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## Briefing Paper

# Using weblogs to encourage reflective learning in History and Classics

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### INTRODUCTION

Everyone seems to have a Blog these days but can this informal style of communication really be useful in a higher education context? In the school of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh we began experimenting with a simple blogging tool in 2005 and have found that blogging can improve the level of reflection in students' learning and empower them to make the most of their face-to-face time with tutors. Our HCA sponsored trial followed the introduction of blogging into two history courses an Honours 3/4 level course and a Masters course, but we have since successfully used blogs with students at all levels of study.

### What we did

The two history courses were taught through ordinary lectures and seminars in addition to the online element. Each course had its own blog hosted within the university VLE and only visible to students and tutors from that course. Every week a different student from each seminar group would be in charge of the blog. This student posted a 1000-word commentary on a set document or historical text to meet a deadline set four days before the face to face seminar.

Over the next three days, every other student in the class were expected to post at least one comment in reply to the blog, either adding a further short comment on the reading, engaging with one or more of the points made by the blogger, or engaging with previous comments on the thread. No maximum or minimum length was specified for comments, but each had

both to be pertinent and to add something new to the discussion. A 'semi-formal' style, allowing the use of contractions and a lighter tone, but not textspeak was encouraged. All comments were to be posted by midnight on the night before the seminar, in order to give the tutor time to read them. In one case the students' blogging was marked and comprised 10% of the final grade in the other course blogging was expected but not assessed. The students also wrote an essay in which they demonstrated that they could follow the conventions of a formal piece of writing.

At the end of the project we concluded that blogging works well as part a blended learning strategy. The academic content of the blogs and the effort put into research by some students was impressive. The quality of the face to face discussions in the seminars was also excellent.

### The benefits of blogging for staff and students

- Students say that blogging is fun and stimulating. All the students who participated in the end of course survey reported that they would like to do blogging in future courses.
- Being blogger of the week gives a student the chance to become an expert in a subject and to engage with the topic at a deeper level. A discussion forum has the strength of putting the contributors on an equal footing but can lead some students to sit back and let others carry the burden. Designating a 'blogger of the week' gives that student the responsibility of organising their

own learning and finding ways to communicate it to others.

- Regular reading and commenting on the blog helps all the students to work in a measured way throughout their course and regularly reflect on the material.
- All students are more thoroughly prepared when they arrive at face to face seminars allowing that time to be put to good use.
- Reading the blog and comments allows the tutor to get a sense of what the group has understood or misunderstood and also what has inspired them. This allows him or her to structure the seminar to get the most out of the students and the topic.
- Quiet students and those who have English as a second language can blog at their pace without the pressure of a fast moving seminar discussion. In this way the tutor and other students become aware of their opinions, can encourage them and even draw them into the face to face discussions.
- Students can also learn from each other and emulate the approaches taken by the stronger students in the class.
- The text in a blog remains accessible and can be referred to for revision.
- Students can communicate more of their enthusiasm [or confusion!] using the semi-formal style of a blog. Blogging allows them to practice additional communication and interpersonal skills to those required for a traditional essay.

### Pitfalls

Technological failures, especially at the beginning of a session, can damage levels of student participation. Once it has been disrupted it can be hard to re-establish the rhythm of blogging and commenting. Blogging can also decrease in response to pressure from other course work and exams as term progresses. Blogging can be time consuming for staff and students.

Good preparation and consistency from staff can mitigate these problems.

### Recommendations from our experience:

1. Provide a careful introduction to the technology preferably with an opportunity for the students to try the blogging tool themselves and practice before you expect them to produce work for the course. [see briefing paper: Getting History Students Going with a VLE]
2. Conscientious participation in blogging can produce a heavy workload especially in large groups where it takes time to read all the comments. Consider blogging within the wider context of student coursework and staff workload and use it as one of a range of options for stimulating reflective learning.
3. Give clear instructions about the tone and content expected in the blogs and comments. Students need to understand how academic blogging is different from other tasks.
4. Think carefully about how the blogging will fit into the weekly rhythms of the classes and allow students and staff time to make full use of the blog. Don't set deadlines too close to seminars – tutors need time to read the blogs.
5. Marking blogs encourages participation and is also a fair return for students who often put a lot of work into preparing their entries. Devise a marking regime that gives students timely access to feedback without overloading tutors. It is not practical to give feedback on every comment but students need reassurance early in semester in term that they are doing what is expected of them. Thereafter less formal methods of feedback may be more appropriate.

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