The Potential of Blogs for Higher Degree Supervision.

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Abstract
This article discusses the potential of the use of blog technology in supporting research students at the university, and encourages its wider use. Individual blogs open only to student and supervisors can focus and structure dialogue and discussion, helping students to develop their argument and 'voice'. The general blog "*Learn, Live, Thrive"* models the development of a reflexive research diary so that students can develop their own. It also encourages students to begin the process of theorization by sharing reading and ideas, and modelling theory. By being open and available to all students, general blogs add to the breadth, depth, effectiveness and efficiency of the supervision process, informing tutorials on the student's particular topic.

Article
This article explores how new technology can assist and transform the intellectual communication between supervisors and research students by the use of blogs. I have developed the processes described here with MA and MPhil/PhD students. On the electronic version of this paper, the web links are live so that blog posts can be viewed.

The 'blog' is a 'web log' which exists electronically on the internet, as a series of chronological diary entries ('posts') which can be added to and edited at will, and can be made open to as many or as few people as the author wishes. At the minimum, the blog can be set up as a research diary readable only to the author, a private record of thinking. It can also be made open to anyone globally, locatable by search engines such as Google. For example, if readers search Google for *Antonio Gramsci*, my relevant blog entry will be listed, but low down in the series of links. The use of 'labels' (that is, keywords) raises the item's profile: therefore a Google search on 'Gramsci + education + complexity' (three of the post 'labels') brings my blog-page up (at the time of writing) as item 3. Thus, in addition to being useful to students, blogging reaches a global audience.

There has been some recent interest in the potential of using blogs with students, mostly in conference papers. Ferguson, Clough and Hosein (2007) view blogs as an extension of research journals and compared private student blogs with a collaborative blog between three students. Shih (2007) used blogs as multimedia field notebooks, developing a "co-independent constructive pedagogy". Murray, Hourigan and Jeanneau (2007) in Ireland experimented with assessed blogs for language learning. Various conference papers have reported useful developments with academic blogs, though recognising patchy adoption and use (Brescia and Millar, 2005; Hammond, 2006; Giarre and Jaccheri , 2008). One important lesson is that the blog needs to be a structural part of the whole research experience and have a clear sense of purpose. Rita Kop (2006 and 2008) argues that we ought to be rethinking our adult education pedagogy in the light of new technology, but recognising that not all staff and students are ready for this.

The software I use is www.blogger.com, offered free within the Google suite of programmes[1]. The blog web address follows the model of the *Learn, Live, Thrive* blog, http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com, which I discuss below. This address links directly to the most current post, but each post has a separate web address, such as those referred to below. Blogs are simple to set up, offering a choice of instant templates. Photographs, web links and video can be embedded. Each blog post is created with simple text windows for title, text and labels, and once published posts are archived chronologically. Blogs are published with most recent posts on top, but the archive can list early posts in chronological order of creation. Giving labels to posts assists navigation to posts carrying the same label: a blog post and its labels can be edited at any time without changing its original date. A blog can have several authors, so in blogs shared between research students and supervisors, each can add entries. Comments from non-authors can also be made, but can be hidden and disallowed if inappropriate. A blog author or 'follower' receives an email alert when new posts are added.

Individual Student Blogs

Some research students have been up with blog accounts open only to the supervision trio. The model of tutorial followed by supervised structured tasks to prepare for the next meeting (with rapid feedback), follows the learning theories of Vygotski (1986), where conversations with a mentor help to structure thinking (and intellectual development). These are set up so any new post is emailed to each other blog member, and replies can be emailed straight back into the blog. This encourages frequent electronic conversations between the team, and keeps a student profile record of the progress of supervision. It serves as a research diary in that new thoughts and ideas can be entered, and supervisors can give rapid feedback. This attempts to eradicate the stop-start nature of progress in between tutorials, and focuses the tutorial on big issues rather than details. It reduces anxiety over uncertainty, and the delay in progress that this causes. Students often live at some distance – one in India, another in USA – so this continual contact is helpful. This is reminiscent of Lillis's (2003) attempts to develop critical dialogue about student writing, using the blog as a dialogue record. This also (with McKinney and Norton, 2008:201) foregrounds learner identity "to create a discursive space conducive to open dialogue and learning".

These blogs are set to be unavailable to Google searches. I am not quoting from these blogs since they are confidential. I can however give a generalized flavour. The students involved are in the early stages of their research. The first issue is to clarify their research proposal, questions, rationale and methodology. This adds complexity to what often begins as a simply articulated ambition. An email exchange, logged in the blog, can move their thinking forward rapidly. There may be questions of definition to challenge. For example a student wished to understand the relationship between ethnography and action research to clarify her own research design. Another was interested in liminality, but had found research papers that used liminality in different ways, one as the margins of society, the other as a betwixt and between processual concept (Bigger, 2009b). This means that the research design can evolve gradually rather than the student finding that a change of strategy discussed in tutorial destroys weeks of work. One student who has made good use of the blog commented:

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[1] There are alternatives. Information Learning Services (ILS) use http://wordpress.com

I had never had cause to contribute to a blog before my supervisor established one on my behalf. Immediately I felt it legitimised my need to share embryonic thoughts negating the awkwardness of bothering my supervisors yet again. The blog has provided an excellent sounding board for me to reflect on the initial steps of my journey. Many of my contributions did not require or invite feedback yet it still served the purpose of clarifying confused territory. Timely and insightful replies and contributions from my supervisors have served to pre-empt our personal meetings enabling them to quickly establish a flow from which to explore a focussed agenda. Apart from the easy access and a comprehensive record afforded by the blog I consider its fundamental purpose has been to allow me to feel that if I have something to say. I have a platform from which to be heard (even if I end up answering it myself).

There is strong evidence here of the development of personal voice. The on-line discussion also helps to thresh out aims and objectives, differentiating research from development. From this a sense of originality can emerge, as the research idea is refined against the research literature being discovered. If summaries of this literature are recorded in the blog, the supervision team are better able to respond meaningfully to it and to the overall evolution of the project.

The General Education Research Blogs
I developed two general blogs with different purposes.

Research@Worcester
The first, Research@Worcester is at http://worcester-research.blogspot.com. This serves as general guidance on methodology, analysis and theorising. It was designed first with a colleague, Scott Buckler who is a joint author for undergraduate and postgraduate research projects. For example, at http://worcester-research.blogspot.com/2008/11/refining-your-project.html , a post guides student thinking about the detail of their project from aim, research questions, research design, research methods, analysis and theorizing. This site overall has the potential to be developed further, although having few entries for students to read may be preferable to swamping them. Students can ask questions and seek advice through the site.

The 'Learn, Live, Thrive' General Blog
This blog receives regular posts, written generally to develop examples of theorising for students. The discussion below explores a range of ways students can use theory to develop their arguments. The blog is my personal research diary on education, shared with (and modelled to) students, within which I engage with current reading and other ideas which might otherwise be lost. Insights emerging with particular students during tutorials might be generalised in the blog post to make the point accessible to other students. I describe this process as *reflexive* because it abstracts potential meaning about my own views (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). (The term 'reflexive' is modelled on reflexive verbs, in which I engage *with myself*, such as 'to understand myself'[2]). The purpose of posts is to spark off ideas for discussion and theorizing, helping students to make unexpected connections. The *Learn-Live-Thrive* blog has been selected by Escalate (Higher Education Academy) for linking through its Key Links pages -

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[2] In contrast, 'reflection' uses a mirror metaphor in which I seek to view myself objectively as an outsider might. Blog posts are generally impersonal and therefore not 'reflective'

http://escalate.ac.uk/delicious and http://delicious.com/escalate. This is one of only two blogs on the site (as on 2.2..2009), and is the only non-institutional blog. Similar blogs by academics are not common: a rare example is http://mathedresearch.blogspot.com from Norway for mathematics education.

The initial name for the *Learn-Live-Thrive* blog was "Learning not Schooling", based on Ivan Illich's (1971) definition of 'schooling' as promoting compliance rather than independence; but this name carries an inbuilt ambiguity and negative connotations when teachers are using it, so I moved to a more positive title which emphasizes learning as motivating, personally empowering, part of lifelong learning and important to human happiness.

One early example, "Jane's Story", came from a research project I was undertaking and is relevant to school exclusions:

> **Jane's Story**
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> This story features a real girl whom we shall call Jane. She is now 10. Two years ago she was out of control, swearing at teachers, throwing chairs around, not learning anything and not wanting to be at school. Her life prospects were bad. She was very close to permanent exclusion from school. Things had gone wrong at home as well and her mother was in despair. All teachers will recognise the type of child she was. One year later, she was still at the same school and was awarded a prize for good behaviour - a prize fully earned. Her life chances are now good. She is young enough to make up lost ground. She is real, not fictional. Many other children really need a taste of success like this.
>
> A second life story. We shall call him Trevor, not his real name but he is real. At 12 years old, he too was close to exclusion, at least his teachers thought him difficult. Like many boys like him, a future without qualifications lay ahead. That was 2001; but now Trevor is in University, studying computer science and preparing for something he had once never imagined - a career as a graduate.
>
> The simple message is PLEASE do not give up on any child.
>   http://learningnotschooling.blogspot.com/2008/03/janes-story.html

This featured two real children (anonymised) discussed in research (Bigger, 2008) about breaking the vicious cycle of deprivation and low self-esteem. The intervention programme being researched sought to develop children's self-agency to promote 'can do' attitudes.

Another early example sets the tone of this and its successor blog, on what we mean by effective schools. The current view common in school, promoted by government and its agencies, is dominated by targets and narrow compliance. Teachers involved in educational research need to become more open to holistic thinking about values, mission and educational aims. On this view, schools are effective only if they help pupils to become effective.

> **[Effective schools?](http://learningnotschooling.blogspot.com/2008/03/effective-schools.html)**
>
> To know if something has been effective, we have first to know what it ought to be doing, and in the light of that, what counts as success. Crude and superficial measures produce crude and superficial education. Our definition of effectiveness must go far beyond these to address social, moral and emotional issues, aspiration and equity, conflict and anger management, personal responsibility and pupil engagement. For an educational institution to be adjudged effective it has to meet the whole needs of each pupil or student, preparing them for a worthwhile adult life appropriate to their potential (which should never be underestimated). Since what counts as knowledge is constantly changing and we live in a world of information overload, it is more important to be able to test and apply knowledge than simply remember it. Thinking, philosophy and values should grow out of a healthy use of the word 'why'. Education should enthuse and set up interests for life. The material will not do this by itself but requires adults who are themselves enthused. This enthusiasm may come from teachers, and from adults other than teachers that schools network with. This will provide role models to imitate, and encouragement to aspire. Non-authoritarian positive role-models are of great importance.
>
> Educating the whole person encourages and enhances personal development as an individual, emotional control and maturity, social skills and attitudes, moral awareness of other people's feelings and rights, cultural appreciation of ways of life different from their own. Education should encourage thinking, reason, rational argument and scrutiny of evidence, encouraging problem-solving, research, investigation and generally thinking things out. Pupils need to become critics in the best sense of that word - media critics, advertising critics, literary critics. Criticism means appreciating the good and recognising the weak, a long term task, not a quick target.
>
> Education should encourage thinking about what sort of people we are and want to be, both in terms of qualities and aspirations. This has to do with personal qualities such as honesty, kindness, generosity, calmness, diligence, patience, resilience, reliability and openness. It also explores attitudes and values, those aspects of life we hold dear which are hopefully more positive than negative. Students need to be encouraged to reflect on these in ways which helps them to reassess the past and their behaviour and performance in the future. The problem-solver is likely to become a dynamic citizen. None of this can be measured by league tables.
>
>   http://learningnotschooling.blogspot.com/2008/03/effective-schools.html

That this draws on the work of Lev Vygotski (1986) on how experienced mentors structure both learning and development by positive reinforcement and support, and on the agenda of emotional intelligence or literacy embraced by Daniel Goleman (1996) and Katherine Weare for schools (2004). This was added to this post to help students to begin to conceptualise their thinking: beginning research students find even this simple level of theorizing difficult. In research degree supervision, especially with part-time students, meetings between supervisor and student can be infrequent and may not be able to develop abstract thinking without scaffolded support. Another post discusses the

nature of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and reality. If knowledge signifies *what we think we know* and is always testable and falsifiable, intellectual clarity and caution are both necessary to the developing researcher. Constructing the argument of the thesis is therefore an important skill, enabling students to make their arguments persuasive, evidenced, checkable and transparent.

This opens up the debate about andragogy and pedagogy – that is, how best to educate adults, and whether this is different from teaching children. Malcolm Knowles (1990) introduced this discussion in the 1960s based on his own adult education practice, unfortunately contrasting andragogy with a diminished style of pedagogy in schools. This discussion about *how adults learn* needs to be developed for the digital age: Knowles' emphasis on open discussion of real life issues can best be achieved by a mixture of face to face and electronic conversations; as this develops research as a personal problem-solving strategy, the learning becomes deep-rooted. Paulo Freire, whose adult education focused on real-world micro-politics, called this process 'consciousness raising' (1970; Freire and Macedo 2000: 80-110). The blog therefore links the applied research that the students are undertaking with critical issues, which leads to *critical studies theorizing* (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) – focusing on issues of bias, equity, respect, autonomy, democracy and personal empowerment. Thus *Learn, Live, Thrive* discusses multicultural education and religion (e.g. Christians and Muslim relations on http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com/2008/03/christians-and-muslims.html), epistemology, knowledge, the nature of truth, bias in relation to the curriculum (http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com/2008/04/one-damn-lie-after-another.html), and other appropriate themes. The emphasis is that education should respect and empower students who are regarded as equals and co-learners with adults, rather than diminish them through authoritarian and superior attitudes by teachers. This style of theorizing is affirmed for educational action research by Carr and Kemmis (1986), a foundation text for teacher research, and for 'critical' multicultural relationships by Kincheloe and Sternberg (1998).

Keeping up the posts is not a chore because it feels to me when engaged with it as a creative research habit – a habit I wish to model to students. This 'catches' ideas that crop up in conversation, or as a result of reading, and invites further thinking. Where I complete other items such as book reviews or articles, a summary is reshaped for the blog, often with a live-link to the published review in WRaP. For example, two book reviews on therapeutic education enabled me to share this with a different audience. I will just quote part of each to show how research with opposite conclusions should be analysed and synthesized. The issue is whether education should teach content, or develop people, so it is central to the core aims of education. One work applauded the therapeutic nature of special needs education; the other criticized all attempts to offer a general therapeutic approach and argued that what is taught is more important than personal development:

A. I have just reviewed a book on "therapeutic education" (http://escalate.ac.uk/4752) which raises issues. The authors mean positive pupil-centred education which is non-conflictual: since the book's educational focus is a special school, this is described as 'healing', hence therapeutic. It is defended through reference to therapists such as Maslow and Rogers. Of course, the authors are describing 'good', motivating and positive education *per se* and the work 'therapeutic' is a misnomer. A therapist will have had substantial education and training to develop a knowledge and expertise to contribute to health care and child development. …
There are general things that teachers can do to help children with non-acute developmental delay or with emotional and behaviour difficulties which are not severe. Indeed this helps the therapist because some ground has been covered and acute cases better identified - there will be some pupils who make progress and don't need to be referred. Although we might call this 'good' education, based on positive relationships, teachers and others do need both training and consciousness raising to change practice.
For example, behaviourist rewards and punishments are often a school's only strategy to deal with challenging attitudes and behaviour. This aims at submission rather than personal growth and actually doesn't work. Punishments escalate to exclusion when the problem gets passed on to others and the pupil remains stuck. Education should be 'healing' in a broad sense, and promote personal growth. This is main focus for the training needed - a simple message to understand but more difficult to put into practice routinely….

B. Reviewing another book (http://escalate.ac.uk/4866) this time a diatribe *against* 'therapeutic education' (which it only vaguely defines), it turns out to be a polemic against two things - 'positive psychology', and pathologising people and emotions (thus promoting the dependent diminished self). These two points at least I have sympathy with. 'Positive psychology' promotes optimism and happiness as ways of coping with life and thereby living longer. It takes an objectivist realist view of knowledge so they are positive positivists. They see themselves as enemies to constructivist psychologists, who use qualitative methods. Positive psychology promotes the pursuit of happiness into a therapy - the solution to all life's problems is to find a way to make negative experiences meaningful, learn from them and achieve this 'real' contentment. A negative psychology would be to recognise negative emotions as OK and helpful, to accept them and learn from them - not rejecting the negative and turning it to a positive, but learning to relax with it….
July 2008. http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com/2008_07_01_archive.html

These model also how to introduce one's own voice to the argument, a key skill needed by new researchers. Other items have developed from current reading. So "Heroic Resisters in Rotten Systems" stemmed from the reviewing the work of psychologist Philip Zimbardo (2007) on how bad systems such as prison services can influence

people to act unethically. This is applied to education in a call for teachers to develop moral resistance in pupils through reading, discussion, debate and social action. "What is Knowledge" came out of a discussion about ontology with a PhD student and other supervisor and introduced the concept of ontology, i.e. how to identify what is real. "Britishness and Englishness" was rooted in an editorial article in a new journal *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World*, the author Marika Sherwood being British of Hungarian background. I will just quote my conclusion:

> In America, to be American in spite of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, meant something ideologically. To be American was to create and benefit from 'opportunity' (the reality was more restricting). Americans are even now re-evaluating what it means to be American, since the past fifty years have been found wanting.
>
> I therefore contend that seeking out an English, or British, cultural heritage is a red herring, and is potentially divisive and damaging. What we should be doing is following Barack Omama's lead in the USA and take Englishness, and Britishness by the scruff of its neck, shake it up, re-evaluate it, and decide together as a nation of mixed origins and experiences what Britishness *ought* to be, what ideals we should be promoting, and what prejudices we should be attacking. Then, and only then, will we have something worthy of our loyalty.
> http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com/2009/01/britishness-and-englishness.html

The blog "The Banality of Injustice" stems from the work of Hannah Arendt (1994), a German Jewish writer who coined the phrase "the banality of evil" in her 1963 account of the trial of the Nazi Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem. She argued that these killer Nazis were not monsters, but ordinary people doing their daily jobs unquestioningly. They loved their wives and children and found satisfaction in their work – however much we now find this grossly misguided. Following Zimbardo's (2007) lead to promote the banality of heroism – that is regarding heroism as an everyday normal activity rather than an elite performance, I explore the notion of *injustice being socially entrenched* as prejudiced attitudes, the 'banality of discrimination, as it were, seeking an *education for resistance* (i.e. heroism) to oppose it (Bigger 2009a).

The final post discussed here is that on Antonio Gramsci, mentioned above. Gramsci was an Italian Marxist, imprisoned by Mussolini, whose prison notebooks are regarded as Marxist theorising of great significance (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1971). His central concept is that of *hegemony* – that is the complexity of power and authority, especially of the state over civil society. I apply the concept to current education and social issues, as the following extract shows:

> This idea of slow revolution (non-marxists tend to call it improvement or progress, without always defining the criteria) is one we can apply to many aspects of education, attitude and practice. The 'intellectual world' is inclusive of everyone who thinks and articulates clearly, which should ideally be everyone. 'Thinks' means to think about life, experience, society, community, politics, justice and democratic empowerment. That is a challenge, and alas runs counter to the concept of intellectual found in the Academy.
> http://learnlivethrive.blogspot.com/2009/02/gramsci-hegemony-and-social-complexity.html

There is a principle at work here, to encourage students to see relevance in research for the contemporary world, to apply theory to their own experiences, for form arguments, and to find their own voice.

In conclusion, academic blogging has potential at several levels: my interest in this paper is how blogs can support the research student experience. The individual blog helps to structure tutorial dialogue, to refine the research proposal, to maintain short-term deadlines, and to encourage students to find their own voice. It encourages an on-line academic conversation which remains on the record. The general blog models a research diary and introduces ways of theorizing from which students may gain inspiration for their own argument and discussion.

All articles and conferences papers so far appearing explore academic blogging with small numbers of students; so also does this discussion, since a single research supervisor works with very few students. However the use of email conversations has been a regular feature of supervision relationships for many years; the blog is an extension of this and enables notes to be collected and sequenced usefully. The developments reported here cover one full year of active blog use, but are of necessity preliminary in that more time will be needed to demonstrate that blogging has actively enhanced the understanding and performance of students on their long term projects. The blogs I have considered have been designed as scaffolding tools for theorizing, developing an on-going dialogue between supervisors and students, so enhancing periodic tutorials.

I recommend further development of research diary blogs, but there are issues to consider. The recent papers on academic blogging suggest that if blogs support students' real progress and is not seen as artificial, students will find it useful in practical terms. Some students are more open to the blog diary than others – it is a personal discipline and the relationship has to be nurtured by supervisors. Students may have a similar reluctance to keep a paper reflexive research diary regularly. Staff using it can support or destroy the process by responding or not, so proactive encouragement of it by staff is important.

Acknowledgements

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