.

There are benefits relating to the following institutional concerns:

- Combating disengagement;
- Internationalization; and
- Showcasing excellence; and
- Digital literacy.

Returning to the article by Chang and Yang of 2011, it is suggested that blogging platforms give students a personal space for writing, making it easy to publish, share, and automatically archive. Blogs, they say, empower users to form “learning communities through inter-linkages”. Blogs can combine solitary reflection and peer interaction in the learning process. Chang and Yang refer to studies conducted on the educational use of blogs by Williams and Jacobs (2004), who drew on the evidence that students learnt from each other and suggested what mattered most was finding an appropriate vehicle to facilitate that learning. They considered blogging as potential “transformational technology” for teaching and learning. Oravec’s (2002) observations are also included in Chang and Yang’s

research, that many blog dimensions suited the individual voices of students, empowering them, and encouraging them to become more critically analytical in their thinking.

The typical scenario when a teacher poses a question in a classroom is that a few dominate the discussion. Students also express their opinions without solid support from content they are studying, perhaps because there is not enough time to prepare or reflect. Disengaged students frequently remain silent, and others who might have something truly relevant to contribute are too shy to do so. And time is a consideration discussed in Chang and Yang's research, whereby they agreed with Dailey's studies on "time and blogging" in 2006. It is apparent that blogging gives students "the time to think", and most clear thinking is likely to take place in an environment out of the classroom. It is important for teachers to explore ways to use blogs to engage students in learning when they are not in class. Chang and Yang concluded that shy students or disengaged students will communicate more effectively through blogs. (2011: 126-134)

Through practising self-directed learning we found that students responded with emotional reflections on their learning experiences, facilitated via the support of their peers, and the process combined the social, virtual and the cognitive in a breakthrough-learning environment. Robertson's studies also concluded that self-directed learning added value for first year undergraduates and enhanced the student experience, "The affordances of educational blogs could also be used for peer coaching of meta-cognitive skills, an approach which deserves future study." (2011)

Our research was also in accord with Deng and Yuen's conclusion that "The salient values of blogs centred on emotionally charged and social-oriented individual expressions as well as self-reflection." (2011: 441)

Blogging has become important as a medium for educating, and is certainly one way forward for creative writing education. We are all still learning, digitally, especially from our students; in fact we were reprimanded by a student recently. After informing him of his failure to show "written" drafts of his creative work, he replied,

If you had seen my blog, you would have seen the improvements in my writing and reflections on my progress, and all my feelings on my writing ability. You can stay up-to-date with what I'm changing, redrafting etc. So, why didn't

you look and leave comments?

Touché. Blogging is valuable for creative writing portfolios, drafts, feedback, reflections and for viewing assignments. It has proved beneficial for both students and lecturers, and no doubt could be of value in many subject areas.

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Alyson Morris is Senior Lecturer and Course Director for English and Creative Writing at Coventry University. She writes poetry and short stories, and has published materials for education and marketing. Her teaching includes travel writing, magazine production, writing for theatre and radio, and writing for children. In 2008, Alyson published Coventry Words, a creative writing website and magazine for student writers. Alyson has a BA Ed. teaching degree with Design and Computer Studies, an English as a Secondary Language teaching qualification, and received a distinction for her MA in Creative Writing.

Tim Kelly is Senior Lecturer for the English and Creative Writing course at Coventry University. He has lived and worked in the UK, Europe and the Far East and has taught at the universities of Lancaster, Sheffield, St Andrews, Warwick and Doshisha University in Japan. He holds a national award for "innovation in education" and is the writer and director of a number of award-winning short films. His latest short story "The Girlfriend" has just been published, and he is currently working on his first novel.