**Creative Uses of Blogging in a Postgraduate Entrepreneurship Course:
Discussion and Reflection of Benefits, Challenges and Best Practice**

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Abstract
Blogging is increasingly being used in the classroom environment. In addition to being a method for recording reflection, blogs can be a useful tool for feedback and building reputation. This paper explores benefits, challenges and best practices through a case study of a postgraduate entrepreneurship course at Kingston University. It identifies the often overlooked benefits for integrating blogging into the student learning experience and gives practical suggestions for how it can be deployed effectively. Student blog reflections are used as the basis for reflective discussion. The various blogging methods and outcomes deployed in this masters course reveal best practice for using blogging as a tool in the classroom at a postgraduate level in entrepreneurship.

1. BACKGROUND
Several papers have been written on the uses of blogging (Chong, 2010; Du, 2006; Hsu, 2008). However, few have discussed the reasons for using a blog in the classroom and best practices for deploying and managing them in a university environment.

A cohort of 36 postgraduate students were encouraged to write a weekly blog post entry from October 2009 to May 2010, using the wordpress.com platform. Over 900 blog posts were written over this eight month period in total. Excerpts from these blogs and reflections on this experience were culminated into a list of benefits and challenges that led to a set of best practices for using blogging in a university environment. These were organised according to: benefits to students, benefits to lecturers/universities and challenges and best practices.

2. BENEFITS TO STUDENTS
Six benefits to students were identified in the course of the blogging activity. These were: tracking progress, improving articulation, developing transferrable technical skills, reputation building, external networking opportunities and peer-to-peer networking. This section explains these benefits, alongside excerpts from student blog posts.

2a. Track Progress. A challenge for educators is often how to make the classroom relevant to students and to help students make the connection between theory and practical application. By students recording their learning journey, students can see their learning take shape and transform over the course of the year. It was found that a blog helped bridge this gap for students, to realise learning experiences 'in the moment':

> Regular blogging has obviously become a very natural thing [for me]. Whilst attempting to expand the concepts behind our team's ideas last Friday, my first thought was 'this will make a really good blog post!' (Student J, November 1, 2009)

This blog entry was one example of how a learning moment was identified quickly and a way for recording it using a blog was seen as a 'natural' place for that experience. Compared to the traditional assignment of a reflective essay, consider the unlikelihood of a student in the moment saying 'this will be a great reflection to include at my end of term essay in a few months!'

2b. Improve articulation. Another essential skill of an entrepreneur is to be able to communicate ideas to outside parties. By students having to write down reflections of their learning each week, it improved their ability to articulate concepts learned in class and embed their goals. This was particularly helpful for students who did not have English as their first language (accounting for 75% of the students). While the writing style was more informal than academic, for students who had difficulties expressing themselves in class, the blog provided a channel for them to discuss their learning through writing. One student wrote about coming back to blogging after a long break:

> Whether it is worth doing in terms of assessment or not, I feel quite good in a way as I'm recovering my momentum of feeding my blog. [My memory] is getting easier and clearer. (Student G, 10 February, 2010)

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2c. Transferrable Technical Skills. An important part of entrepreneurship is the ability to connect a product or service with a market in an innovative way. As the internet is increasingly the source of this connection, it is important for students to have the skills in developing e-commerce skills. As the Wordpress blogging platform is increasingly being used to run more than blogs and is a useful content management system (CMS) e-commerce websites are now possible with little technical skill. As students used wordpress.com for their blogs they gained basic web design skills, which allowed them to develop their own business websites. Out of the eight business teams in the class, every team developed their own business website.

One student found it as useful for her own work in as a teacher:

> The use of technology [in this course] will improve the way in which I communicate with students, for example using blogging as a way of reflecting and carrying out formative assessments. I have already begun to use the internet as a way of teaching and developing...in much the same way as I have learned. (Student C, 15 May, 2010)

Another student found blogging made the web relevant to business and career goals:

> The first step of my development, was my induction to the web. Prior to this while I was familiar with the internet, having a Facebook account and various emails address for years, I was reluctant to put my life out of the web. As a writer, my words have always been tightly linked to who I am. The idea of putting them on the web, for free on a blog, was a blockage in my thinking. Pondering over this I came across a blog about writing that had a very clear and unmistakable message [that] online tools are the fastest and easiest way for unknown writers to begin building an audience, get better at their craft, and network with others who can make a difference in their careers. This of course makes complete sense and tied in with what we were being told on the course. I was quickly forced to remove my train of thought that made me unsure of blogging and twitter. (Student Y, 14 May, 2010)

2d. Reputation Building. Another key to entrepreneurship is the ability to build a reputation. Some students found that by writing their views on entrepreneurship, it improved their online reputation as people outside of the classroom connected with their ideas. Two students as a result of their blogs were invited as to be guest writers on reputable websites or participate in conferences:

> ...this module also gave me the energy to start my own [specialist blog], only a few months ago. With my newly upgraded business and technical skills I have gained while working on [our enterprise's] website, I worked on my [specialist blog] plan and design. A week later my brand new blog was up and running. And on my second month, I was invited as a blogger to one of the most prestigious social media forums of Europe; Social Media Worldforum Europe, that would normally cost 1.700 GBP. Not only [was I invited] to that event for free, but also I met very important contacts from all over the world. (Student P, 15 May 2010)

Another student found the blogs as inspiration to start a new blog that generated interest from third parties:

> Magazine journalism has always been a love of mine, and whilst I don't want it as my main career, I would jump at the chance to write on the subject in addition to my main career. MACE has already helped me on my journey to achieving this goal. Encouraged by [the instructor] to start our Uni blogs, I also decided to start a blog related to my subject area. The purpose of this was to test ideas in advance for my dissertation, but it soon outgrew that goal. I recently received my 10,000th unique visitor, have frequently had my writing featured on the Sustainable Cities Collective website, was approached by the New York Times as research for an article, and recently started a position as Guest Writer for the American blog Green Growth Cascadia, which has a much bigger audience than mine. I hope that this success will continue and I can keep achieving this goal. (Student J, 15 May, 2010)

By having students record their thoughts in a public environment, rather than the traditional essay written for the lecturer, students were able to connect with a wider audience.

2e. External Networking Opportunities. Much of the student's ability to connect with wider audiences was due to wordpress.com's search engine optimisation (SEO) package. Because wordpress.com blog entries were quickly made available on search engines, it allowed other like-minded people to connect with them easily. One music and entrepreneurship student wrote a post about a new and up-coming singer. Grammy Award winner rapper Lil' Wayne read the post and Tweeted a link to her blog entry as a result. Of the five students who reported statistics of their blog after the course ended, the average number of views per blog was 1,110, with one student blog receiving as many as 2,687 views in 10 months.

2f. Peer-to-Peer Networking. Being able to network with peers is also a critical skill for entrepreneurship as well as innovation (Johnson, 2010). Students commented on each other's blogs, which stimulated debate and reflection outside of the classroom. They also cited eachother's entries in their reflective essay.

> I learnt a lot by reading the blogs of other [students]! Blogging actually is a great teaching-learning tool. (Student M, 14 February, 2010)

Some students also commented that blogging helped them keep up-to-date by reading other students blogs when they weren't able to attend class. This demonstrated that the blogs were seen as a resource for keeping in contact with the class illustrating that a student's reflections were seen as a credible source to their learning.

3. BENEFITS TO LECTURERS AND UNIVERSITIES

This section explains eight benefits to both students and instructors for using blogs. This includes: using a non-proprietary and no cost LMS, gathering student feedback, university reputation building, personal reputation building, forming a teaching archive, providing a resource repository, data collection and alumni connections.

3a. Non-proprietary and No Cost LMS. Instead of setting up the syllabus and teaching materials on Blackboard or other propriety learning management system (LMS), which is externally controlled—by the university technical staff, the class was published through Wordpress which was internally controlled—both by the lecturer and student. This allowed the teaching material to reach the students without the hassle of university access issues and reach a broader audience for recruitment. It also replaced Powerpoint presentations, as class was taught from blog posts each week. This provided an open and central source for class materials, which was created at no cost to the university.

3b. Student Feedback. Students can often give more direct feedback through writing than face-to-face discussion as it can be viewed as less confrontational. As blog entries were read each week, the instructor was able to identify whether students were understanding the concepts that were taught, and if the teaching plan needed to be adjusted. It also provided a platform for the instructor to leave comments on student posts to add to the discussion or provide encouragement. The following two excerpts explain how student blogs helped to improve the course content:

> In the afternoon, we had a web-design session with [the instructor] , which was by far one of the most useful classes of the year so far! Drawing back to Piers' theory of the 'Three Fears' (referring to a class the week before), in a class so full of knowledgeable and experienced people, I sometimes do have the fears of being wrong, and seeming mad! It was great to go through all the things which have been ticking over in my mind for the past few months, and it was especially useful since my main project within the team recently has been to get our website up and running, more on that in a minute! (Student A, 11 February, 2010)

After reading posts like this, it can help a teacher learn which lessons to include for the next year, and also how students are connecting information from outside the lesson. In this example, a student connects two separate courses as giving insight to the other. In the next example, a student describes how she sees the instructor's teaching style and class content, which provides insight for improvement:

> I was definitely confused in class this week! It was beneficial information, that's for sure, but it was too much to take in during one class! However, it did give me a lot to research and look into, to try and find my way throughout all the lines and triangles!

> What I did in class was basically answer [the instructor's] question: 'What do I need in order to create a successful business? 'Now what I like about [the instructor] (but which also makes things

a tad more difficult!) is that she asks a general question and waits for your answer. It might be because she doesn't want to steer you in one specific direction, and doesn't want to limit you so she just asks, and waits for your answer. Now on the receiving end and in the back of your mind, you're thinking "what does she want? How do I answer this? What is she looking for *this* time?" Consequently, you end up giving your answer and hoping for the best! (Student J2, 23 October, 2009)

Compared to the traditional means of gathering student feedback—such as through a feedback form at the end of a module—by having access to a weekly reflection on each class, it offered insight during the module, rather than post module. This feedback method allowed for in-course corrections or to affirm lecturer assumptions about certain assessments or approaches of teaching delivery.

3c. University Reputation Building. As students wrote about their experiences on their course, they were effectively an advertisement for future students in building the programme and strengthening the university's reputation. When prospective students asked what the course was like, they were pointed to read the student blogs, giving them detailed accounts of their experiences. Their most recent blog posts were their final reflection assignment about the course, effectively becoming 'brand ambassadors'.

3d. Personal Reputation Building. By having a class of students each week write about a lecturer's classes, it can generate interest in what the lecturer and university is doing. (Of course this depends on whether the students are saying good things or bad things!) Knowing that this feedback will be made public, increases a competitive desire to keep classes fresh and interesting.

3e. Teaching Archive. Once a collection of students blogs has been written, students on the following year can look back at previous student's reflections. One blogging assignment was to write a post to next year's students, explaining pitfalls to avoid in their own work. With these blogs written from the students point-of-view, it can make the advice real and credible to students in a way that a teacher sometimes cannot communicate to students. It also allows students to build on previous student experiences, potentially furthering and improving the module each year. In addition, this archive of class content—alongside the blogroll of student blogs—allowed external examiners to more fully evaluate the module at the end of the year (a necessary record in a UK university).

3f. Gathering Resources and Maintaining Currency. By inviting all class members to write and reflect on their experiences and learning and to find their own additional resources to compliment concepts discussed in class, it created an 'army of researchers' who gathered new sources of information through sharing thoughts and internet links each week. This helped the lecturer stay current by harnessing the students as an information resource.

3g. Data for Research. As students wrote their reflections, it revealed patterns in student behaviour that could be tracked and observed over a period of time. It also provided a searchable database through Google Reader, to examine ways in which terms were used or understood individually and collectively. Several case studies were written as a result of data on student blogs.

3h. Alumni Connection. After students graduate it can be difficult to track down what they have done as a result of their studies. However, through the student blogs some continued to write after the end of their course and posted updates about their work. These posts have included student exhibitions at a London Fashion Show and discovering that students have received awards for student projects conducted at university.

4. CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICE
Three key challenges were faced in using blogs in the classroom—issues in making content public, technical obstacles in setting up and using a blog, and marking and reading a large number of blog assignments. In addition, 200 students enrolled in three university classes (undergraduate and postgraduate) in 2010-2011 provided insight for challenges that didn't present themselves in the first year.

4a. Making Content Public. Some students were concerned about writing their learning journey in a way that didn't identify them personally to outside parties. For example, when a student describes a challenge they faced in class, will a future employer find this online and see it negatively? Will what is said upset another student or a business partner? Will it reveal sensitive information about a business idea that is then stolen, or invalidates the ability to apply for a future patent?

To aid in these issues, students were encouraged to only use their first names or an alias in the blog. They also retained complete ownership of the blog, which allowed them to close down the blog after the class ended. Only one student chose to close down her blog after the course. The rest have left their blogs online and four still add content to their blog, post graduation.

Students were encouraged to avoid sharing any sensitive information, or keep sensitive posts to a minimum. When students wanted to share information they felt might be sensitive, they created a password-protected post outside of public view (a simple option to select when publishing a post). This created some challenges for the instructor in marking the work as it was not be visible in an RSS reader (meaning that the webpage must be accessed directly, see point 4c).

Students were also warned that once something was published online it is difficult to 'take back' (Schmidt, 2010). In the case of the student who removed her blog from online, she found that the RSS feed for the course still contained some of her posts. In order to remove this, the RSS feed had to be closed down, and/or her blog unsubscribed from the list. This issue revealed that instructors who encourage public blogging must be aware of technical issues, which can change without notice. For example, it was discovered that once someone deleted a blog post from their blog, it may still show up in an RSS feed (Google Reader Forum, 2011).

4b. Technical Obstacles. Several methods were used for registering students for a blogging account and collecting their blog addresses. The most successful method was when class was held in a computer lab, with each student setting up their wordpress.com account simultaneously. They then entered their name and blog address into the class module blog on another computer where the instructor was signed in to her own blog account.

Unsuccessful methods in collecting blog addresses were:
* *Inviting class members to be a contributing author on the class blog.* It was confusing for most students as many 'couldn't find the invitation email'. In addition, when a class of 60 has the task to blog every week, it meant it was difficult for students to sift through the information and made the class blog very cluttered and increased maintenance for the lecturer to categorise information when students did not self-categorise.
* *Asking class members to sign up for their own wordpress.com account outside of class and email the blog address to the instructor.* Handling the number of emails was unfavourable for the lecturer, and some students would send their username instead of their blog address leading to further work to collect student blogs for collection.

As far as technical obstacles for students were concerned, despite the fact that very few students had blogged before (averaging 3-4 students per class), students were proficient in blogging after writing two posts. This was due to the wordpress.com platform being easy to understand with a simple in-class demonstration of publishing a post. To gain other skills such as changing the appearance of the blog, posting a video or organising content, students were self-taught and took advantage of online tutorials, such as videos on YouTube or asking other classmates.

It was also found that for building the module blog, using a university hosted Wordpress MU blog had some setbacks, compared to using the wordpress.com platform. The first setback was that the lecturer did not have administrative privileges to the module blog, requiring a technical member of staff to install spam filters and other plugins which took time and negotiation. When using the wordpress.com account however, the lecturer was able to control the blog's technical features without needing a third party, and more features were available for use by default in comparison. The final obstacle in using the Wordpress MU platform came when another blog on the same lecturer's account was closed, which also resulted in losing access to all of the other blogs. Several months on, this technical issue was never recovered, and the module blog was finally exported from Worpdress MU and imported into wordpress.com. It was straightforward to migrate the blog, but the student blogroll had to be reinstated one address at a time.

4c. Marking and Reading Blog Posts. To read the student blog posts, the instructor subscribed to each student blog individually, and organised them into a single folder using Google Reader. As students would write new posts, it would appear in Google Reader, meaning that the instructor could access each post in one place. For grading posts, by using the 'tag' feature in Google Reader, it was possible to mark a grade for each post at the bottom of each post, visible only to the instructor. (The grading system was a simple 1-2-3 point system). By marking posts as they came in each week, grading the blogs became manageable.

However, this marking method was not scalable for large amounts of blog posts. In the following year, some student cohorts were instead marked according to the number of posts published, for quantitative evaluation and were asked to submit a reflective essay summarising their blog over the course of the year, for qualitative evaluation.

5. Conclusion

This paper is not a complete list of benefits and challenges of running blogs, but rather provides a discussion on the uses of blogging in the classroom to stimulate debate and reflection. Blogging should be seen as more than just an online journal, but if harnessed effectively can provide students with necessary technical tools for developing business websites, enhancing marketable skills, building a reputation in their field in entrepreneurship. As one student concluded about her own blogging experience:

> Quite simply, if given the chance to re-do the first year, with all its experiences, I would do everything again! particularly this blog. I have enjoyed using it as a tool to share my experience and encourage discussion whilst providing a journal of my learning. It hasn't always been wholeheartedly embraced and I have struggled to publish my thoughts in the public domain, but accepted that a degree of creativity must be applied in order to achieve the goal.

> There is still along way to go on my journey of discovery of a world outside of work. The challenge is to bring to life, in a practical way, the ideologies and theories that will become the framework for the way forward. (Student C, November 20, 2009)

For a complete collection of this work, visit the 2009-2010 module blog at:
http://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/maceteams

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