Reflection, identity, community: Affordances of blogging for social interaction and reflective dialogue

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Abstract

An evaluation of the use of blogging for developing educational affordances that enhance characteristics of social interaction and reflective dialogue within learning communities. The findings emerge from a study investigating the implementation of course blogs on a media practice programme at a UK university. Literature on the use of course blogs suggests that blogging supports learning and promotes the attainment of skills in researching, academic writing, critical reflection and professional identity formation. There are however difficulties for educators seeking to promote the use of course blogs as a productive and lively social practice. The study presents data from a group of L4 students as well as a group of tutors tasked with implementing the use of course blogs. It asks: what are the barriers to developing blogging as a social practice; and seeks to identify positive actions that will enhance the implementation of course blogging. The research employs a qualitative approach drawing on the concept of 'dwelling' as a focus group methodology. The production of two data sets, one from the staff and one from students allows for a comparison that aims to identify disjunctions between the staff conception of blogging and that of the students. Thereby offering the possibility for determining the particular set of educational affordances required to achieve the aims of the project. Findings suggest that in the early stages of implementation one of the biggest challenge to developing blogging is resistance to change among staff. While among students the core theme is around ownership and motivation.

Keywords Reflection · Identity · Community · Affordances · Blogging · Social interaction · Reflective dialogue

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1 Introduction

The adoption of blogging as a pedagogic tool in Higher Education is widely explored in the learning and teaching literature (cf. Sim and Hew 2010) and is commonly thought to provide a range of benefits such as promoting the attainment of skills in research for creative practice, academic writing, critical reflection and professional identity formation. Notwithstanding some of the difficulties faced by educators wishing to employ blogging in an educational context (cf. Robertson 2011), there is a clear sense of an opportunity for learners to engage with acts of personal and critical reflection, identity building and community membership through the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as course blogs. The paper that follows explores some of these ideas through research undertaken into the implementation of course blogs on an undergraduate media production programme at an English university.

The decision to introduce blogging as a course activity followed on from a pilot study that evaluated the introduction of course blogging on one L6 course unit during the 2016 to 2017 academic year. The aim of the initial pilot was to investigate whether or not blogging might address three previously identified issues with the use of critical reflection as an assessment of practice on the programme. An evaluation of the pilot study undertaken by means of a focus group and associated written feedback from the participants, arrived a number of findings. The first issue concerned the need to integrate theory and practice into course activities so that the students practice would be informed by theory, thereby deepening the critical dimension of problem solving for creative practice. Secondly, there was a need to promote an engagement with critical concerns that circulate around ideas of practice so that the student's critical reflections are located within an appropriate theoretical framework. Finally, there is the need to promote an early engagement with contextual material so that there could be a formative component to the act of looking back upon practice. The problem being, in the experience of the course team, students will tend to leave work on their written assessment until the last few weeks of a practice unit. Thus, the theory doesn't inform practice, engagement is purely strategic and importantly there is no draft presented for formative feedback.

It was hoped that the use of course blogs could in some way address these issues and encourage the development of capabilities for thinking through problem encounters that would see students take hold of theory as it pertains to their domain of practice and use it to inform their practical work. Evaluation of the pilot based on data gathered through focus groups supported these aims finding positive benefits to the use of course blogs. The research suggested that learners found (Hanney 2017):

- *the course blogs helped them prepare for end of unit written assessments;*
- *that they helped them connect their research with their practice;*
- *that blogging was enjoyable, fast and spontaneous;*
- *that it gave them time to find good sources to write about as they were not leaving research till the last minute;*
- *that it helped them keep track of their research;*
- *they liked seeing other students work,*
- *and they liked being able to compare their own standard of work with others.*

Subsequently the course leader for the programme and principle investigator for the study, supported by the department head, decided to roll out the use of course blogs across the entire media production programme. Funding from the university's learning and teaching institute offered the opportunity to undertake research into the implementation and through a series of research activities gather feedback on its effectiveness.

Having set out upon this course, the study presented here sought to understand the ways in which the formation of learner identity through course blogging intersects with and/or impacts upon the enhancement of student achievement. The use of blogs on the course is valued as an example of 'purposeful action' (cf. Arendt 1998) that offers the potential for a transformative pedagogy. One that manifests as the students' performance of a professional self in a public sphere. The study evaluates the effectiveness of the implementation through the framework of educational affordances (cf. Gaver 1991, Gibson 1979) in order to identify the social dimensions of the pedagogic environment and consider how action within this milieu might foster or inhibit engagement with course blogging. The research employs a qualitative approach drawing on the concept of 'dwelling' as a focus group methodology. The resulting data includes post-it notes, posters, ethnographic notes and transcriptions of recordings including data from a group of L4 students as well as a group of tutors tasked with implementing the use of course blogs. The production of two data sets, one from staff and one from the students allows for a comparison that aims to identify disjunctions between the staff conception of blogging and that of the students. Thereby offering the possibility for determining the particular set of educational affordances required to achieve the aims of the project. Interim findings suggest that in the early stages of implementation one of the biggest challenge to the use of course blogs is one of change management in relation to leadership of academic teams. While among students the core theme is around ownership and motivation.

2 Rationale

2.1 Affordances as possibilities for action

Educational affordances are those characteristics of a pedagogic approach that determine the adoption of a learning behaviour. They can be thought of as the relationship between the particular properties of a pedagogic environment and the characteristics of the learner as they interact with that environment (Gaver 1991). An affordance is what is offered, provided or furnished, it describes the complementarity of the subject and the environment (Gibson 1979). The concept of affordance offers a means of thinking about the possibilities for action offered by particular techniques, approaches and technologies, within a specific environment, to those who might use them (Gaver 1991, 1).

This 'ecological approach' focuses on the links between 'everyday perception and actions' (Gaver 1991, 1) and provides a framework for conceptualising what we might call the user experience of a pedagogic design. With this in mind it is useful to consider that not all affordances are apparent, that in some cases they may be hidden or even false. To give an example from Gaver (1991, 2); a door handle may suggest an apparent or perceptible means of opening a door. However, the door maybe locked in which case

the apparent affordance is false. Even so there may be a way of unlocking the door which in the first instance is not revealed (e.g. a key under a flowerpot); this would be a hidden affordance. Thus, apparent affordances need to match with the original intended use in order for the interaction to function effectively. In other words, there needs to be a complementarity of intention and action (Gaver 1991, 2). From this example, it is also possible to see how affordances might be culturally signposted (a door handle signifies in most cases a possibility for opening a door) and sequential (in that one may reveal another).

Affordances might take the form of objects, tools and other concrete things but might also be places, environmental factors or even people. Because the relationship of a subject to its environment extends beyond concrete physicality, the concept of affordances also necessarily includes values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Equally it needs to take account of the notion that a particular affordance may be different for different subjects. For example, a wooden staff might offer the affordance of support, it might in differing circumstances offer the affordance of a weapon. In all cases an affordance is one of relations since, even though it may identifiably exist without the subject attending to it. It is the need or intention of the subject that gives importance to it. In an example given by Gibson (1979) it is understood that a letter box offers an affordance to a letter writing subject. However, if the subject doesn't write letters the affordance is still present just not necessitated. In a similar way, it is possible to say that a blogging tool is only has affordance for someone who is motivated to write.

Recognition that the concept has a social dimension and is not limited to the functional use of objects is of clear value to educators exploring the use of technological tools in a learning environment. Especially in an age when these tools, in general, pose little in the way of an obstacle to their functional use (cf. discussion section for exclusions to this assumption). Gibson's letter box is a great example of social affordance since the letter box is merely an epiphenomenon of a symbolic system which cannot be described through the relating of the its physical properties alone (Hammond 2009, 207). The social possibility afforded by the letter box is one of action, in this case the act of communication. Consequently, it is possible to see the environment of affordances as one which is 'full of potential, not of things' (Hammond 2009, 206). Social affordances can be thought of as describing the ways in which the social offers possibilities for action.

Developing this theme further, the question of affordances for course blogging becomes one of inquiry into the social properties that determine just how a thing could possibly be used (Hammond 2009, 208). In particular it is the perception of a tool, its desirability or lack of, in other words its apparent affordance, that is a key focus for this study. Of course, material properties still have a significant bearing on how the subjects using them interact and cannot be entirely disregarded. The particular genre (Gaver 1996, 113) of tools in an environment also carry their own symbolic meanings. The playability of social media may for example, may conflict with the academic desire for learnability and work against educator's intentions. The 'environmental shaping of social actions' (Gaver 1996, 113) is thus, at the same time material, symbolic and social. As such, the concept of affordances is a useful one if there is a desire to explore the inherent properties of a pedagogic environment. Thinking of this environment as an ecology of affordances enables educators to consider the design and usability of the

learning experience, and to ask questions about whether or not students are using the tools provided in the way that was intended. It also provides a model for understanding how the use of tools can be refined in order to more effectively make apparent the possibilities for action offered by those tools.

2.2 Praxis as purposeful action through reflection

If a theory of affordances describes the *possibilities for action* then the concept of praxis offers a means of understanding the *possibilities for purposeful action*. An action is a beginning of something, the act sets something in motion and even though prompted to act in the first instance, this beginning is the beginning of somebody (Arendt 1998, 177). If action indicates a beginning, it is for Arendt speech that is revelatory of whose beginning. Through utterance a unique personal identity is revealed and thus a place taken in the public realm (Arendt 1998, 179). This revelatory characteristic of the utterance functions because the speaker is immersed in a field of social relations. By stepping into the public realm, the speaker begins to manifest their public and professional identity (Arendt 1998, 180). Importantly for Arendt public and purposeful utterance imbues the action with special characteristics and sets it above just being a means to an end, or in her words 'mere talk' (Arendt 1998, 180). The idea that an utterance can transcend mere talk is of interest as it is suggestive of some kind of transformative process at work. It is of course agency that is the special characteristic that Arendt (1998) describes, though of course, it is understood that being immersed in a multiplicity of social relations the agent is not the author of their own story. Instead they are embroiled in relations with other agents and take their place among people, within the public realm.

The utterance connects the subject to the social, it is for Holquist (2002, 61) 'drenched in the social' and a 'social phenomena par excellence'. It is through the voicing of the subjects own multiplicity of positions and through response to other voices and alternative positions that public identity is formed. In this sense, praxis is primarily action taken in respect of others. It is in essence performative, committed to the future and 'bears witness to personal meaning' (Melaney 2006, 465). Freire (1970) maintains that praxis involves both action and reflection suggesting that:

> *"Praxis, therefore, starts with an abstract idea (theory) or an experience, and incorporates reflection upon that idea or experience and then translates it into purposeful action. Praxis is reflective, active, creative, contextual, purposeful, and socially constructed"* (Freire 1970, 113).

Following Freire (1970) it is understood that through praxis the subject comes to embody the "unity of theory and practice" (McLaren, 2000, 5) a position that is widely supported by the literature on experiential education (cf. Argyris and Schön, 1974, Kolb 1992, Dewey, 1938). Through dialogue and addressivity, in other words through the orientation of an utterance to an audience or addressee, the subject enacts a performance of self that offers an opportunity to engage with self-construction (Ross 2014, 220). It is argued here that blogging in an educational environment gives space for exactly this kind of identity construction through participation in a community of peers, where values, perspectives and beliefs are shared (Hanuscin et al. 2014, 1). It is a

form of 'ongoing internal construction that prepares one for taking action" (Volkmann and Zgagacz, 2004, 600) in which the formation of identity occurs through the presentation and interpretation of personal narratives within a community of actors (Hanuscin et al. 2014, 2).

However, critics have claimed that this kind of high-stakes reflection is an articulation of an addressivity that has an 'orientation towards assessment criteria, attention to teacher presence and preferences, a sensitivity towards a general other" (Ross 2014, 219). It is suggested that this audience awareness somehow results in a loss of authenticity and reduces access to an 'unmediated self' (Ross 2014, 219). They argue that reflection is a confessional mode of writing which is personal, private and revelatory. They are concerned that reflections presented publicly or for assessment are not representative of an interior monologue but are instead performed and in-authentic expressions of self. There is some truth in these claims and in reality; any form of writing by students for academic purposes will be a constructed presentation of self. Nonetheless, Ross (2014, 230) argues that there is value in thinking of reflection as a 'performed self' and claims that 'revelations of interiority' are in fact epiphenomena of the genre. For Ross and others 'blogging might be conceptualized as a disembodied form of face-work, concerned with the art of self-representation, impression management and potential self-promotion' (Hookway 2008, 96). Acknowledging reflection as a performed act of expression in this way, means it can be celebrated it as an utterance. One that signals the beginning of an emergence into the public realm: *a possibility for purposeful action* afforded through the use of course blogging tools.

3 Methodology

3.1 Context for the research

The research was undertaken as a follow on from a prior study that evaluated the introduction of blogging as a learning and teaching practice to a group of L6 students on one unit of study. On the basis of positive feedback from students who participated in the pilot study the teaching team concluded that there was a significant benefit to the introduction of course blogs and the decision was taken to roll out the use of this approach across the BA programme at all levels. To support this implementation, the course team engaged in a number of staff development initiatives including practical training in setting up a Wordpress.com blog and pedagogy focused workshops aimed at supporting the integration of blogging into the delivery of their course units. Staff and students were also provided with a range of supporting materials and online resources. While, incoming students were provided with workshops during welcome week that saw them register and set up a personal Wordpress.com course blog.

3.2 Addressing the role of researcher as insider

The research team was led by a full-time lecturer at the university where the study took place. Two-part time research assistants (RA) were employed on the study while additional team members were co-opted as needed from a pool of research assistants employed by the university's learning and teaching institute. The inclusion of the RA's

in the research team provided a solution to the problem of 'researcher as insider' (Trowler 2014) which occurs when an academic with a direct teaching relationship with the students, as subjects of the research, undertakes a study at the site of their employment. It was felt that students would be more comfortable and speak more freely once academics were removed from the process. The aim being to de-escalate the power relationship between tutor and students through a distancing of the lead researcher from the actual research activity. In this way, claims as to the validity of the data captured are mitigated and what is offered is a contestable form of knowing which is mediated through the social and interpreted by a researcher who is situated within a lived context. Offering the possibility for the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of positions taken by the research team and the research subject. Accordingly, the dual role of insider and researcher is acknowledged and reflexively incorporated into the research design in order to flag up ethical concerns and allow for them to be addressed.

3.3 Research site

The research site for this study is a university on the south coast of the UK situated in a large urban centre. The institution gained university status in 2005, having its origins in a private School of Art founded in 1856. The building itself is relatively new, having been constructed around 1964 and includes modern classrooms with video projectors, IT facilities, white boards and flexible chairs and tables. The university has a large media arts provision, with a reputation for industry engagement and the integration of project working with real clients into the curriculum.

3.4 Recruitment

Subsequent to ethical approval by the university's research ethics panel. In order to encourage participation, the research team offered students £20 iLive2Shop vouchers as a reward for participation and this attracted enough students to enable the study to proceed. For the staff team a complimentary lunch was offered to encourage a high degree of buy-in to the workshop, though this was intended as more of a 'thank you' gesture since the meeting had already been scheduled as a compulsory staff development session.

3.5 Sample

The participating students were drawn from two main groups. The first group was drawn from an L3 Foundation Media course that serves as a feeder for a wide range of BA pathways within the university including; film, media, television and journalism. Out of a year group of 45 students 10 took part in the study. This included a mixture of male and female students of around age 17–18. The second group was drawn from a L4 Media Production pathway. Out of a year group of 53 students 12 took part in the study. This included a mixture of male and female students of around age 18–20. The staff group included full-time (3) and part-time (5) staff members ages from 30 to 50 years with a predominantly male membership of the group.

3.6 Dwelling as a research methodology

The motivation for the design of the research methodology draws on the concept of *dwelling* or *silent discussion* inspired by the work of researchers at the 2018 Rethinking Research Conference (Giddens, Spencer and Urbanczyk 2018). Focus groups began with a short framing activity that was intended to bring to mind the participants experience of course blogs. During the framing activity, researchers handed each participant few post-it notes and pens and asked them to write things about blogging they liked. This was followed by the *dwelling* activity which started with a brief introduction explaining the context and purpose of the 'silent discussion'. Participants were then introduced to a five A0 posters laid out on tables on which a topic word or prompt had been written. Initially participants were asked to place their post-it notes on the poster with the most relevant prompt. They were then encouraged to circulate around the posters in silence and to inscribe further responses to the topic prompts. In addition, participants were encouraged to engage in silent dialogue with each other by adding responses to each other's comments. At the conclusion of this phase of the activity small group discussions were facilitated by the research team who used ethnographic note taking techniques to capture the discussion content. At the conclusion of the discussions each group was invited to summaries and share the results of their discussion with the rest of the focus group participants. Lastly, QR codes linking to online surveys were provided in order to capture more rudimentary information about participants self-perception of their own digital literacy and practical experience of using blogging applications. The *dwelling* focus group was delivered on three occasions. First as a pilot activity to test the method with a group of L3 students. Then with a L4 group who were the target of the study, followed by a staff group to provide an alternative and contrasting perspective. Each group was presented with the topics: community, participation, confidence, engagement and critical reflection.

After each session, the research team reviewed and refined the process to enhance the dialogic element of the method. The adoption of an iterative, reflexive methodology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) allowed researchers to explore the relationship between students and academics perspectives and use this data in a way that not only enable the research team to refine the method but to link perspectives between each group. In this way, the research team were able to map a broad range of responses and get a broader sense of the barriers to using course blogs as an effective pedagogic tool.

4 Results

The research generated a broad set of data including survey results, dwelling posters, ethnographic observation notes, transcribed discussions and framing activity sheets. The capture of data from both staff and students enabled the research team to undertake a comparative analysis of the views of both groups of stakeholders. The analysis of the data led the research team to conclude that there are a number of key barriers to the implementation of course blogging.

4.1 The dilemma of course blog implementation - do students feel 'forced' to participate in course blogging?

Both academic and student groups seemed to feel that engagement with course blogs is low because the activity is not assessed and therefore they are less motivated. Many of the staff group felt that the only way to 'make' students do the task is for it to be assessed and marked:

> 'STAFF 1: "Um yeah, well ultimately students often say, "well why should we do this?"
> 'STAFF 4: "Quite honestly trying to get students to do anything that's not assessed is...."

The students' agreed with this position and the phrase 'forced us to do' occurred quite often in the discussion:

> L4 STUDENT: "Not everyone participates because then we are not actually being graded - so there's no real point in doing them".

However, it appears that students do not wish course blogs to be assessed, even though they agree that it would improve their engagement and motivation. Though they acknowledge that if course blogs were to be assessed, they would feel obliged to participate:

> L4 STUDENT: "I would hate if they would assess the blogs".
> L4 STUDENT: "If it was assessed everyone would have to do it".

So, it would seem that one of the biggest obstacles to encouraging student engagement with course blogging is their lack of motivation and that while there is acknowledgment that assessment would drive engagement the students are resistant to such an approach. A few of the students mentioned that some sort of encouragement, extra motivation from tutors or a reward for participation might help, while others suggested that if teachers provided more interesting topics related to their assessments, or allowed students to pick their own topics, they would be more willing to contribute and participate:

> L4 STUDENT: "More people would do them if we had freedom to choose what we wrote about".

The students see the blogging activities as another burden in their busy schedules, more academic labour for which they can see no direct value or purpose. While staff are uncertain about how to integrate blog writing tasks into their lesson planning and course design. As a consequence, rather than being an integral part of the process of researching and developing a creative project the blog writing tasks are seen as an add-on, something extra to do, more academic labour that distracts from the core task of delivering course content. This view would seem to be supported by comments from

students in the L4 workshop group where it was claimed that tutor had demotivated the students saying:

> L4 STUDENT: "Do it if you want to – this doesn't make me want to do my work".

It is clear that the course team also felt extra pressure and didn't feel they had the time to fully engage with course blogging. During the workshop discussion one staff member expressed worries regarding lack of time to deliver high quality content whilst also implementing course blogging as an extra activity:

> STAFF 6: "It's like you said, it is at the expense of something else. So yes, is there something I'm supposed to be teaching instead in this time? As an individual teacher, I'm being asked to deliver the blogging thing, and I'm being asking to deliver content. So, if I'm to do both, something has to give at some point. The content used to come first but now this is impinging on it as an extra thing we do."

There is then, a sense that staff are resistant to adopting new forms of pedagogic practice, that there is an attachment to ideas about content which are associated with concepts of self-identity that might be related to ideas around being a practiioner and teaching practice. Consequently, there is a reluctance to embrace a new approach and this then impacts on their own motivation, which has a concomitant effect on the students' engagement with the course blogs.

4.2 The dilemma of course blog implementation – what is it all for, it's really unclear?

A key theme in the data among both staff and students is the sense that the purpose of introducing blog writing to the course was unclear. There was collective agreement on both sides regarding this issue and as a consequence students felt there was a lack of guidance and perhaps even a lack of support for the activity. Having undertaken blog writing activities students felt their work was not being valued:

> L4 STUDENT: "the lack of feedback on the blogs, they are not sure if their blog posts are being read and because of that the whole task just loses meaning".

Staff also felt that the value and purpose of the course blogs was unclear, that they also felt they lacked proper guidance and support:

> STAFF 7: "it was unclear from the outset whether the blog was meant to be a sort of holistic blog that was about their practice or whether it was supposed to be linked to certain units or something completely extra-curricular, and I think we were unsure in terms of that so of course then the students are lacking clarity […] I mean there was a comment of 'why do we have to do this' and that's what students think".

> STAFF 7: "I've been in rooms where students have said 'you know we don't have to do this' out loud to the other students and of course if there's that perception where a student can still pass the unit without having done anything you know turns up in the last two weeks, hasn't done any blog posts says what is this all about".

The workshop data revealed that academics don't have a clear perception of how to implement blogging into their course and how to introduce blogging to students:

> STAFF 7: "I think that's really where the problem lies is it's the philosophy behind it. What is the intention of the blog? Is the blog there to facilitate their critical reflection? Is the blog there to be a window to the world, for them to share their creative work? What actually is it? And I think until we actually know what it is, it's really difficult".

Interestingly however, according to the pre-workshop survey administered to the staff team, 4 out of 7 academics answered, 'Strongly Agree' to a statement 'I understand how to use blogging as a tool for supporting assessment.' While 3 marked their answer as 'Neutral' and none marked as 'Disagree'. The contradiction between the survey results and the data from the audio transcription of the workshop discussions suggests a high level of internal confusion about how to use course blogs as a learning tool among academic staff.

The L4 student workshop data reveals that students have very similar feelings to academic staff and are also 'unclear' of how to approach course blogging:

> L4 STUDENT: "Students don't know whether blogs should be academic or personal. They don't understand what is the desired structure or what is the right way to write blog posts."

There were other issues around clarity and capability that appeared to underpin some of the confusion among academic staff. The results from the pre-workshop survey administered to the staff group revealed that while 4 out of 7 academics answered, 'Strongly Agree' to the statements 'I feel comfortable using digital technologies' and 'I am capable setting up a blog' and 3 out of 7 answered 'Agree. Indicating it was assumed, a high level of digital literacy among the members of the staff group. This despite anecdotal observations by the course leader who lead a workshop on blogging for the academic team as part of the course blog implementation strategy. At the workshop, at least two of the staff members were unable to register an account and set up a simple wordpress.com site without extensive technical support. While some struggled to acquaint themselves with the technology, out of a group of 8 who attended the workshop only 4 were able to set up a profile on wordpress.com unsupported. The contradiction between the academic's self-perception of their own digital literacy set against observational data suggests that despite personal technological capabilities in their own specialist areas of practice. Across the board capabilities for digital literacy are at best uneven and in some cases, might be described as profoundly inadequate.

4.3 The dilemma of course blog implementation – what if someone read my blog?

The data from the L4 workshops raised an issue around the public nature of the course blogs. Students were reluctant to put work they didn't feel showed them in a good light online:

> L4 STUDENT: "What if my future employer sees it?"

There is an obvious concern that whatever they post online might come back to haunt them in the future. Yet on the other hand students appeared to be reluctant to put enough effort into the task of writing a blog post to ensure it would be of an acceptable standard.

> L4 STUDENT: "People don't work as hard on them because they don't count towards anything"

This tension between the need to present themselves publicly and the lack of motivation to spend time on blogging tasks is resolved by the students through a contradictory discourse of detachment from the task.

4.4 The dilemma of course blog implementation – on reflection it's not all bad?

When it comes to seeing the use of course blogs as an aid to supporting the acquisition of skills in critical reflection staff and students rated blogging very highly in both surveys and in discussions. Critical reflection was mentioned as useful, relevant to the assessment, improving writing and good for tracking professional growth. The data from the L4 student workshops shows that they rated critical reflection as the most positive attribute of course blogging. When asked a question about this in this the workshop they cited the relevance to assessment, connection to professional practice, contribution to personal growth and an opportunity to track their progress. Data from the staff workshop suggested that the academic side also valued the use of blogging as a tool to support critical reflection:

> STAFF 3: "They use it as a learning log, keeping track of the process; to show research and reflect on it".

Yet the discussion also suggested that the students wanted more ownership and the opportunity for creativity. They didn't like what they referred to as a strict academic template for course blogs (*in fact this template was no more than a requirement to write 300–500 words, include an image, two references and an opening paragraph that hooked the reader*). Freedom of creativity is the most desirable feature about course blogs for the students who appeared to be convinced that staff did not want to give them meaningful, useful and interesting tasks:

L4 STUDENT: If they would give us something we are interested about".
L4 STUDENT: "They don't want to give us interesting tasks".

One student asked why they couldn't write a biography about a documentary filmmaker for one of their classes (in documentary filmmaking) which came as a great surprise to the course leader when this was related to him. He explained that this exactly the task they had been given during the course unit and expressed surprise at the disjunction between what they were asking for and what was being asked of them.

Academics agreed that course blogs are lacking the creative space and have too rigid academic template:

> STAFF 5: "I had a thought that in the induction it was very much sort of set up four categories so video, photography, it's a showcase of your professional practice - that's the selling point, right? So, it's like this is the mouthpiece for my creativity and then you've got this very rigid academic template that then inhabits that space as well and I don't think you can say- oh it's yours to show the world but then say but you're also going to show the world kind of old school academic template and that's sort of... they don't stick together".

Many of the comments above appear to refer in particular to an infographic that had been designed on behalf of the research team. The infographic had been distilled from the commonly recognised general characteristics of a 'good blog post (Bonnie 2017) into a schema for writing course blogs under the heading of Anatomy of an Academic Blog Post. The only significant difference between the two approaches, other than the title, was the requirement to adopt Harvard Referencing as a means of evidencing the use of source material. The 'anatomy of a perfect blog post' (Bonnie 2017) example can be compared directly to the researcher designed 'anatomy of an *academic* blog post' (Fig. 1) infographic. The main differences being the heading and the requirement to reference sources.

A quick search of the internet will reveal that the refrain of 'cite your sources' is as common in advice presented to bloggers as it is to students at a university. Within the field of non-fiction writing, it is a fundamental requirement that applies to all forms of writing practice. In the case of online writing it is common to use hyperlinks as a means to cite sources. It is equally as common to see foot notes or other more traditional academic forms of referencing. It is the addressivity required of a particular piece of online writing that would seem to lead authors towards one approach or another. The tension here is perhaps the confusion over audience; is the blog intended for public or academic consumption. In both cases a form of referencing that functions as an archaeology of knowledge is a requirement, but the particular choice of form of citation is likely to be different. The request for students to adopt an academic style of referencing (as an opportunity to practice something that would be required for written assessment), along with the titling of the infographic as an academic writing genre appears to have created a series of misrecognitions that constructed the blog writing task overly restrictive, inappropriately constrained and addressing the wrong audience.
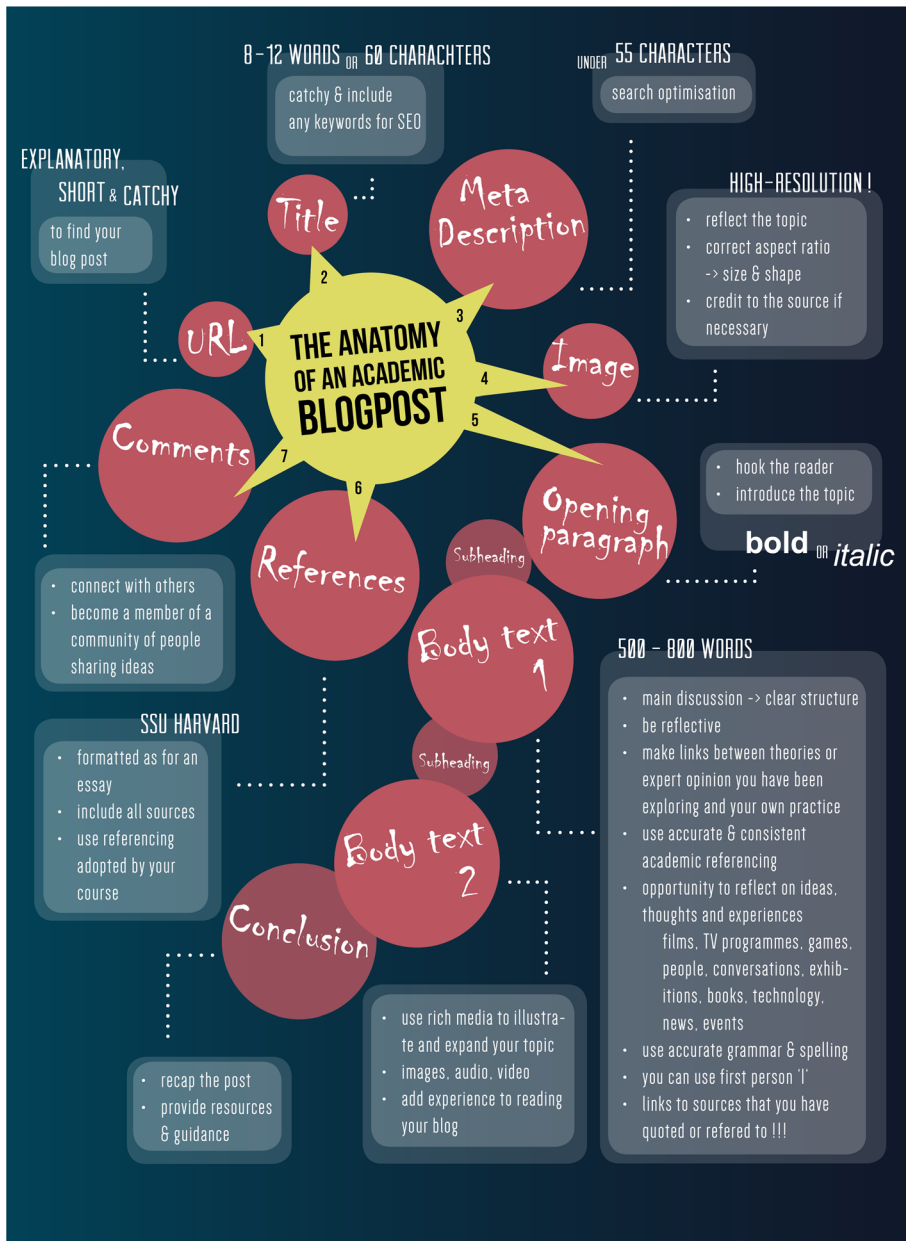
Fig. 1 The anatomy of an academic blog post

5 Discussion

The implementation of course blogging hoped to encourage an integration of theory and practice, foster an encounter with the contextual ideas and stimulate an early engagement with the process of reflecting on practice. The staff team also sought to develop students writing skills and to develop a community of practice around a shared

and collective digital dialogue. If, however, an educational affordance is a characteristic of a pedagogic approach that determines the adoption of a learning behaviour. Then the data suggests that the implementation of course blogs as described in the results above has only been partially successful. It would seem that the possibilities of for 'purposeful action' afforded by course blogs are only partially apparent. The affordance is hidden, or partially occluded by a range of social factors that have resulted in a partial uptake of course blogs by staff and students. The data suggests that while there are some issues relating to digital literacy among staff it is in the main, social factors that come to dominant the thematic analysis. There is then an opportunity to look at why that maybe and to consider possibilities for further adjustment to the use of course blogs in order to enhance engagement and participation. The analysis of the data suggests that there are two key themes that need to be addressed the first being one of change management, the second circulating around issues of ownership and motivation. From the student point of view, they need to want to do it. In other words, they need to feel motivated towards the activity. A clear sense of personal ownership needs to be afforded to the task of blogging in order to shift it from being a burden towards something they want to do, or desire to engage with. There needs to be clarity around the purpose and value of the course blogs and there needs to be an engagement with the idea of blogging as a professional presentation of self. A 'reason why', is a motivating factor that shifts affordance from hidden to apparent and would perhaps lead towards *possibilities for purposeful action* as student bloggers begin to present themselves in the professional realm. Unless the intention is there, then the affordance of blogging will remain hidden, deflected by student's inattention to the possibilities afforded by course blogs.

There is a sense, on reflection, that one of the issues is that blogging as a professional, or even just as an educational practice, is not modelled for them. There is no process for socialising the students into a community of practice (Wenger, 1999) and consequently, they do not connect the practice of public writing with their own personal goals and aspirations. Clearly what would help here is more leadership from the staff team, however this would require staff ownership of the implementation process underpinned by a clear pedagogic understanding of the purpose and value of the use of course blogs. While there is also a need to develop competencies in digital literacy among the staff team (but seemingly not among the students) there appears to be a direct correlation between the staff and student's engagement with the use of course blogs. In fact, it seems clear that if the use of course blogs is to achieve the aims and objectives posed above then the primary objective for the ongoing implementation should be the development of a community or practioners i.e. a community of bloggers. This requires staff to shift away from the role of facilitator to one of activator. Or in other words, to become an agent of change (Fullan 2013, 25) who actively engages with the use of technologies such as blogging rather than just passively promoting their use. In this way, the implementation shifts away from addressing goals and becomes a process (Fullan et al., 2005, 55) of engagement with change. At the core of any plan for change is the need for 'capacity building', by which is meant the development of new 'skills and competences' (Fullan 2009, 2). If it is through practice that skills and competencies are arrived at (Dewey 1938) then the community of practice approach must require all of those engaged with the implementation to become bloggers.

Having had the opportunity to reflect on the results of this study we have already undertaken some change management activities to try and enhance the visibility of the

affordances for 'purposeful action' that have remained partially hidden. On the student side, we have taken the time to promote the use of course blogs, clarifying their value and purpose in lessons with the students and linking them more directly with assessment. They are encouraged to literally cut and paste their blogs into new documents as the starting point for their critical reflections. In addition, assessment briefs make clear that the 'frequency and quality' of the use of their blogs will contribute towards assessment. On the staff side, we have set up a regular blog writing group which aims to get all the staff members blogging. Not only does this address the unevenness of digital literacy competencies among staff by offering a supportive, peer mentoring environment. It also offers the opportunity for discussion among the team about how they have integrated blogging into their classroom delivery. For the sharing of best practice, and for the review of tools and techniques that have already been developed to support the use of course blogs. There is an additional advantage to this process which is that it encourages staff to write about their research, providing a model for students to engage with. It also fosters a sense of community amongst the staff and encourages them to view themselves as researchers who are exploring the nature of practice-based research through their own personal engagement with blogging as a reflective tool.

6 Conclusion

If the introduction of course blogging aimed to encourage students to take their place in the public sphere and enact public personas as professionals then it seems clear that the implementation was not entirely successful. In fact, on reflection the objectives of the implementation now appear extremely ambitious. There was a lot of confusion among staff about the value of course blogging, a lack of clarity around the purpose and the means for using course blogs. In addition, the assumption that as media practice educators there would be an even level of digital literacy among the staff team proved incorrect. This confusion and uncertainty seems to have impacted directly onto the student's engagement with the activity. From the student's point of view the overly prescriptive nature of the assigned blog writing tasks as they saw them, along with lack of motivation to engage led to a poor take up across the board. There were also issues around the buy-in of staff to the implementation exacerbated perhaps by an uneven range digital literacies among the staff team. However, all is not lost! At the end of the summer break subsequent to the research activities described above. A returning student informally reported on the work experience they had undertaken during the summer. She described a media company where she had been working and apologised saying "I never understood the blogging, now I do". This revelation came about for her after she witnessed the army of bloggers employed by the media company where she had spent her summer. This real-world experience put blogging into a different conceptual framework for her and she asked me if it was possible to arrange any additional blogging experience. In fact, she threw herself into a couple of assignments for a local business which were recently published. What is revealed here is that it is the real-world contextualisation of pedagogic approaches that is the best motivator for engagement and ultimately the most effective affordance for the use of course blogs.

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