

Title	Teaching and Professional Fellowship Report 2007/8 : The role of E portfolios in postgraduate art and design courses
Type	Report
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/489/
Date	2008
Citation	Lowe, Paul (2008) Teaching and Professional Fellowship Report 2007/8 : The role of E portfolios in postgraduate art and design courses. Project Report. University of the Arts London, London.
Creators	Lowe, Paul

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Background to the fellowship: E portfolios in A&D

'An e-portfolio is a purposeful aggregation of digital items – ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc., which 'presents' a selected audience with evidence of a person's learning and/or ability.'

Sutherland, S. and Powell, A. (2007)

The initial impetus for the fellowship was to explore how the concept of E portfolios that has gained increasing currency in undergraduate education might be applied to the postgraduate sphere. Many degree level courses have adopted e portfolios as part of their PPD programmes, especially in areas like teacher education, health care, medicine and law, where there is often an explicit requirement in course structures because of mandatory government guidelines for students to engage in reflection on their studies. The e portfolio is seen as a vehicle to transmit the lifelong learning of the student, as well as act as a potential showcase of their achievements to an employer. Whilst these approaches work well in such professions, there are significant issues when applying them to the context of art and design that we are engaged in at UAL.

Significantly they are often relatively inflexible and follow rigid templates that from a functionality and aesthetic point of view do not accord with the cutting edge design experiences out students are used to in their professional endeavours. Few if any A&D students would wish to use a predetermined template to showcase their work to a potential employer or client.

If the role of e portfolios as a vehicle for demonstrating professional competence to a potential professional client is therefore ruled out for most A&D students, then the other potential role of e portfolios as a vehicle for self-reflective development then comes to the fore. Additionally, there is considerable danger in conflating the role of the portfolio as a presentation or assessment tool and as a tool for reflection,

The conflict is especially detrimental when one seeks to use the portfolio for learning purposes, yet tells portfolio authors that their portfolios will also be used for high-stakes assessment or as a device for obtaining a job.

Barrett and Carney (2005)

In the context of UAL students then, it seems that the role of e portfolios as a reflective vehicle is paramount. The question then becomes what kind of software environment is the most suitable for this process to take place.

Given the relative customisability and freedom of expression that can be obtained from commercially obtainable open source blogging software, we have come to the conclusion that this is the ideal format for a vehicle to map the learning journey and encourage reflection in learning, providing the context for what I characterise as the *e-reflective practitioner*. The fellowship was thus used to explore this possibility in greater depth using the cohorts of the MAPJD at LCC as research material.

The report:

Blogs and the e-flective practitioner: professional not confessional

Paul Lowe University of the Arts London

‘In my opinion, nothing comes closer to a critical assessment of my major project than my almost day-to-day account of my progress with the project (and my studies in general) in form of this blog. What is more, the blog entries were written in ‘real time’ while I was working on my project and therefore are, in my opinion, more valuable to analyse my thought processes and my approach to the project than any ex post dissection could be. And in a sense, this blog also reflects – in an unvarnished fashion - my successes, excitement, frustrations and failures along the way without the benefit of hindsight.’

Student on MA Photo Journalism and Documentary Photography

This report explores the relationship between personalised learning, reflection and the use of blogs. It outlines how the postgraduate programme in the Media school at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London uses web 2.0 tools on the photography programme, in particular blogs, in developing reflective practitioners. The unique opportunities presented by ‘live’ blogs in opening up the process of articulating experience into learning, enhance what we characterise as the ‘E-flective practitioner’.

Context

Our postgraduate programme is specialist and largely vocational. It aims predominantly at developing the knowledge and skills of professional media practitioners. As such, it has implications for any practice-led education where the emphasis is on solving real world problems and developing professional experience. The MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography course is aimed mostly at mature students who are mid-career professionals looking to deepen and extend their practice, or wishing to gain the skills and methodological toolbox to operate as professional photographers in an editorial and documentary context. Our students are from a wide range of backgrounds and countries. Central to our teaching strategy is the development of critically aware practitioners who are able to combine high levels of technical expertise with compelling aesthetics, underpinned by a strong ethical perspective. There is a high level of interaction with industry, evidenced especially by extensive use of professionals as visiting tutors and mentors.

One to one and small group tutorials are central to the teaching method, analogous to Schon’s (1987) ‘coaching’ approach. The students progress in a structured way from small, set assignments to their final major project, thus building a ‘repertoire’ of

skills and methodologies. The course has both full-time face to face and two year part-time fully online modes, delivering the same curriculum but in different ways. We use four interrelated platforms for e-learning on the programme. Firstly we have an industry standard digital image asset management for uploading and interacting with photographs. Secondly we use the WIMBA live classroom web-conferencing suite for lectures, tutorials and group sessions. Thirdly we employ individual and group blogs for developing reflective practice and collaborative space, and finally we have the Blackboard VLE for course materials, discussion boards and wikis.

Reflection

Reflection helps learners to:

- * understand what they already know (individual)
- * identify what they need to know in order to advance understanding of the subject (contextual)
- * make sense of new information and feedback in the context of their own experience (relational)
- * guide choices for further learning (developmental)

(Higher Education Academy UK Centre for Legal Education 2008)

By working through a series of set practical assignments which then expand into a self initiated major project of the student's own choice, we seek to build a repertoire of experiences on which the photographer can draw, like a mental image bank of situations that they have resolved photographically that can act as a guide to future projects. As part of this process, we ask students to question constantly what they are doing, and to record the journey they are taking whilst studying with us, and on a broader scale to constantly question the media industry they are part of or wish to join. In this, we are thus seeking to develop what Schon(1983;1987) calls 'the reflective practitioner'. Schon's theories underpin our teaching methodology, which is based on years of combined practical experience as photographers and journalists as well as academics. The concepts of *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-on-action* are well established and mirror how photographers operate in the field, making constant decisions on what and how to photograph, but we also see that this process takes place in the planning stage too, what we call *reflection- before-action*. Analysis of the working practices of creative professionals also identifies *knowing -in-action*. Schon (1987) describes this as not depending on 'our being able to describe what we know how to do or even to entertain in conscious thought the knowledge our actions reveal.' (p.22)

We see the importance of reflection as contributing not only to students' development of professional practice but also the learning process itself. Boud et al (1985) argue:

Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning. (p.19)

The particular contribution of blogging

In order to trace this process of continuous self-examination and reflection, we have introduced blogs to the course. We identify several key features of blogs that make them an ideal vehicle to act as a reflective journal. Firstly, blogs serve to map the personal learning journey in real time which, when combined with the depth of personal expression that they allow, generates a level of 'connected knowing' (Brockbank and Mc Gill 2007) that is difficult to achieve through more conventional tutorial relationships. Brockbank and McGill characterise connected knowledge as being based on empathy, trust and a willingness to extend or alter one's own perspective. They perceive it as being encouraged through reflective dialogue and a focus on making sense of the other person's experience.

Blogs provide a 'mashable', searchable archive of the student's process and progress, which can include rich media : images, video and links. They give a whole person view as they can include influences and experiences outside the core programme, and thus allow for considerable personal expression, which in turn generates increased interaction with the audience, whether that is tutors, peers or a wider group. Their collaborative nature encourages peer group feedback and commentary, and their portability and ease of access and updating means that they can act as 'sandboxes' in real time to explore, develop and record the entire creative professional sphere of the students' endeavours.

In this way blogs sit inside the learning cycle, creating a central space where experiences can be reflected on, analysed and acted upon, before reapplying the new paradigms learnt to the repertoire of approaches that characterise the reflective practitioner. Thus the whole process of turning experiences into understanding and generating new insights is documented in real time by the use of blogs.

How we use blogs

In establishing the blogs we give the students full choice over where and how to host their blogs, and on how to set up and design them, following Moon's (2006) advice:

'unless there are reasons for prescribing a particular format, it is desirable that the format of a journal is a matter for personal experiment and choice for the learner because this is a manner through which a sense of ownership – a relation to the writing- is developed' (p 95)

For us it is important that the blog represents the whole person in so far as it relates to their professional practice, as Klug (2002) advises:

‘Write how you really feel and not how you think you should feel. Record what you really think, not what you believe you ought to think’

(p.56)

Blogs perform several functions on the course. Their main purpose is to map the individual student's learning journey, thus deepening reflective practice and strengthening their repertoire by articulating experience into learning. In doing so, they describe and explore issues and problems the students face in their practical assignments, and document the process of research and planning on larger projects, essentially creating an instant archive of the creative interaction with the situation. The blogs are vital too in referencing the ‘world outside’, providing an arena for the students to explore influences other than the course. As they are open to the whole group, they provide a vital collaborative arena in which to showcase work and get peer group feedback. They also function as a critical commentary on the course itself, creating a space that is less threatening than conventional feedback routes which allows the student body to express its views on both the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, allowing tutors and staff to micro manage the course in a way difficult to do with other feedback methods.

Personalised learning

Perhaps most importantly for personalised learning, tutors use these project descriptions in advance of tutorials to get a sense of what the student's work is about, making tutorials much more effective in delivering exactly the right advice for that particular student.

Blogs help individual students organise their thoughts and document their workflow, essentially becoming an online workbook/sketchbook for their ideas, creating a space for reflective analysis of their projects in ‘real time’. In giving a ‘warts and all’ view of both their studies and of the course they develop an arena for healthy self-criticism of the programme.

The blog gives tutors greater insights into the individual student. This support can be continued outside of term time and timetabled contact points by giving feedback on

ideas and work in progress. Blogs thus give valuable insights into how students deal with the assignments they are set, and how they then convert that experience into knowledge. As such, they greatly assist staff in learning how learners learn.

Most importantly they offer the tutorial staff an unparalleled insight into how the students think, work and relate to each other, thus they amplify 'connected knowledge' (Brockbank and McGill 2007) in a way that contact through tutorial sessions and classroom cannot match. Whilst the blog cannot replace more traditional tutorial sessions, it does get 'inside' the student's work in a way that is not easily obtained by other methods. The best blogs offer an extraordinary insight into the students' practice, detailing the practical, conceptual and ethical issues they faced and documenting how successfully they overcame them. The blog format because of its informal nature allow students to express their ideas in a non threatening way, and get valuable peer group feedback as well as feedback from tutorial staff. It also permits students to present their other interests outside of course work, thereby enabling them to present themselves as more rounded individuals. They are 'authentic', in that grounded in experience, reflective diaries depict personal observations, making it difficult for others to fake. Tutors therefore have the insights about each student to make a real contribution to a more personalised form of learning.

Issues in using blogs

a) Ethical issues

We considered several ethical issues in the use of blogs. The discussion of personal matters generates issues of privacy. Who sees the blog? Is it limited to staff and peers? What about the role of external examiners or family and friends? We established rules of 'netiquette' when posting to the peer group to maintain a professional environment for discussion and commentary. The level of self-disclosure is important, as journals can help to develop a sense of professional /private spheres. We are also keen to avoid disclosure as a form of surveillance. Foucault (1995) argues:

'This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroisation; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection.'

It is important to recognise that the blog can act as a space to explore the relationship between the professional and the personal, and to delineate those areas that can be discussed in the professional sphere and those that need to remain in the personal, so the blog can act as a sandbox to establish what is *professional not confessional*.

b) Assessing blogs

A major question for us was whether and how to assess the blogs. We wanted them to be assessed to make sure students actually maintained them, but not too formally because they are not the main product of the course, which is their major projects. Again, Moon (2006) provides guidance:

‘The assessment of secondary material is usually the preferable choice’

(p.112)

We therefore use the blogs primarily for formative assessment, and then students reformulate the material for their final critical report, which accompanies their major project. The blogs themselves are assessed on progress to a standard of completion with a required minimum number of weekly entries. In this way we are seeking to assess *process* not *product* in the blogs. We regard this way of working with blogs as pedagogically sound as it encourages the return to the material and enhances secondary reflection. Additionally, it changes the blog from an assessment method to a tool for learning making it freer and more exploratory/experimental. It avoids marking personal material, and the reformulated critical report is easier to assess against a set of criteria. Material from elsewhere can be included in the original blog and format and presentation issues are minimised, with the word count easier to handle.

However, we have experimented with several students who were very comfortable with the blog format in presenting their critical report in the form of their blog. In several cases this has been very successful, as in the case where the student used tags within his blog to identify key points where he critically interacted with his project in real time, and we have allowed the use of the blog for critical assessment. The quote at the start of this chapter sums this up in the student's own words.

c) Volume

Volume was an issue for both staff and students. Our student evaluations indicated that students felt that there were too many access points for information e.g. blogs,

blackboard, emails and that one centralised portal would be better. Running two blogs, one for project work and one personal was seen as counterproductive. Equally, the staff time needed to read and react to the blogs is significant, and in order to gain the greatest benefit this needs to be allowed for in determining allocation of staff resources.

d) Management and control

Most students would prefer to host their own blogs on their own external server rather than using the college server, which could present issues to confidentiality, data protection and archiving.

Benefits

a) Motivating students

Our students liked blogs and found them useful. MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography students are mostly digital immigrants with some digital natives, however most are comfortable with technology, and use computers and the Internet in their existing professional practice. Some already had or read blogs before embarking on the course. Our evaluation from 16 online students at end of first term is typical of both modes on the course. 70% responded that the process of creating the blog to aid studies had been very useful, with 30% responding that it had been useful, and 60% found the process of writing the blog as very useful in helping to deepen understanding of their own practice, with 20% finding it useful. The responses to the question, 'How useful were the blogs in getting to know your fellow students and creating a sense of a group identity?' indicated that 20% found it very useful and 80% useful.

b) Building a collaborative learning community

Overall we are convinced that blogs help the students understand more about what their fellow students are working on, strengthening the sense of community, especially valuable on group pieces of work. They quickly build a collaborative community, especially on the online course, as blogs give a rapid and deep insight into the personality and perspective of the blogger. Traditional models of student reflection can be critiqued as lacking in dialogue, particular in an era where there is limited tutor time to allocate to reading and feeding back on students' input. By

building a collaborative learning community students are constantly in dialogue with each other and have to absorb and process the points made by other students as well as tutors. Brockbank and McGill (2007) point out the importance of dialogue for reflective learning since an individual's knowledge and understanding develops through response to critique. They argue that:

Dialogue that is reflective, and enables reflective learning, engages the person at the edge of their knowledge, their sense of self and the world as experienced by them. (p.65)

With the project centred blog, tutors and other students are able to monitor and comment on each others work in 'real time' without having to wait for tutorials or other formal learning activities. Students can post questions and ask for advice or comments on their work. They can also express their feelings about the course in a less self conscious way than in more formal contexts. By making the students more aware of the idea of blogs in general, it has made them search out relevant blogs in their area of practice, thereby increasing their understanding of the medium. Five of the previous group are still using their blogs one year after graduation as a platform for their work.

The blogs also form an instant communal archive of the creative process; this is especially valuable on group projects that have an extended life beyond the duration of the project. The ability to look at previous years' blogs is an invaluable resource.

Widespread use of blogs could easily replace or supplement the traditional student workbook, as it opens out the creative process to a wider audience, allowing much more interaction and feedback between the students and tutors, and documents in real time the trials and tribulations, and successes and failures of the e-reflective practitioner.

Results of the fellowship

The above report will be reformulated in several ways, notably as a 'how to' guide for UAL staff in introducing blogs into the curriculum as a vehicle for reflection, and as an academic paper to be presented at the Design on E learning conference at Penn State in September 2008, which will hopefully then achieve publication. Versions of it have already been presented as papers and posters at the Solstice e-learning conference at Edge Hill and the Blackboard Europe conference in 2008. Blogs have been developed as an ongoing and vital part of both the full time face-to-face and part time online modes of the MAPJD.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the team at CLTAD, especially Mike Kelly and Linda Ball, for the very useful discussion at the beginning of the fellowship where we identified the potential direction of focusing on the reflective qualities of e portfolios as being the

most important for A&D students. I would also like to thank Margo Blythman for her assistance in drafting the main part of this report. However, my greatest thanks are to the student cohorts of the MAPJD who provided the raw material for this report, and without whose insights and experimentations the fellowship would have been meaningless.

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