
Driving learning through blogging: Students' perceptions of a reading journal blog assessment task.

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Abstract

In 2007, a new assessment task, a reading journal blog, was introduced to undergraduate public relations courses at the University of Newcastle on Australia's East coast. It was designed to address two challenges: firstly to encourage student engagement with the required course readings to facilitate student learning; and secondly to equip students with the technical skills of blogging. There is evidence suggesting that this type of assessment task increases student engagement with required course reading, that the assessment task could have wider application than in public relations courses, and that it facilitates the development of students' technical skills in using new media. In this paper the context and design of the assessment task and the results of a student survey are presented. In addition to discussing the research findings, ways to further develop the assessment task are explored.¹

Introduction

This research project stems from a constructivist approach to learning – an approach that focuses on teachers providing opportunities for students to construct contextual meaning rather than students predominantly being

passive receivers of information (Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, Cruikshank, Mayer & Pintrich, 2001).

As in many other undergraduate courses, first and second year public relations students were required to substantially engage with the theoretical concepts and underpinnings of the field through a programme of directed reading throughout their studies. The directed reading aimed to facilitate students constructing new knowledge through making connections between the new information and what they already knew; and this in turn aimed to inform the class discussions and project work scheduled throughout the semester (Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Benjamin, 2000). The readings were also designed to introduce students to the specialised language of the public relations discipline to help to shape the way that students conceptualise and research public relations (Lattuca, 2006).

Reading to learn has long been a feature of higher education (Guthrie, 1982, cited in Maclellan, 1997). The first challenge addressed here, was to increase students' compliance with completing required reading as this

plays “an important role in classroom dynamics as well as individual achievement” (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000, p.59). The second challenge arose from recent academic literature in the communication discipline indicating that public relations graduates will need to be able to set up, maintain and contribute to blogs and make decisions about whether such tactics should be adopted in campaigns (Alexander, 2004; McAllister and Taylor, 2007).

The reading journal blog, that used blogging technology to establish and maintain a learning journal, was introduced for the first time in two public relations courses in 2007, namely the second year course Issues and Strategies in Public Relations in Semester One and the first year course Introduction to Public Relations in Semester Two. The blog was trialled in Semester One and, after taking into account the experiences of that semester, modified and implemented again in Semester Two.

A formal survey was undertaken in Semester Two to evaluate the students’ perceptions of the reading journal blog assessment task and to identify students’ opinions as to the strengths and weaknesses of the two specific aims of the assessment task. The first aim was measured by asking whether they felt the task contributed to their learning about public relations at an introductory level through engagement with the course readings and the second aim was measured by asking whether they felt the assignment had facilitated their development of technical skills in blogging. The survey was conducted in addition to the regular Student Evaluation of Course and Student Evaluation of Teaching surveys routinely conducted at the

University of Newcastle. Human Ethics committee approval was sought and received to conduct the additional survey for this research.

The context of the research

The first challenge, getting the students to read, was viewed as the more important of the two challenges given the existing literature on the crucial contribution of reading to both individual and group achievement (Maclellan, 1997; Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Failure to meet this challenge could have meant students would not have an adequate knowledge base on which to build more complex competencies in more advanced courses. This is supported by Maclellan (1997) who writes that students “must, further, coordinate their extant conceptual information with the information which is in the text in their efforts to construct a more sophisticated representation of the knowledge domain” (p. 280).

Braguglia (2006) found that although conventional wisdom deems that reading is important to college courses, it is mainly teaching staff who believe this. Her study found that 48% of students (but only 4% of college professors) were neutral or believed that reading assignments were unimportant to course grades (Braguglia, 2006). However Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac (2002) found that “students who take seriously the encouragement to read afford themselves a substantial practical advantage in test taking” (p.274).

Although most lecturers set required course readings, on average only about one third of undergraduate students complete the required reading by the

specified class deadline (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Karp and Yoels (1976, cited in Burchfield & Sappington, 2000) found that “an unprepared student is more likely to adopt the role of silent, uninvolved observer than is the prepared student” (p.59). Students who do not do homework, who come to class unprepared and who decline to participate in class discussions, have their learning achievements adversely affected (Burroughs, Kearney & Plax, 1989). If the majority of students are not undertaking the required readings, this has a tendency to become the norm in the class and, if compliance is not monitored by teaching staff, sends a message to students that required reading components are optional (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). Sappington et al., (2002) found that when reading compliance is deficient this “diminishes the potential for class discussion, appreciation of lectures, and mastery of the subject’s contents and concepts” (p.274). An overall casual approach to processing required reading may develop in students who typically do not have their reading progress evaluated by teaching staff (Maclellan, 1997).

In searching for a way to address this issue, the literature on assessment in higher education was consulted. Teaching is about designing experiences that enable and encourage student learning (Lattuca, 2006) and assessment is about getting to know our students and the quality of their learning (Rowntree, 1977, cited in Ramsden 1992). Boud (1988) argues that many research studies have shown that assessment methods and requirements have the greatest influence of any teaching component on how and what students learn. Learning can be facilitated through

good assessment design which includes explaining assignments and activities, clearly stating course expectations, and articulating assignments to the content of the class (Cabrera, Colbeck & Terenzini, 2001). It was clear that simply stating to students each week that it was important that they do the required reading was not going to work. From the literature (Maclellan, 1997, Sappington et al., 2002) it was gleaned that the development of an assessment task that facilitated independent student learning through directed reading could be a sound approach to the first challenge.

The second challenge was one that related to equipping students with the technical skills of setting up, maintaining and contributing to blogs, which is a skill that future public relations practitioners will need to have mastered (Alexander, 2004; McAllister & Taylor, 2007). Alexander’s comprehensive exploration of the challenges for the public relations curricula, although published in 2004, remains in large part the state of play in the field in 2007 (James, 2007). In identifying the need for educators to provide a thorough grounding in how technology can facilitate relationship management, a key component in public relations theory and practice, Alexander (2004) argued that there was “an urgent need for academics and practitioners to review current course and subject content and work towards ensuring future practitioners are capable of working in the new public relations environment” (p.4). A recent study found that about one-third of students felt either not very prepared or under-prepared to work with new media (Gower & Reber, 2006).

New media definitions remain unfixed, with some definitions of new media

focusing exclusively upon computer technologies and digital content production while others stress the cultural forms and contexts in which technologies are used (Dewdney & Ride, 2006). There are challenges for organisations deciding to enter into arenas such as blogging, but serious consideration must be given to including blogs in public relations campaigns, given the indications that they could be effective at establishing and maintaining relationships (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Future practitioners need to be adept in the basic technical skills of blogging but must also be able to analyse how new technologies can aid or hinder practice and provide organisational decision-makers with strategic advice on these issues (James, 2007).

Blogging is not as yet used widely in educational assessment settings and has only in recent years become incorporated into some mainstream public relations programmes (Williams & Jacobs, 2004; Velkov, Eiro-Gomes & Duarte, 2005; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Interestingly, public relations practitioners who embrace new technologies such as blogging are perceived within organisations as having more power, in that they are willing to be leaders in the industry and use new tools to better reach target publics (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007). Although only in the early stages of use in academia, “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” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 232).

It was the desire to bring together these two important assessment

dimensions—(a) reading to learn and (b) blogging—that drove this assessment task design. Underpinning this design was the philosophy that students would be encouraged to engage with “concepts, disciplinary or professional processes of thinking, and their related evidence and procedures” (Ramsden, 1992, p.191) rather than isolated curriculum material.

The assessment task linked in with other course assessment items which included preparing an annotated bibliography as a preparatory step towards a series of class debates on issues in public relations relating to tactics, media relations, new media, ethics and community relations. The courses culminated in major assessment tasks which included for the 1000 level course a public relations plan for a community organisation, and for the 2000 level course undertaking a communications audit and publication portfolio for a local client organisation.

The assessment task – Mark I

Learning journals have been “well described and advocated in the teaching literature” (Connor-Greene, 2000, p.44). Combining a learning journal with a blog was seen as a way to design an assessment task that responded to both identified challenges and would also foster the active engagement and personal investment factors that Angelo (1995, cited in Connor-Greene, 2000), considers crucial to effective teaching.

The task ran for 10 weeks of the 14-week semester, commencing in the week-two tutorial sessions. All tutorial sessions were held in computer laboratories. In this first iteration of the assessment task, it was assumed that students would have had experience

with blogs through their social networking activities. The task of setting up the blog was prescribed as homework. Students were instructed to create a new blog on www.blogger.com or similar website and to post their blog URL in the Discussion Board on Blackboard, the web learning interface used at the University of Newcastle. Students were then required to respond to the required reading each week with a blog entry of no fewer than 150 words. There was no upper limit set for word length and students were invited to write as much as they felt would facilitate their learning. Students were also advised not to include personal details on their blog for privacy reasons, and to report any unwanted postings to their course tutor immediately.

Taking into account that teachers can assist their students to undertake their reading with the intent of learning and that “reading to learn” is “effortful and problematic” (Maclellan, 1997, p.286), guidance and examples were provided to assist students with the task of summarising and making connections between new and current knowledge. Maclellan (1997) states that novice students may need help with the task of summarising and that it “is when students are effective in their summarising that they have control over their own learning” (p.286).

To augment the content summarising and knowledge connection-making processes, students were instructed that their weekly entries should complete the following sentence leads:

- a) I believe the key messages from this week’s readings were...

- b) The key points in the readings could be applied to my group’s work in that they...
- c) The readings made me think more about public relations theory/practice in that...
- d) The readings related to the other reading I’ve done in previous weeks in that...

Students were invited to add other comments and opinions related to the subject areas and were encouraged to comment on each other’s blog postings but this was not a requirement. Only a minority of students commented on other students’ blogs even though it was clearly indicated on the grading criteria that it had the potential to earn the student more marks.

Although not specifically documented in the literature reviewed, it seems that anecdotally most lecturers assign a maximum of 15% of the total course mark to learning journals, with many being assigned only 10% of the total course mark. To further encourage students to engage with course readings and to highlight the importance that the course placed on this activity as underpinning all other learning in the course, the reading journal blog was allocated 25% of the total course mark.

A marking rubric was developed for this assessment so that the task could be broken down into discrete components that could be individually assessed against a standard (Lattuca, 2005). According to Lattuca, many academics do not think carefully about the criteria and standards of performance that they will use to evaluate a given task by a student. This means that “neither student nor instructor is clear about what students are expected to do for a specific

assignment and what will serve as evidence of an excellent performance” (Lattuca, 2005, p.248). In this assessment task, if all criteria were fully met it was possible for the student to achieve full marks for their efforts. The marking rubric allocated marks not only on the basis of content but also on the basis of whether blogs had been completed on time and entries had been made at least weekly throughout the course. Comments made on other students’ blogs were also taken into account in the allocation of marks, in particular analytical and critical ability shown by students through the discussion of theories and practice, comparing alternative points of views and discussing the validity of the evidence presented in blogs.

No specific survey seeking feedback on the new assessment task during this first semester pilot was administered. A course evaluation survey was given to students. These surveys are routinely organised for all courses by the Corporate Performance Reporting unit of the University of Newcastle. The results were very positive with 97% of students responding to the course evaluation (response rate was 85%, n=71) agreeing with the statement: “the assessment items in this course support my learning”. From a lecturer’s perspective, the level of engagement with the assessment task in particular, the coursework projects generally, and the in-class discussion was extremely satisfactory. The overall standard of the final course group project was high, and although not directly comparable with previous years’ results, average grades for the course were higher.

The grade improvements may have been due to having made expectations

and grading criteria clear in the assessment materials (George & Cowan, 1999). The students knew what they needed to do in order to achieve the various levels of mark for each criterion in the marking rubric for the reading journal blog. This aligns with what students value in assessment.

Students study more effectively when they know what they are working towards. Students value transparency in the way their knowledge is assessed: they seek a clear relationship between lectures, tutorials, practical classes and subject resources, and what they are expected to demonstrate (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002, p. 10).

It was evident to the course tutors through observing in-class discussion and through the standard of work in written assignments that students had engaged with the required reading material. This gave the course coordinator the confidence to proceed in further developing the assessment task.

Evolution of the assessment task – Mark II

Although the assessment task worked well in Semester One for the 2000 level course, there were some issues that needed to be addressed if a similar assessment task was to be used in Semester Two with the introductory course. The main issue was the fact that the assumption that had been made about students’ experiences with blogging had been largely incorrect.

Subsequently in the next iteration, the blogs were set up in class time in week two. This enabled the tutors to demonstrate the process and troubleshoot as required while students undertook the exercise. Students were also able to help one another.

Another issue that required attention was building increased academic integrity into the assessment task. While no specific problem had arisen in Semester One, it was recognised that there was potential for a student to have another person write the entire blog without ready detection. Good assessment design should be able to minimise the opportunities for academic misconduct such as cheating and plagiarising while not reducing the quality and rigour of academic requirements (James et al., 2002). As such, the requirement was instigated that at the beginning of every tutorial, each student selected another student's blog on which to comment.

This had the three-fold effect of increasing the opportunities for critical reflection, of increasing the pressure on students to have their blog up to date each week and of being able to compare the writing that students were undertaking each week in class to that which was submitted to the blog outside of class times. Sample sentence "leads" were supplied to students to help model good constructive comments:

- a) I thought your point about _____ was interesting in that...
- b) I took the author's meaning to be quite different in that....

- c) I thought the way you approached the reading was helpful to other students as....
- d) I can't believe we saw things so differently. I totally disagree with what you said about _____ because...

The required responses to the readings were also altered to reflect the important aspects of the learning activity, namely summarising and beginning to make knowledge connections. Students were directed to write at least 175 words each week and at a minimum complete the following two sentence leads:

- a) I think the key points to remember from this week's readings were...
- b) The readings made me think more about public relations theory/practice in that...

Students were able to blog about other aspects but each week those two sentence leads had to be completed. Again, there was no upper limit set for student entries and students were invited to write as much as they felt would facilitate their learning.

It became clear as the semester progressed that the 'Mark II' reading journal blog assessment task worked better than 'Mark I' in that students were more likely to keep the blog up to date and dialogues between students about course readings were being established through the required commenting sessions each week.

In addition to the routine evaluation for the course, it was decided to conduct a student survey on this specific

assessment task to gather data that could inform further development.

The student survey - method

A new survey was developed with the intention of gathering information from students in the Semester Two course, prior to semester's end, to assist in determining whether the reading journal blog was an effective learning and assessment tool. The survey questionnaire included 12 Likert-type items which asked for levels of agreement-disagreement with statements relating to the reading journal blog assessment task. The research questions were written as statements and students were instructed to read each statement carefully and then to select the response on a five-point scale, from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', that most closely aligned to their opinion as to their degree of agreement or disagreement.

The research questions were:

- RQ1. The blog provided an opportunity for me to demonstrate what I learnt from the readings
- RQ2. Having to blog about the required readings set for each week encouraged me to read more of the set readings for this course than I have done in other courses.
- RQ3. Commenting on other students' blogs each week provided me with further insights into the content of the readings.
- RQ4. I had experience with blogging before this course.
- RQ5. Posting comments on other people's blogs was something I'd done regularly prior to doing this course.

- RQ6. The blogging assessment task tied in well with the class exercises and other assessment tasks.
- RQ7. If the blog assessment task was worth fewer marks towards my final assessment for this course I would have put less effort into it.
- RQ8. Having to blog each week about the readings was too demanding.
- RQ9. I think this blog assessment task would help me to incorporate a blog into a public relations plan for an organisation.
- RQ10. I think this sort of assessment would suit many courses at university.
- RQ11. The assessment items undertaken so far in the course have clearly related to the course content.
- RQ12. The assessment items in this course support my learning.

Research questions 11 and 12 were taken directly from the University's Student Evaluation of Course (SEC) questionnaire so that results from the answers to these questions in the research survey could be compared with those in the SEC questionnaire. If the responses given to the same questions in the two different surveys varied significantly it would cast some doubt onto the validity of the research project survey. The survey was open only to students enrolled in the Semester Two course, was administered online through Blackboard, and was anonymous in that there was no way to identify students with individual answers. Anonymity makes students feel safe from recriminations should they put forward criticism or complaints (Morgan, O'Reilly, & Parry, 2004).

The survey's aim was to identify students' opinions as to the strengths and weaknesses in the two dimensions of the assessment task. The first dimension was whether the task contributed to student learning about public relations at an introductory level and the second dimension was whether it facilitated the development of technical skills in the practice of blogging. A brief description of the project was included in Blackboard announcements which then linked to a complete description of the project. The opportunity to participate was also announced to students in class.

As the survey was a multiple-choice type response, there was no opportunity for students to identify themselves. At the end of this description of the survey, each student had the option of completing the survey questionnaire or navigating away from that page. A student's decision to participate or not could not affect their course results or any other aspect of their relationship with course lecturer or tutors. The decision to proceed to the survey page on Blackboard was taken as informed consent.

Table 1 – Student responses

	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	Mean
RQ1 learnings	41	48	7	1	3	1.77
RQ2 more reading	62	23	6	6	3	1.63
RQ3 insights	10	37	29	17	7	2.74
RQ4 blog experience	7	23	3	37	30	3.60
RQ5 blog posting	1	7	11	39	41	4.11
RQ6 other assessments	11	60	21	7	0	2.24
RQ7 fewer marks	14	27	23	24	11	2.91
RQ8 too demanding	9	13	20	44	14	3.43
RQ9 blog PR plan	7	46	27	17	3	2.63
RQ10 other courses	26	49	6	19	1	2.21
RQ11 relate content	24	69	3	4	0	1.87
RQ12 support learning	26	67	7	0	0	1.81

As the survey instrument was newly developed and had not been used before, factor analysis was conducted on research questions 1–10 to examine to what degree, if any, the survey measured the two intended dimensions of the assessment task. The results were analysed and components of the assessment task designated into 'strengths' or as 'opportunities for improvement'.

Results

The analysis was based on the responses of 70 students. The response rate to the survey from a possible 115 enrolled students was 61%. All students who participated in the survey answered 100% of the questions. Their responses are recorded in **Table 1** (above).

The dimensionality of the first 10 questions was explored using maximum likelihood factor analysis. Given the small sample size used in this analysis any results should be considered informative. Initial exploration of the Eigenvalues and scree plot indicated that the number of possible factors to be retained was

between 2 and 3. Further analysis resulted in the use of 2 factors which were rotated using a Varimax rotation procedure. The rotated solution, as shown below in **Table 2**, below, resulted in two interpretable factors, reading to learn and blogging skill. Only one question loaded poorly on both factors.

Table 2 – Rotated Factor Matrix ^a

	Factor	
	1	2
Learnings	.378	-.131
More reading	.489	-.186
Comments further insights	.473	-.105
Experience blog	-.189	.661
Posting blog	.021	.999
Tied other assessment	.558	-.110
Fewer marks	-.186	.239
Too demanding	-.495	.044
Blog PR plan	.372	-.055
Other courses	.773	-.109

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation

^aRotation converged in 3 iterations

When two factors were used it became clearer which factor individual questions contributed to most strongly and facilitated explanation of the results. The question ‘fewer marks’ loaded poorly on both factors and so

did not contribute to explaining the results. The two interpretable factors were the dimensions of ‘reading to learn’ and the ‘development of blogging skills’.

Table 3: Factors

Questions	Factor 1	Factor 2
Reading to learn		
This sort of assessment would suit other courses	.773	-.109
Tied in well with other assessment tasks	.558	-.110
Blogging each week on readings was too demanding	-.495	.044
Encouraged me to read more readings than other courses	.489	-.186
Comments provided further insights to reading content	.473	-.105
Blogging allowed me to demonstrate what I’d learned	.378	-.131
Allow me to incorporate a blog into a PR plan for an organisation	.372	-.055
Blog		
Experience blog	-.189	.661
Posting blog	.021	.999
Loaded poorly on both factors		
Worth fewer marks	-.186	.239

Discussion

Because 39% of students did not respond to the survey, the results cannot be extrapolated to reflect the total view of the student cohort undertaking the course. However, the results indicate that for the 61% of students who did respond, a significant majority agreed that the assessment

task had provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate what they had learned from the readings (RQ1=89%) and that having to blog about the required readings set for each week encouraged them to read more of the set readings for this course than they had done in other courses (RQ2=85%). Significantly, 62% of respondents strongly agreed with the latter statement.

It was inconclusive whether commenting on other students' blogs each week provided students with further insights into the content of the readings (RQ3) with 47% agreeing with the statement, 24% disagreeing and a sizeable neutral response rate at 29%. This is an area of the task that will be examined to ascertain whether it is required at all or whether there is a problem in the design of the component. The strength of this particular aspect of the task may be related to the maintenance of academic integrity.

As expected from the experiences of students in the first iteration of the assessment task, RQ4 and RQ5 clearly indicated that the majority of the respondents were inexperienced with both blogging and posting comments to existing blogs. More than two-thirds (67%) of respondents indicated they had not had experience with

blogging before the course, and 80% disagreed with the statement "posting comments on other people's blogs was something I'd done regularly prior to doing this course". Given the academic literature emerging on the prevalence of blogging, and its potential impact on public relations practice, it seems clear that facilitating the development of technical skills in blogging for future practitioners, alongside the critical exploration of new media's impact on the field, will serve students well.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (71%) agreed that the blogging assessment task tied in well with the class exercises and other assessment tasks (RQ6). Only a small percentage (7%) disagreed with this statement.

Responses to RQ7 and RQ8 caused some surprise as a clear majority of respondents had been expected to agree that if the blog assessment task had been worth fewer marks towards the final assessment for the course students would have put less effort into it (RQ7) and that having to blog each week about the readings had been too demanding (RQ8). Although 41% of respondents did agree with RQ7, i.e. that they would have put less effort into the task, 35% disagreed with the statement and 23% were neutral. The assessment task was allocated 25% of the total mark for the course in order to motivate students to engage with the readings and to signify the importance of the activity. These results indicate that although a significant percentage of respondents were motivated by the marks available, over a third (35%) of respondents indicated that they would not have put less effort into the task had it been worth less. The setting of the mark as quite a high proportion of the overall course mark could be seen as a strength in that it could be

motivating people who would not normally apply themselves whereas other more studious respondents would do the required reading in any case. This supports what Burchfield and Sappington (2000) stated in that only about one-third of students have completed the required reading on any given day. The fact that 58% of students disagreed that blogging each week was too demanding, with only 22% indicating that it was too demanding, suggests that this schedule for updating the reading journal blog was in the main acceptable.

Although not a stated aim of the assessment task, several of the readings and one of the debate assignment topics within the course contextualised how blogging was being taken up by public relations practitioners and how public relations theorists were accommodating the phenomenon. As such it was seen as an interesting exercise to ascertain whether students felt they would be able to apply their knowledge and skills in this area. A small majority of respondents (53%) thought that this blog assessment task would help them to incorporate a blog into a public relations plan for an

organisation (developing a plan was part of their major course assessment). Only 10% disagreed with the statement. Teaching staff were encouraged by this result, given that these were beginner-level students in public relations. Disciplines outside public relations may also be encouraged by the results of RQ10, with 75% of respondents agreeing that this sort of assessment would suit many courses at university.

As previously stated, RQ11 and RQ12 were included in the survey to serve as a quasi-benchmark for the reliability of the other answers. There was close correlation between the answers given in the research survey and the standard course evaluation questionnaire in that 93% of respondents agreed in the survey that the assessment items undertaken so far in the course had clearly related to the course content (RQ11), whereas 90% agreed in the standard questionnaire. Similarly 93% of respondents in the survey agreed that the assessment items in this course supported their learning (RQ12), whereas 96% agreed in the standard questionnaire.

Table 4 – Summary of identified strengths and areas for improvement in the assessment task.

Identified Strengths	Identified Areas for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabled students to demonstrate learning • Encouraged them to read more than in other courses • Gave students experience with blogging • Gave students experience in commenting on established blogs • High assessment mark allocation motivated almost half the students to read to learn • Weekly updating of blogs • Increased confidence in students that they could apply blogging skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments on other students' blogs – more work on structuring this aspect of the assignment task is needed • Ascertain whether applied skills are central to a 1000 level course

Future challenges

Taking into account the overall positive results it is envisaged that this task will again be used in public relations courses in 2008-9. The rationale, modelling and logistics of having students commenting on each other's blogs will be further developed to take into account the results for RQ3 which was identified as an area requiring improvement.

If such a mechanism as this assessment task is to be used to motivate students to engage with required course readings, both within the public relations programme at the University of Newcastle and in other courses, innovative ways for integrating the reading journal blog into those courses will be required. Good assessment should not be tacked on as an afterthought but should be integral to course design processes (University of Newcastle, 2007). Students' assessment activities should not seem like a burden that is in some way additional to the learning they experience (James et al., 2002). Ramsden (1992, p.189) states that "the teacher who thinks about assessment in terms of what essential understandings he or she wants students to acquire [has] the tendency to focus on assessing isolated parts of the curriculum at the expense of the higher-order principles that link the parts together". This leads to students focusing on relatively unimportant activities that might be subject to assessment rather than focusing on more complex activities that are related to understanding (Ramsden, 1992).

Students could well become disillusioned if every course in which they enrolled had the same requirement for a reading journal blog based on the

set readings. This could have an effect of increasing the propensity to plagiarise from previous blogs for that subject. For each blog journal project there would need to be specific response requirements from course to course to keep the assessment task relevant and to discourage academic misconduct.

To this end, the reading journal blog for the second year Issues and Strategies in Public Relations course held in Semester One 2008 was redesigned. In this course there was a major group project and students were allocated to groups for the duration of the semester. Each group was required to set up and maintain a blog for their project, integrating summaries of the course readings and identifying connections with their particular group's project. More frequent audit points were established so that teaching staff could provide formative feedback on each group's work. This approach incorporated the course reading dimension, further developed blogging skills and also contributed to the group's overall cohesion. An analysis of this iteration is underway.

Conclusion

Although it could be argued that the results cannot be extrapolated to reflect the views of the entire student cohort, the strength of the responses in the key areas can provide a degree of guidance for further development of the assessment task and a degree of confidence for the course coordinator that this innovation is on the right path.

It is intended to repeat the survey with introductory public relations students in 2008 both at the Newcastle and Singapore campuses of the University of Newcastle to continue to gather data

on this assessment task as it develops. There have been initial discussions amongst several course coordinators from within the Communication discipline to ascertain the feasibility of implementing a coordinated approach to reading journal blogs for the courses offered and undertaking further research to explore the potential of this assignment task within the wider disciplinary context. There has also been some interest in this project from teaching staff within the Law School, which also struggles to motivate students to complete the considerable amount of course reading.

The results indicate that although the task is not perfect it does have the potential to address both the reading-to-learn dimension along with other course-specific dimensions. The possibilities may only be limited by the creativity and enthusiasm of course designers.

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