Debating Chambers in Space

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It was a warm autumn in 1477 when the trouble began. Late on the afternoon of November 18th of that year, England's first printed book, *The dictes or sayengis of the philosophres*, tumbled from the press, and communication in English was never to be quite the same. The trouble-maker's name: William Caxton.

Ideas and the written English word still combine today, as then, to stir humans into passion and tranquility, into defiance and acquiescence. Black lettering on a white background is the primary vehicle by which important concepts have traditionally fought it out. Now, however, the new battleground is not merely rectangular sheets of white paper. It is websites and blogs.

What is happening and how does this matter to academia?

The concept of a personal website is fairly familiar. Within universities, it is a place where academics can publish their research or write a mini- polemic, technical or non-technical, for their readers. Indeed the young wonder how we survived before the internet.

Yet many academics still have no real working website, and some may not appreciate the way that news of their work might spread if they did.

A blog, in case you have rarely run into one, is a website with a key difference: readers are allowed their say. Blogs are debating chambers in computer space. They are evolving commentaries in journal form with comments and responses.

Great universities need great ways to share knowledge. The quality of information technology in a University is today fundamental, in our judgment, to its chances of success. The best institutions, we believe, will leave behind the mediocre partially *because* they have a clearly conceived, and carefully delivered, IT strategy. So universities have to make good predictions about the top technologies and then back them with cash. Furthermore, the leading universities need to invest before their customers demand the latest and greatest.

To get a feel for the future, it is hard to better a pithy introduction to one of the world's most famous blogs. Set up by two brilliant and tough-minded University of Chicago scholars, this is the Becker-Posner blog. Its opening words, on the day the site went live in 2003, were:

Blogging is a major new social, political, and economic phenomenon. It is an … exemplification of Friedrich Hayek's thesis that knowledge is widely distributed among people and that the challenge to society is to create mechanisms for pooling that knowledge. … The newest mechanism is the "blogosphere." There are 4 million blogs. The internet enables the instantaneous pooling (and hence correction, refinement, and amplification) of the ideas and opinions, facts and images, reportage and scholarship, generated by bloggers.

Both economist Gary Becker and Judge Richard Posner are pro-market thinkers; they argue for the efficiency of competition; and their blog, as they see it, is an example of how to compete in a global marketplace of opinions.

In our opinion, the personal website will keep its place, and it remains modern by the standards of the planet. Yet our hunch is that more UK academics would benefit from taking an initial step, and simply putting up all their work, and comments, regularly. If the purpose is to

be in the ideas business, a website that is only a picture and a list of courses taught is not much use.

One of us runs a site -- mixing newspaper articles and technical research papers -- that generates an flow of responses from countless nations at strange hours of the day. One of the nicest things is that on most mornings there is an email from a Thai professor, American journalist or Australian undergraduate, suggesting something, or fiercely disagreeing with an idea on the site.

Of course blogging is still new. Whether blogs will ultimately transform or displace the personal website nobody knows for certain. The data show that university students like blogging. Uptake at universities like ours has been large -- and it has been intriguing to watch how students have adopted, adapted, and occasionally corrupted, the use of the medium for their own purposes.

It is no surprise that most of our academics are only just beginning to experiment with blogs. Will it ultimately be a vibrant technology for them too?

First, blogging is in tune with the culture of higher education. It is egalitarian. It embodies the principle of academic freedom. Chat that spans disciplines and continents is easily facilitated.

One of us last week stumbled upon a debate, in student blogs, about whether the subject of economics was now unspeakably boring, and on the idea that the new psychological research on economics might rescue the subject from its technical tedium. Blogs give students a fruitful chance to complain on air.

Second, blogging aligns with the modern outward-looking aims of higher education -- in our own case an interest in raising a young university's international profile.

Publishing in a blog is also immediate. This is not a medium for peer-reviewed contributions to the academic debate. Different protocols apply. This is where the academic can be a semi-journalist for a moment, and communicate more freely. Half-formed ideas can be floated to see if they inspire, or evoke comment and response. Once

in a while, they will tap into the zeitgeist and gain intellectual momentum.

Third, blogs are easy to use and the technology is now sufficiently flexible, reliable and scalable to evolve with academic demand. A requirement to blog is not going to start appearing in academic job descriptions. We cannot easily forecast demand but the technology itself should no longer be the barrier.

So what of the inhibitors? Some will fear the overhead of maintaining a blog. They will see the blog as a treadmill which, once started, must be updated daily. In practice, there is no compulsion to update a blog unless you have something to say.

A potential worry in novices' minds is that their blog will have crazy or rude things posted on to it. Our experience with student blogs is that it is the exception for an entry to be annotated with defamatory, racist or otherwise inappropriate comments, and anyway these could easily be deleted.

Some will feel that their discipline is just not suitable for blogging. Physicists are not yet likely to publish their CatherineZetaParticle discovery on a blog. So far, a preponderance of academic bloggers come from fields within social science and the humanities. Politics, economics, english and philosophy are the best represented. Perhaps it is easier for these areas to find resonances within popular culture.

One fear, that intellectual property will be stolen, is potentially real. Researchers will want to be careful that premature publicity does not scupper the chances of later publication.   On the other hand, reference to an archived blog entry might one day enable proof of authorship to a ground-breaking thought. Again, this is an area where practice varies across disciplines.

We would recommend:

http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/ *for lots of information to answer questions like what is a blog, and how do I do this or that with my blog?*

http://www.crookedtimber.org/ for an academic group blog to which Chris Bertram of Bristol is a key contributor (http://eis.bris.ac.uk/~plcdib/)

Other blogs for hard-hitting opinions:
http://www.oxblog.blogspot.com

and of course:
http://www.becker-posner-blog-com

Our view is easily summarised. British academics would gain from having active websites, and should at least consider going boldly into the blogosphere.