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To cite this article: Lucinda Kerawalla , Shailey Minocha , Gill Kirkup & Gráinne Conole (2008) Characterising the different blogging behaviours of students on an online distance learning course, Learning, Media and Technology, 33:1, 21-33, DOI: [10.1080/17439880701868838](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439880701868838)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439880701868838>



Published online: 04 Mar 2008.



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Characterising the different blogging behaviours of students on an online distance learning course

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Since the early years of the twenty-first century there has been an increasing interest in using Web 2.0 technologies to support learning in Higher Education. However, previous research suggests that the integration of blogging into courses can be difficult and cites problems with issues such as student compliance. We adopt a learner-centred perspective and explore students' (rather than their educators') understanding of how blogs and blogging can support distance learning in Higher Education. We report on a study of UK Open University (OU) students on an online distance learning Masters course, that has enabled us to determine the issues that are important to these bloggers, and we describe five ways in which they appropriated blogging to suit their individual needs. We discuss the importance of making blogging activities flexible so that students can blog to meet their own needs whilst still attending to the requirements of their course.

Keywords: blog; blogging; higher education; distance learning; student experience; blogging skills

Introduction

In recent years there has been a rapid growth and awareness of Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and wikis that offer new opportunities for networking (Instone 2005) and there is an increasing interest in using these technologies to support learning in Higher Education (Weller, Pegler, and Mason 2005). Whilst there have been several studies about how blogging can support learning through, for example, the development of knowledge communities (e.g. Oravec 2003), supporting meaning-making (Fiedler 2003) and enabling the sharing of resources and opinions (Williams and Jacobs 2004), it appears that little attention has been paid to exploring the *student* experience of blogging. It is recognised that students need to develop blogging skills, such as finding a suitable 'voice' for learning (Mortensen and Walker 2002) and writing (Abdullah 2003) in a public space, but what challenges do students face when they are trying to blog? And how do their perceptions of these challenges impact upon the ways in which they use their blog? In this article we will address these questions and report on the findings from interviews with 15 students enrolled on a postgraduate online distance education course at the UK Open University (OU). We will report on the factors that the students attended to when blogging and discuss five distinct types of blogging behaviours developed by students on this course.

Background

Despite some positive examples of how blogs can be used to support learning (e.g. Dickey 2004; Huann, John and Yuen 2005; Burgess 2006; Farmer 2006), there are other studies that suggest a

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degree of caution. Problems with blogging for learning can include haphazard contributions to blogs, minimal communication between students through their blogs and poor or inadequate quality reflection on the course materials as evidenced in blog content (Krause 2004). Homik and Melis (2006) report that students engaged in only a minimal level of blogging to meet assessment requirements. Williams and Jacobs (2004) report on the introduction of blogs to MBA students and encountered problems with poor compliance with the course's blogging requirements: 33% of the students thought they had nothing valuable to say in their blog; and a further 33% thought blogging would not be worth their efforts. Other issues include the need for students to have developed skills in selecting appropriate material to hyperlink in their blog, the problem of plagiarising from others' blogs (e.g. Oravec 2003), and the issues surrounding self-disclosure in online environments (Joinson 2001a, 2001b).

The findings discussed above suggest that students are often task-focused and outcome-oriented, that they can find it difficult to understand the rationale of blogging, and that they may be unable to recognise how blogging could enhance pre-existing learning activities. These studies suggest that we need a better understanding, from the student's perspective, of why so many experiments with blogs have not produced the desired results. All students on any course with blogging activities will have received the same set of activities and guidance, yet their blogs can exhibit distinctive styles (Williams and Jacobs 2004). Indeed, the very nature of a blog as essentially a blank canvas surrounded by a selection of built-in tools (e.g. a word processor, a blog roll and RSS feed) (Kerawalla et al. 2007), positively encourages users to appropriate blogging software for their own individual learning needs. Boyd (2006, 1) argues that as all blogs are different, the activity of blogging is best described as 'a diverse set of practices that results in the production of diverse content on top of what we call blogs'. It is students' personal perceptions of the issues surrounding the manifestation of these 'diverse practices' that we are interested in exploring here, within the context of an online distance learning course that we chose for our empirical investigations. For example: Why do some students not communicate with each other via their blogs? What are the specific issues involved when thinking about writing in a public space? Answering these questions may help us to increase our understanding of the student experience of blogging.

Methodology

Participants and their course

The students were enrolled on a new MA online distance learning course – *The eLearning Professional* – presented by the OU. It has been designed for e-learning practitioners in post-school education and training contexts. The main aim of the course is to encourage students to reflect upon their learning and their own professional practice through 'reflective' writing. This was a new course (launched in September 2006) and the course designers were keen to explore various new technologies (blogs, wikis, podcasting and an e-portfolio) alongside existing tools used on many other OU courses (email and an online, asynchronous, text-based discussion forum). Students were advised to try blogging throughout the 20-week course and to reflect upon whether it could support their own learning and/or whether they might like to incorporate blogs into their own teaching. The blogs were hosted on the OU intranet and were visible only to tutors and other students on the course.

In addition to three assignments, students created and collected various pieces of evidence (e.g. personal reflections documented in Microsoft Word or their blog) of their developing competencies in the areas of technology, communication and research and practice, and added these to a personal e-portfolio which was submitted for their final assessment. Use of the blogs was *not* statutory and blog content was not assessed unless the student submitted posts in their final e-portfolio. The course materials suggested that blogs *may* be a suitable environment in

which some of the reflective activities could be completed, but it was left to the students to decide whether or not to follow the suggestions. Course teams had no expectations about the ways in which the blogs would be used beyond possibly supporting the suggested activities. The students were free to use the blogs in any additional way they wished, whilst adhering to the OU computing code of conduct and guidelines for working in online environments.

Overall, 108 students enrolled on the course: 36.4% male and 63.6% female, with most between 30 and 60 years of age. Two recruitment notices were posted on the course website asking for volunteer participants for our research once the course had ended. The notices emphasised that we had no expectations about the nature of the blog posts and that we were interested in how the *students* had found their blogs useful. We received 15 positive replies from 13 females and 2 males (mean age 47.7 years, range 29–55 years). The participants in our study were resident in the UK (10), Philippines (1), Canada (1), Spain (1), Cyprus (1) and the USA (1). The mean number of participant blog posts over the whole course was 14 (range 0–31 excluding an outlier who posted 99 times) and the mean number of non-participant blog posts was 11 (range 0–43) suggesting that, with the exception of the outlier, our participants were representative of the course as a whole.

Data collection

Each student gave consent that we could access, read, analyse and use anonymised quotes (as a part of our research and dissemination activities) from their blogs that they had posted prior to the recruitment date. Firstly, each blog was read carefully and a list was made of the different types of content. This enabled us to personalise the interview schedule, where necessary. For example, if a blog contained a large number of photographs the student was asked further questions about the reason for their inclusion.

Following a review of the literature, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed which gave students an opportunity to discuss the following issues:

- The content of their blog, and their rationale for its inclusion;
- Their opinions about whether and how blogging made any impact on the way they learned;
- Their experience of writing in a public space;
- Their perceptions of ‘community’ amongst the course bloggers;
- Their opinions about the utility of blog comments; and
- The degree to which blogging was integrated into their learning on the course.

The students were interviewed by two co-present researchers using a conference telephone; one led the interview and the second had an opportunity to ask for any additional elaborations at the end of the session.

Data analysis

Analysis of interviews

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. This was an exploratory study so we adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) for our analysis which focused on the identification of emergent themes in the data. Individual responses to each question were grouped together if they addressed a common theme. The sub-themes were grouped together under the following four top-level emergent themes:

- (1) Perceptions of, and need for, an *audience* (defined as whoever reads the student’s blog)
- (2) Perceptions of, and need for, *community* (defined as the group/s of people to whom a student may feel attached to through blogging)

- (3) *Comments* from other bloggers (defined as the communication between students through use of the commenting facility in their blogs)
- (4) *Presentation* of the students' work in their blog in terms of grammar, spelling and academic rigour, etc.

Following this, we were interested to see whether student blogging behaviour could be sub-divided into groups, based upon students' responses to the questions within each of the four themes identified above. Firstly, we noted two students who did not engage actively with blogging on their course, so they were grouped together as representing 'blogging avoidance behaviour'. Next, we started examining the documents containing the other students' responses about 'audience', and explored whether there were any commonalities between any of the responses. For example, we found that only two of the bloggers spoke explicitly about wanting to use their blog to build up a network of resources for themselves and their audience; three students used their blogs to communicate with a small audience only; four students said that they blogged mainly for themselves and not for an audience; and a further four students were quite wary of their audience. We then explored further and found that the groupings were consistent within the remaining three themes (community, comments and presentation). In this way, we identified and characterised five different kinds of blogging behaviour:

- (1) Blogging avoidance
- (2) Resource network building
- (3) Support network building
- (4) Self-sufficient blogging
- (5) Anxious, self-conscious blogging just to complete the suggested course activities

We will characterise each of these groups below.

Analysis of blog content

Following the interviews we noted that the pre-interview analysis of blog content did not address the issues that the students had identified as important in their interviews (audience, community, comments and presentation). Consequently, we re-analysed the blogs to explore the ways in which the four groups of students attended to and engaged with their audience and course community through addressing them directly and/or revealing personal details about themselves and their lives. We focused our analysis on the following areas:

- whether the student explicitly addressed their audience;
- whether the student revealed their emotional state at the time;
- whether the student revealed details of their learning activities beyond those explicitly suggested by the course materials;
- whether the student revealed details of their personal non-learning activities;
- the average number of posts and comments per behavioural group over the whole course.

New lists of blog content were made and comparisons of types of blog content were drawn between the five behavioural groups.

Findings

In this section we characterise each of the five blogging behaviours by reporting on students' interview responses within each of the four themes identified above (audience, community, comments and presentation). We also include findings from the re-analysis of their blogs as well as illustrative excerpts from the blogs.

Blogging avoidance

The two students who avoided blogging said that they could not find a use for blogging and were happy with their pre-existing learning approaches. One said:

I highlight and write pencil comments on paper documents ... blogging is not very suitable and useful for me.

This student posted only a quote and a photograph and said he did so solely to experience using the technology. The other student posted a single photograph of her pet. She had strong opinions about academic blogging and said that:

I have a problem with study blogs ... I don't think that the institution should feel like it belongs to them.

Also, she said that she found it difficult to sit down at a computer and think 'on demand'. She said that she found blogging to be 'intimidating' and that it was 'difficult to develop the right sort of voice'. However, both of these students did read other blogs and left occasional comments.

Resource network building

Audience

These two students regarded their audience as a potentially valuable resource of ideas, constructive criticism and links to further resources. They explicitly addressed their audience and used their blogs to reach out and seek people and resources, as illustrated in the following post:

Helo [*sic*], to all of you who are visiting me in this virtual space. I hope we can share knowledge, culture and interesting issues about teaching in general, online and e-Learning. Welcome!!

They conceptualised their blogs as being a collection of resources and in this way their blogs portrayed the views of the blogger in relation to others.

Community

Community was important to these students and they aimed to be part of as large a group as possible. One student said that she thought blogging was better than forums because:

There was so much more learning and sharing of information,
and the other described how she had:

visited other peoples' blogs ... there are lots of interesting articles and links, sources of information.

One of these students agreed with some literature she had read for her coursework and wrote about this in her blog as follows:

... a weblog is a unique entity. It has its own autonomous space online; it is personal reflective micro-publishing that requires audience participation. (Ward 2004). Blogging has reading and evaluating multiple perspectives at its heart and this helps students to formulate their own ideas and start to express them ... becoming more information literate in the process. Blogs 'allow students to be active participants in the process, not just readers and writers without reach.

Comments

These two students actively sought and welcomed comments from other people. One explained that comments were useful because:

You can see other possibilities, things that you have never thought of before. It is a way of enriching yourself.

Consequently, they tried to make their posts engaging and to respond to comments. Surprisingly, these students did not post to their blog regularly (mean of six posts across the whole course). They received an average of one comment per post.

Presentation

These resource-network builders said that they paid attention to checking their spelling and grammar as well as making sure that their posts made sense. One described how:

Before I write down something and put it in the blog I do think a lot, ‘oh have I spelt it correctly, does it make sense’, and I read it over and over again.

These blogs contained little personal information apart from an introductory photograph of the student, as they saw their blogs as strictly study-related. Both students said that they tried to adopt an engaging style of writing that included humour and ensuring the posts were not lengthy. One student was keen to draw in her readers by ensuring that all her posts were connected in some way to other material, either in her own blog or places on the internet. These students wanted to make their blogs places that others would want to visit, so ensured that they were well-written, clear and engaging.

Support network building

Audience

The three students who used their blogs to build a support network were extremely sociable and used their blogs to reach out to other members of a small, exclusive community of other students on the course that had evolved over time. All said that they blogged for academic purposes and for emotional support. One explained that:

I didn’t mind because we were all students in the same boat, so I felt quite protected in a sense ... it doesn’t matter that I have got into tiz about this or I think that and somebody else doesn’t.

They said that they were not inhibited by writing in a public space and often wrote for their audience, or at least bore them in mind. All three explicitly addressed their audience in a variety of ways that made their blogs engaging, such as:

- Questioning them (e.g. ‘*what d’you think?*’, ‘*y’know what...*’)
- Thanking them for their help
- Asking for advice (‘*is this good enough?*’)
- Apologising for moaning
- Referring to other blogs
- Giving technical advice when they have solved a problem
- Saying ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’
- Using writing techniques to draw readers in (e.g. ‘*it’s a bit long, don’t be put off*’, and ‘*read on if you want to discover more of my adventure*’)

These blogs represented not only the students’ views in comparison to others, but also their emotional and personal lives as students. They appeared to use blogging as a form of catharsis, especially when stressed, and the audience seems to be important here, as illustrated by the supportive comment received in response to the post in the following example from one of these blogs:

Puff, pant, hyperventilate

AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!

Argh!

ARRRRRGH!!!

AAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaAAAAaaaaAARGH!!!

They're putting online conferences for week 14 ... and I haven't finished week 12's work. And ... I haven't even looked at week 13 yet. And ...

AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!

This course is relentless! I am making a mental note that too many online activities can be off-putting to students who are struggling to keep up ...

AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!

Comments (5)

Ouch!

The best bit of advice I ever had (when the children were young) was 'if you feel like you are at the end of your tether, tie a knot and hang on.' Calming thoughts to you!

Community

These students were part of a small, emotionally close group of around 6–8 people for whom blogging became a central part of their course. One student described how he was inspired to participate in the community as it greatly enriched his learning experience and provided him with support:

[previously] I was content to beaver away on my own. Obviously, [this course] was increasingly about interacting ... the ideas led me to other roads, other ideas. There were times when I thought I'd never complete the course. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the blog. When I think in my mind, where did [this course] happen, predominantly the location was the collective blogging space.

Another student in this group found that the community nature of the blog was important in inspiring her to write and in giving her space to express herself in full:

I wouldn't have written this [material] if it had been in a word document. It was the fact that it was out there for people to read that drove the whole thing.

A further student spoke of the way in which the blog helped her to feel part of a community even though she was geographically isolated by several thousand miles:

[at one stage] I was on the other side of the planet but I certainly didn't feel isolated when I was writing things using the blog.

One of these blogs evolved over time to become the hub of this small community (this blog was kept by the outlier student who blogged extensively). Below are some examples of the comments on this student's blog that probably helped to build the community:

I feel we've got a real community of learners going here, where we not only share ideas but give each other practical help by sharing tools and resources and pieces of work. And I think that's a fantastic achievement, don't you?

Thank you for writing this well researched piece to argue with Perkins. I like your discussion about consumers.

Hi XX, I love reading your blog too!! I think it's the hottest, everybody wants to leave a comment! Could you share your ePortfolio with me? I think I managed to share mine with you, can you see it?

Your blog, along with several key others, has kept me sane over the last few months. I don't know how you do it, managing to juggle all these roles and maintain a sense of humour.

Hi XX – I love the way you talk crazy to yourself – It helps keep me sane! Keep up the ranting.
Ps – Sorry to hear you've been poorly, and pleased to see you're back in action

These students’ blogs continued numerous references to their current emotional state, which is likely to have bound this small community closely together. The blogs included reference to stress, frustration, happiness, grief, enjoyment and boredom. Also, the blogs referred to the students’ personal experience as learners, such as working out how to balance family life and how easy or difficult they found the coursework. The students included information about their social life, such as photographs of their children and details of weekend events.

Comments

These students wanted and expected comments and read them all. They said that comments were useful for aiding their own understanding, for the exchange of ideas and opinions, and they were a source of emotional support. They explained that:

‘very often comments were what made the light bulb go off in my head’, and ‘if you’re feeling miserable and someone says ‘ah never mind so am I’. Then I know it’s not just me.’

When reading these blogs, we found that the comments formed an additional (parallel) artefact, besides the course-related posts, that seemed to help to build and maintain this close network of students.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these students’ blogs contained the highest mean number of posts (33) and comments (100) over the course. The student whose blog had become the hub posted the most (99 times) in this period and received the most comments (146) which is testament to the engaging content of her blog in terms of both academic and social content.

Presentation

These students said that they were not overly concerned about checking their posts for grammar and spelling mistakes. However, they were the only group who talked explicitly about being careful not to offend:

I wouldn’t name people or rant about them. I wouldn’t attack somebody else.

They adopted an informal, warm and friendly tone. One student described writing her blog as being like speaking into the keyboard really.

Their posts contained high quality academic material interspersed with social items. They were written in a thoughtful, yet spontaneous and naturalistic manner. Two of these bloggers posted several photographs and one student included a photograph with almost every post, for example, a photograph of two empty deckchairs that visually depicted his difficulty completing some course activities:

Something missing



Trying to get my head round this week’s activities left me feeling about as clever as two empty deckchairs. I had to read the instructions about 10 times and sneak a look at several other people’s blogs before I finally managed to make 2 little lists of ‘eLearning competencies’ and ‘research skills’ that I plan to develop.

Self-sufficient blogging

Audience

These four students stated explicitly that their blog was mainly for themselves and that their audience was not of great importance to them

People could read it if they are interested and they have to cope with what they find.

One student was travelling a lot so used her blog as an internationally accessible and reliable storage space for her work, and another decided that the blog would be for his own notes. These students' blogs were distinctly inward-looking and contained personal creations that represented the views of the blogger only. The example below illustrates how entries to one of these blogs were often lists of URLs that attracted few/no comments:

December 23, 2006

<http://online.chigwell-school.org/online/default.aspx>

for comparison:

<http://moodle.org/sites/>

See also: <http://weblogs.asp.net/jan/archive/tags/SharePoint/default.aspx>

Posted at 11:08 PM | Comments (0)

Only two of these students addressed their audience: one acknowledged another student's blog as agreeing with her opinions and the other thanked her tutor for her help.

Community

These students were not community-focused. They did read other blogs, as exemplified by one who said that:

If I was puzzled by something ... I'd do a quick circuit round the blogs [to] answer my question, or set me in the right direction,

but they did not make a conscious positive effort to build relationships. They rarely included any indication of their emotions. Accounts of their experiences as learners were mainly diaries of what they had done or plans of what they needed to do next. Only one student briefly mentioned a holiday. Consequently, their relationship with others was rather distant.

Comments

These students did not expect or seek comments and rarely read or responded to any that they received. One described how:

'I didn't write to get comments. I was surprised when I did get them' and 'I thought I should answer it but what's the point? I didn't always get back to them as I didn't want to get carried away from the core work.'

It appears that these views are linked to the way in which these students viewed their audience as relatively peripheral and their blog posts as being personal reflections primarily for their own benefit (see above).

The number of posts by these students varied widely, from 3–19 in the three-month period. The student that posted the most was using his blog as a personal notebook and the student that posted the least actually gave up blogging altogether after eight weeks of the course because she was not finding it useful.

Presentation

The self-sufficient bloggers said that they were concerned with the presentation of their posts. They checked the content, ensured their writing was of a good standard and avoided too many negative posts about any difficulties they were having. One student described how:

‘I don’t think I owned up to how badly I was feeling about things at certain points. You want to put yourself in a slightly decent light’ and another admitted that ‘I suppose there’s a part of me that’s trying to impress.’

*Anxious, self-conscious blogging just to complete the suggested course activities**Audience*

Four students thought (incorrectly) that they would be penalised for not blogging so, despite the fact that it made them feel anxious and self-conscious, they continued throughout the course. They felt that their own inexperience as learners and users of technology, and their lack of confidence and potential incompetence would be revealed to others. One said:

‘I was worried that the other students on the course would think that my work was not highbrow enough’ and another that ‘blogs are very public, I don’t like that. I don’t believe that my work is of public interest.’

These blogs were inward-looking in that comments were not actively sought and posts were for the students’ own purposes only (‘it was just for me’). The content of these blogs was usually well-executed and formal and none of these students explicitly addressed their audience.

Community

These bloggers said that they did not seek involvement in the course community. One student appears to have assumed that others shared her perspective and would not want their posts to be read:

I didn’t read anybody else’s blog, partly because of the time and partly because to me even though it was a public thing I didn’t want to invade their space.

One student said that she lacked conviction that her own thoughts would be of interest to others, and also that her work commitments meant she often fell behind on the course and consequently she felt unable to contribute to discussions. However, she did read others’ posts (i.e. she ‘lurked’). She said:

I was looking at people’s blogs and that helped you feel part of a community. XXXX’s humorous posts cheered me up.

These students did not reveal much about their personal learning experiences, apart from one student who wrote about how she was finding blogging difficult (eventually she stopped).

Comments

These students reported that comments were useful but unexpected so they were surprised and happy when they got positive feedback. Two said that:

‘I didn’t really mind if I got no comments. I didn’t expect any because I didn’t really blog about anything anybody would want to read about’, and ‘there is part of me that thinks, are my opinions relevant?’

They posted infrequently (mean four times in three months) and mostly in direct response to suggested activities. They also received only a minimal number of comments (range 0–10).

Presentation of the blog

Three of the four students who felt self-conscious about blogging were less concerned with style and more concerned with controlling content. One student described that:

Potentially I did leave some things out, because I was worried that I had not got the right end of the stick and didn't want to look stupid.

The fourth student was very particular about both content and style and said:

It goes through a lot of filtering before it comes out on the page ... I would do it separately [in Word] and then cut and paste it into the blog.

Discussion

Many of the students enjoyed blogging and found it to be beneficial from both educational and social perspectives. They used their blogs in several ways, including community building, resource-consolidation, sharing ideas, catharsis and emotional support, or as a personal journal. However, some students found blogging problematic; they were concerned about revealing their personally perceived academic inadequacies to others (see Joinson 2001a, 2001b) and felt that they had nothing to say that would be of interest to other students on their course (see also Williams and Jacobs 2004). Others chose to blog mainly for themselves (e.g. by storing URLs or making personal notes) and not to communicate extensively with other students. These behaviours are akin to those reported previously by Krause (2004) and Homik and Melis (2006). When interpreting our findings, it is important to bear in mind that the students were on a relatively short course (20 weeks) and that, especially for those students who did not find blogging immediately useful, this may have restricted our view of how their blogging skills may have developed if given more time. It is possible, for example, that the students who were relatively anxious and self-conscious at first, or those who did not engage at all, may have developed their blogging skills or got over their apprehensions given more time.

In our study, we have conceptualised blogging behaviours as representing the efforts of students exploring blogging and utilising it to meet their own learning and personal educational needs, which was, in fact, one of the aims of their course. It is important to recognise that the current study differs from many of those carried out previously (e.g. Williams and Jacobs 2004) because in our data-set, students were not compelled to blog for assessment purposes, for example, and could avoid the activity if they wished. When considering the range of relatively freely developed blogging behaviours that we have identified above, and the range of individual learning needs that they met, it is perhaps understandable that some of the students in previous studies did not engage fully with the prescribed blogging activities that were designed by their educators.

Conclusions

This study has taken a student-centred approach to investigating the challenges that students face when presented with the opportunity to blog to support their learning. All the students in our data-set conveyed that their varied blogging behaviours emerged through the interaction of these four main factors:

- (1) Their perceptions of, and need for, an audience;
- (2) Their perceptions of, and need for, community;
- (3) The utility of, and need for, comments from other bloggers; and
- (4) Presentation of their blog.

All of these factors are pertinent when it is intended that learning may occur through blogging in a public online space. The students navigated their own ways through them and developed their individualised blogs but we were able to identify five distinct types of blogging behaviour:

- (1) Blogging avoidance;
- (2) Resource network building;
- (3) Support network building;
- (4) Self-sufficient blogging; and
- (5) Anxious, self-conscious blogging to meet perceived course requirements.

We can conclude that, within the context of the particular course in our study, blogging was successful as most students tried it out and devised their own (individual) ways in which it could support their learning. The range of behaviours we found within a group of 15 students demonstrates the flexibility of blogging, which may pose a challenge for educators who are designing courses with prescribed blogging activities. Our findings suggest that, in many circumstances, it may be appropriate to make blogging activities flexible, voluntary or loosely prescribed, so as to give students the opportunity to adapt blogging to meet their own needs, whilst still completing the required activities. We acknowledge that the participants in our study were self-motivated mature learners (and educators in their working-lives) undertaking online Masters level study, who kept the majority of their blogging activities closely tied to course requirements. More research is needed to explore whether similar blogging behaviours will be observed with younger and/or less experienced learners who may be given the freedom similar to the students in the current study, and/or who may be studying face-to-face.

Notes on contributors

Lucinda Kerawalla is a cultural psychologist and works as a Research Fellow in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, UK. Her research interests are in technology enhanced learning. Previously, she has published several papers on children's use of technology both within and across the classroom and the home contexts.

Dr. Shailey Minocha is Senior Lecturer of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) in the Department of Computing of the Open University (OU), UK. Shailey's research focuses on the effective design of electronic environments, with two related strands: (a) Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and service quality of e-business environments, and (b) information design and pedagogical effectiveness of e-learning environments. The core thrust of Shailey's research has been on investigating user behaviour with computer systems, users' requirements from technologies, and the nature of the user-system interactions, which influence the design and usability of electronic environments. She has a Ph.D. in Digital Signal Processing, Post-Doctorate in Adaptive User Interfaces from Technical University, Braunschweig, Germany, and an MBA from the OU.

Gill Kirkup is a Senior Lecturer in educational technology in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University. Since the 1980s she has researched, and published widely, on the uses of computers in distance education. For the past four years she had directed the Institute's Master's programme in online and distance education.

Gráinne Conole is Professor of E-Learning in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University in the UK. Her research interests include the use, integration and evaluation of Information and Communication Technologies and e-learning and the impact of technologies on organisational change. Two of her current areas of interest are focusing on the evaluation of students' experiences of and perceptions of technologies and how learning design can help in creating more engaging learning activities. She is co-editor of the recently published RoutledgeFalmer book *Contemporary perspectives on e-learning research*.

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