

STUDENTS WHO BLOG

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Teaching students the use of digital blogs as workbooks has been invaluable to both their art practice and my teaching; here's why and how.

As part of my job lecturing in the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand, I have been developing digital methodologies for teaching and learning as part of the curricula that I teach – different papers in the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (BFA) and the Bachelor of Visual Arts degree (BVA). Across these papers, the most ubiquitously used digital tool that connects them is the blog (or 'Weblog'), an online diary (or log) where authors can catalogue their thoughts on the World Wide Web. Blogs deliver a variety of content – by text, photo or audio – but they all have the same format in common: authors "post" their media by date, reverse-chronologically, and each post has a space for comment. This short paper aims to show, by using examples taken from my teaching over the last three years, how the use of blogging has positively affected both the students and my teaching. It will focus primarily on a discussion of current examples of work by students and staff in the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic and contextualises this within the contemporary use of blogging in education nationally and internationally, locating the use of digital media in art education.

In 2007, students in the third year of the BFA who had chosen photography as their speciality were asked to create an exhibition of work for public display, called "Comment On...". As part of the documentation, assessment and evaluation of the exhibition, and feedback on it, I asked that a blog be used to document images and descriptions of each student's exhibited work, and that each student access the communal *Comment On... blog*² as part of their feedback to their peers. I set specific instructions for everyone to comment on each of their fellow classmates (which they would also do verbally at the group critique), but instead of them all e-mailing me their comments to compile, the blog would act as a central repository, and they would do the work themselves. My intention in including the blog in this project was to show students that free online blog software (in this case wordpress.com) could be used to document, showcase and advertise their work to an online public. It also aimed to show students that the blog could be used as a place for comment and feedback, hopefully extending their understanding of online social networks, firstly within the school, and then encouraging an understanding of wider networks. The result was that the students all got exposure to blogging and they all got an online presence. However, as soon as I began this exercise I realised there were other, wider, implications for this kind of online practice within an art school context. For example, it raised questions of privacy and public exposure and raised issues of copyright and licensing of work. Although this specific project was never intended to *thoroughly* examine these contexts, it was clear that these were issues that should be specifically raised in future blogging projects.

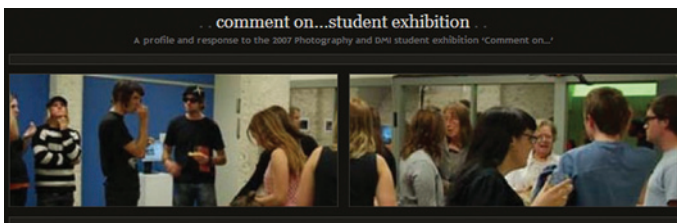


Figure 1: Screen grab from <http://commenton.wordpress.com/>

Later in the same academic year, in discussion with the class lecturers,³ blogging was introduced to the photography students in the second-year BFA. The students were asked to present a project as a blog, available for assessment on the internet. In this example, blogging becomes an individual responsibility rather than a shared one as in the previous project.⁴ Issues of networks were again addressed, this time with issues of privacy and public access introduced earlier in the paper. Furthermore, this exercise shifted some of the assessable components of the course online, and students were asked to consider how the blog could be used for assessment, in the same way that physical hand-ins had been used in the past. The surprising result in this case was that, as digitality was introduced to the students, the wider context of the internet, digital technologies and social networks became themes in their work, with the blog acting as the agent in their concept development. This distinguishes their blog's use from the previous example; rather than a focus on the blog as a website, or a presentation method (for the exhibition), the blog became a space for reflection and development, similar to the way in which the students had been using their physical workbooks.

Concurrently, with the senior BFA students, I started an optional lunchtime group, "Lunchtime Reflections," which was intended to further artistic discussion that occurred outside the classroom and allow ideas to develop beyond the confines of course material and class projects. In order to include students who couldn't make it to these lunchtime sessions, I started my own blog that captured these weekly conversations, extended them and linked them to online resources and relevant examples. With this project, I aimed to create a space for my own thinking as well as documenting the lunchtime group. I also aimed to lead by example in terms of the use of free digital software and demonstrating what it could do for the promotion, discussion and even the making of art.⁵ I was learning about opening up the possibilities for blogging within my own research and scholarship practices as well as at the same time developing methodologies for teaching blogging as a tool.

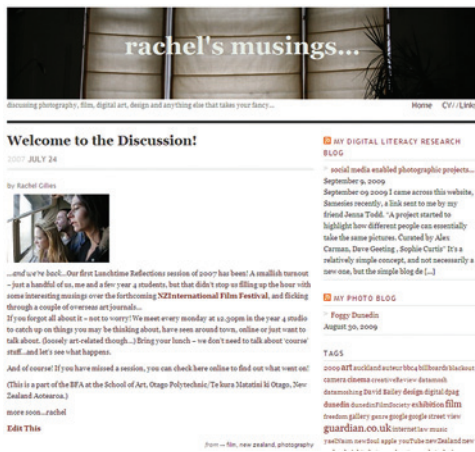


Figure 2: Screen grab from my first post for the "Lunchtime Reflections" group. Available at: <http://discussphotography.wordpress.com/2007/07/24/welcome-to-the-discussion/>

Part of this development was to extend my own learning in the education arena, and I kept a separate blog dedicated to flexible learning and how I could integrate it into my teaching.⁶ For me, "Flexible Learning" was initially the study of flexible delivery modes in teaching, but it quickly developed into a more integrated approach to the use of digital technologies in study, art practice and teaching and learning. In this online space I developed a theoretical understanding of flexible learning and teaching principles, upskilled myself in the use of available technologies, and used the blog as part of a network with other academics. It developed from a place of learning, testing of ideas and discussion to one that I now regularly update within my own scholarship and research related to digital literacy. Through this experiential learning process, and in response to demand within the school, I have developed a core digital literacy paper that runs in the first year of the BVA.⁷ This has now run for two years, and students are introduced to a wide range of digital devices (hardware) and programmes (software) as well as problem-solving techniques related to their uses. Through the digital literacy paper students gain an understanding of relevant digital skills in relation to their study and art practice, and also discover blogging. The overall aim is to ensure that all students gain a

fundamental confidence in the use of a variety of digital tools, as well as an overarching understanding of their wider application within both artistic and digital contexts.

The paper pulls together my research and experiences with students from the past three years. It integrates a variety of digital media in its delivery, and students experience these by accessing the course (also online), and following the tasks set. They are introduced to the wider implications of these media, including blogging, through learning the theoretical underpinnings, as well as receiving instruction in the use of the relevant technologies. Furthermore, they get a chance to develop their own use of the media, specifically in relation to their art practice and study.

To reflect a little on how blogging has changed not only the ways in which students document their work but how they think about their art, and ultimately, how well-equipped they are to face the online world after they graduate, I will discuss some examples of their work.

Those same students from the second-year BFA class in 2007 who were originally *made* to use blogs as part of their course work are now choosing to blog on their own. They develop their blogs as research and practice workbooks, use them to keep in touch with each other's practice, submit them as workbooks for their assessment and in anticipation of graduation, are integrating them into professional websites to market themselves online. The results, for both process and outcomes, have been excellent.

To give an example of the range of students working in this way, in 2009, at the end of the first semester, 40% of the students chose to submit digital workbooks (in the form of blogs) as part of their assessment; 50% did not submit an additional hard-copy workbook. There is no requirement for students to work in one way over another, with the students who choose to work online doing so because they have the freedom to choose, having been taught the benefits of the digital approach earlier in their education.

My first individual example is senior BFA student Viet Tieu, who uses his professional-looking blog to market his photographic skills and develop his social networks. Viet's blog is a great example of a professional online presence (i.e. website) available for free. It's not his first blog, and having gone through the process once already, his current blog is slicker and more professional than the first. It serves as his photography workbook, but he is acutely aware that he is representing himself in a public forum and he will continue to use it as a professional space once he graduates at the end of 2009. The image in the screen grab below from his blog shows "Rufus and his Beach Buggy," a shot recently taken. Viet discussed the use of the image with Rufus' mother at the time, explaining that he was a photographer and that he would like to put the image on his blog, accessible to a wider public. The mother was more than happy about this, and Viet adhered to good practice by using model release forms. His final step (or so he thought) was to e-mail the link to Rufus' family so that they could access the image. To his surprise, Rufus' mum was so pleased with the result that she made a comment on his blog and then moved on to view his past posts and photographic works. She continued to make critical comments on images that moved her to do so, and left a link to her own blog for Viet to visit in return.

The main success here is that Viet is creating his own networks, outside his educational circles and immediate peer group. He is also showing a high level of maturity and responsibility, including all interested parties in decisions prior to the display of work online.

My second example is senior BFA student Emily Hlavac-Green, who is now at the level where she has developed a wider context for her online presence, and has recently been working to integrate the various strands of her online self. Having developed a working blog for her practical photography studies and a separate blog for her research, she realised that there needed to be some way that these elements could connect and overlap. In addition, she saw that there were other parts of her professional self that could be displayed in the same space to create a more complete online presence. Through her own development efforts she has designed a layout, through the manipulation of a free template, which links her separate blogs. Visitors to her integrated site are unaware that they are visiting four separate blogs. The result is a professional approach to presenting oneself online, one that is clear and easy to navigate.

There is an important recognition here that the internet provides a public space in which an individual's personal interests may overlap with their school work – a phenomenon I have personally experienced as more and more of my “friends” on the social media site Facebook become a mix of students, graduates, family and colleagues. Students working online as part of their coursework are made explicitly aware of this through blogging, and take on the responsibility of representing themselves appropriately on their sites. For example, student Jesse Simons' work has developed this year to include artwork created *about* social networks of images, and the internet-as-repository or image bank.⁸

My final example is a student who only started blogging seven days ago! Struggling with the physical workbook format, and as an exclusively digital photographer, senior BVA student Bella Harrex has taken to blogging as a natural. Bella is a new student in the School of Art, and has never been introduced to reflective practice through the development of a hard-copy workbook. This is something that art students are usually introduced to in the first years of their art



Figure 3: Screen grab from Viet Tieu's current blog, taken on 16 August 2009.

Figure 4: Screen grabs of Emily Hlavac-Green's four different blog headers. She has carefully designed and linked them to appear as the same blog, with the four numbered designs letting the visitor know which blog they are visiting.



school education, and it can take a lot of experience to develop a personal style. For Bella, working in a physical format was not helping her develop her own reflective practice. As a digital photographer, reformatting her work for a physical output at the development stage was a time-consuming and non-intuitive way to work.

Seeing the success that some of her peers were having with blogs, Bella realised that this could be a more appropriate way for her to present her work for assessment. I encouraged her to set up her own blog, to look at the blogs of other students who were using theirs particularly well, and just to have a go. As previously stated, the results were incredible. Bella quickly realised that using the technology was not a barrier for her; it suits her to think through

her computer and, within an hour of setting up her blog, she had discovered a suitable template, created her own unique header image, and posted her first images. She is now using the technology every day.

What has surprised both Bella and I is how quickly the blog format has helped develop her photographic practice. In just a week, there was a considerable leap in her ability to articulate her thinking and process the changes in her work. The blog is not just a tool, or merely a different way of doing the same thing; it can enable further learning and engagement where other tools cannot go.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

For me, blogging is also a space for reflective practice, whether for teaching, scholarship, or research. At the core of everything I do, reflection is an important process that enables development. Having learnt this process through my own blogging, and from the students' blogs, the benefits are clear and have underlined my determination to both continue teaching the use of blogs and to continue to situate myself in a network of other bloggers.

This network not only encourages further learning, but also enables critical discussion around the culture of art practice in a networked world. This is an interest that flows through my own work, from photography to digital literacy and social media research, and connects some of the strands along which I think (both on and offline).

I am also able to utilise the blogging network in my teaching across the polytechnic. For example, I teach photography at different levels and in different contexts, and I find that with the ease of access I have to other students' work via their blogs, I can now use their work as examples in the classroom. Both in lectures and in consultations with individual students, I can easily go online to show visual examples of students' work, or share the research they are doing in a particular area. Furthermore, I am increasingly seeing the students referencing each other's research by linking to each other's blog posts. This collaborative learning environment is benefiting everyone involved.

I also find that my own blogging practice, as well as that of my students, has become more critical as we are increasingly aware of our representation online. In comparison to physical workbooks (which until a few years ago was the expected format for assessment), which remain a private space until assessment (and some arguably remain so thereafter), I find that the students are more careful and critical about what they post from the outset. They format their arguments *before* posting them, and they exemplify them with *edited* images to make their point. Similarly, their research is submitted in a more developed form than before.

I find myself doing the same. In my own blog, I am aware that my students are my primary audience, and I feel it is important for them to see what I do inside, outside and across the classrooms I teach in. For example, until recently, I kept the blog I used for students separate from my Digital Literacy Research Blog, and I struggled with the thought of posting links to subjects less closely related to class topics. As I have developed my blogs, I have developed a better understanding of who I am as a teacher, and I have integrated my blogs to reflect this and to create a more



Figure 5: Screen grab from photographer Bella Harrex's new blog, showing her fifth post, taken on 20 August 2009.

rounded web presence for myself, supporting my professional work in a greater variety of ways.

Finally, as I continue to learn through my own blogging, I continue to share these experiences with my students. In this context we are all learning, and have already learnt a great deal. This has been an invaluable experience.

Some Students who Blog

Emily Hlavac –Green	http://emilyhlavac.blogspot.com/
Viet Tieu	http://viettieu.blogspot.com/
Bella Harrex	http://isabellaharrex.wordpress.com/
Alex Lovell-Smith	http://electart.blogspot.com/ (research), http://alorxphotography.blogspot.com/ (practical)
Jesse Simons	http://jessesimons.blogspot.com/ (research), http://kiaora-jesse.blogspot.com/ (practical)

Staff Blogs: The School of Art

Rachel Gillies	http://discussphotography.wordpress.com/
Dr: Susan Ballard	http://suballard.wordpress.com/

Staff Blogs: Otago Polytechnic

Definitive list (regularly updated)	http://wikieducator.org/Otago_Polytechnic#Staff_blogs
Other Links	
Digital Literacy Paper:	Wiki: http://wikieducator.org/School_of_Art_Digital_Literacy

Rachel Gillies is a Senior lecturer in both the School of Art and Department of Design at Otago Polytechnic and has backgrounds in photography, multimedia technology, contemporary art gallery management, graphic design and electronic arts. Her research practice includes electronic arts, photography and contemporary exhibition practices, and she is directly involved in the development of digital literacy resourcing at Otago Polytechnic.

- 1 For further information see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>.
- 2 The *Comment On...* Exhibition Blog is available to view here. It hasn't been updated since the end of the project in 2007. All work is classified as Creative Commons, By Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives: <http://commenton.wordpress.com/>.
- 3 At this time I was working as acting head of the Photography Department, and this paper was taught by Michael Morley and Angela Lyon.
- 4 The *Comment On...* blog ended up being the responsibility – and submission – of one student who set up the account and updated all the images and descriptions from the students. The group members then had individual responsibility for posting comments to each other for feedback.
- 5 My current blog can be viewed at <http://discussphotography.wordpress.com/>. Although this blog was started when I initiated the "Lunchtime Reflections" meetings, I was already trialling my blogging "voice" at <http://photography-and-new-media-art.blogspot.com>.
- 6 See <http://flexiblelearningranch.wordpress.com/>, which was started in response to a paper which formed part of the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Learning and Teaching offered at Otago Polytechnic.
- 7 The paper is available online at http://wikieducator.org/School_of_Art_Digital_Literacy.
- 8 For some examples of Jesse's work, see <http://kiaora-jesse.blogspot.com/>.