Hype or hope?

*Using a course blog
to encourage
critical reflection
by students*

Jonathan Hewett   J.C.Hewett@city.ac.uk
Associate Director of Newspaper Journalism

City University London

If possible, find some genial friend, who will read the book along with you, and will talk over the difficulties with you. *Talking* is a wonderful smoother-over of difficulties.

When I come upon anything—in Logic or in any other hard subject—that entirely puzzles me,
I find it a capital plan
to talk it over, *aloud*,
even when I am all alone.

Rationale: needs

- From review of curriculum and ICT use
- Programme and module specs
- Critical reflection (and all that…)
- Media convergence in journalism
- Other pressures and priorities

Critical reflection needed

*"reflect critically on the
practice of journalism"*

*"critically evaluate issues
in contemporary journalism"*

*"synthesise information from
a range of sources"*

*"manage the implications
of complex ethical dilemmas"*

Quality standards
QAA: Quality Assurance Agency for HE

- **critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data**
- **critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights**
- **independent learning ability required for continuing professional development**

Where's the critical reflection?

- **More implicit than explicit?**
- **Assessment?**
- **Relevance?**
- **Modularised?**
- **Integration of theory and practice?**

Why online?

- **Relevance for journalism**
- **Educational context**
  - E-Learning
  - E-Portfolios (PDPs, lifelong learning…)
  - Pedagogical framework
  - Pressures of numbers, timetable, £££
- **Encourage 'thinking digitally'?**

Blog learning benefits *claimed*

- **Reflection and analysis**
  - in-built feedback system (comments)
  - contextualised learning (links)
- **Forum for critical thinking**
  - points 'published' and queried/discussed
- **Collaborative, student-centred**
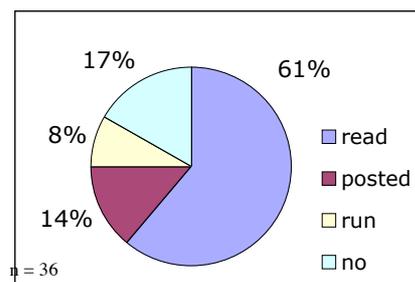- **Active learning, higher-order thinking**

Ferdig & Trammel, 2004

-- (Social) constructivist approach?

Practical priorities

- **IT access and support**
- **Cost**
- **Time required**
- **Staff input**
- **Ease of use – familiarity**
- **Relevance**

Students are familiar with blogs

- 61% read
- 14% posted
- 8% run
- 17% no

n = 36

"A blogging space for journalism students to reflect on and discuss their practical work and issues in journalism"

- **Single blog**
- **All students able to contribute**
- **Newspaper Journalism Masters / Diploma**
- **Pilot, then full**

What to blog about – 1

✓ *Your experience(s) as a journalist, primarily in your practical work*
- how it went, frustrations and successes;
- how it relates to points raised in teaching sessions;
- tips and suggestions;
- what you have learned.

What to blog about – 2

✓ *Published articles (or broadcasts etc), particularly to highlight points relevant to what you are learning and putting in to practice*
  ▸ *eg intros, structure, accuracy, style, use of quotes, attribution, sources, headlines, use of visuals, other elements of content, different types of news story, news features, profiles…*
  ▸ *Particularly useful to focus on what you find effective or not, and -- importantly -- why and how the reporter/writer/sub–editor/publication has achieved this (or failed to).*
  ▸ *Possibly linking this to your own experience, too.*

What to blog about – 3

✓ *Contemporary developments in journalism*
  ▸ *not simply to note these but to reflect critically on them, get beneath the surface, make connections etc.*

Assessment

- **Min. 7 items (posts and/or comments)**
- **Length is less important than relevance**
- **Where possible, they should 'add value'**
- *"This is where critical reflection comes in; critical not (necessarily!) in the sense of criticising/ disapproving but in the sense of reviewing, analysing and evaluating; 'unpacking' assumptions; challenging yourself and others; making connections, particularly with your own experience/work/ideas; and so on."*
- **cover a range of topics**

The blog in figures

Pilot (7 weeks + 1)
  – 14 students contributed
  – 69 posts/comments in total
  – range of 3–16 per student

Full-scale (11 weeks + 1)
  – 45 students contributed
  – 399 posts/comments (+ 39)
  – range of 1–40 per student

Main areas of blog posts

- **Practical experiences (eg interviewing)**
- **Published articles etc (plus links)**
- **Contemporary issues in journalism**
- **Moaning, mutual support, ideas**
- **Feed in from outside events**
- **Cross-course discussion**
- **Follow-up from in-class / assignments etc**
- **Useful feedback for me!**

Students' experience of the blog

From survey of students' experiences:
- **Very few technical problems**
- **Useful and had learned from it**
- **More tutor input**
- **Preference for continuing blog, but not assessed**

Worst things about the blog

- *Assessment: quota for posts / comments, topics specified*
- *Some posts too long*
- *Not enough dialogue / interaction*
- *Some people write rubbish – using it for their egos?*

Best things about the blog

- *continuing discussions from the day, having time to reflect on issues*
- *useful for sharing practical information*
- *setting up dialogue between students*
- *encouraging critical thinking*

More best things…

- *It's catapulted me into the modern age. And I quite liked it!*
- *Idea exchange forum --> collaborative support = learning from each other*
- *You can ask fellow students for advice/reassurance*

Other spin-offs

- Students started (or revived) own blogs
- Contributor to *The Guardian* arts blog
- 'Diary of a journalism postgrad'
- Students' online newspapers
- Intro to online tools (RSS, deli.cio.us etc)
- Online / multimedia jobs

Possible changes for next time

- Tutor role – more input?
- Assessment
- Encourage reluctant contributors
- Greater integration across programme
- Journalism blogs
- ! Privacy and plagiarism ?
- More links and multimedia content
- Individual blogs with RSS feeds?

Blogging Journalism Education -- http://hackademic.net