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International Journal for Academic Development, 2015; 20(3):212-223

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<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/93693>

International Journal for Academic Development

Vol. X, No. X, Month 20XX, 000–000

ARTICLE

Blogging as community of practice: lessons for academic development?

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None of the authors have a financial interest nor benefit from the direct application of their research.

Blogging as community of practice: lessons for academic development?

As practices and expectations around doctoral writing continue to change, so too do the demands on academic developers and learning advisors. Social media is increasingly playing a role in doctoral education, just as it is in higher education more generally (Conole & Alevizou, 2010). This paper explores a blog initiated in 2012 to inform and support doctoral writing; since its inception, it has grown to include diverse and overlapping communities of academic developers, language and literacy specialists, supervisors and students with shared interests in doctoral writing. This case study reflects on our experiences of entering the online environment through the lens of connectivist learning, noting the practices and communities that have been established, and the blog's positioning in relation to our formal roles within universities. We consider how blogging relates to our work as academic developers. Details of our experiences, with our analysis and reflection of them, can inform other academic developers seeking to engage in social media networks as part of their working lives.

Keywords: blogging; connectivism; doctoral writing; community building; social media in higher education

Introduction

The practices and expectations around doctoral writing, research, and scholarship are changing, and so too are ideas about how academic developers and learning advisors can support doctoral writing in a tech-savvy world. Many supervisors admit uncertainty and lack of expertise concerning how to develop student writing (Paré, 2011), and much learning by supervisors has been informal—supervisors recycle pedagogies from those who supervised them (Guerin, Kerr & Green, 2014; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011) and from discussions in the corridors (Aitchison & Paré, 2012), valuing the views of trusted colleagues more than those centrally provisioned (Hamilton, Carson, & Ellison, 2013). With the advantage of their meta-level multidisciplinary viewpoint (Carter & Laurs, 2014), academic developers are well positioned to contribute to changing practices of researcher writing development. One new practice in this field is the use of social media in the work of academic developers and learning advisors, but to date the literature on this topic is relatively sparse (Lee et al., 2013). Our research contributes to this discussion by exploring how blogging might benefit

the work of academic developers and learning advisors, using as the basis of this study our own experiences of establishing a professional blog, *DoctoralwritingSIG*.

Here we explore the formation of a Special Interest Group (SIG) on doctoral writing at the Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) Conference 2012, when a small group of academic developers and learning advisors from four different universities came together to establish an academic blog. The *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog was launched in September 2012 to reflect the interests of the SIG—that is, an interest in doing and supporting doctoral writing as shared by the ‘tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98) of academic developers, academic language and literacy specialists, doctoral scholars, research student supervisors, graduate school administrators and other stakeholders. Our intention in presenting this case study is to inform academic developers about the potential benefits of using social media such as a blogsite in their work.

Case study, communities of practice and connectivism

A case study was undertaken in order to better understand the phenomenon of a specific case of academic blogging, seeking to describe what happened and reflect on how and why it has evolved in this particular way. The study details the early experiences of our endeavour to establish a community around doctoral writing via this blogsite; data is gathered from the authors’ own reflections as participant observers of this community in the process of its formation, and from the blogsite itself (including postings, comments and site statistics). From this single, bounded instance in a real-world setting (Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2009) we draw conclusions about the effectiveness of blogs for community building in academic contexts. The case study method allows us an in-depth, context-specific examination that enables the construction of an ‘analytical narrative’ (Gerring, 2007, p. 5) of recurrent themes likely to be relevant to academic developers positioning themselves in social media.

We examine the particular case of our own blog and practices by reflecting on our experiences in ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998), noting two formulations of communities of practice—that of the blog editors, and of the readership/contributor networked community. Our understanding of communities of practice is further informed by ‘connectivism’, a theory of learning that focuses on networks of connections (Cormier & Siemens, 2010; Downes, 2012; Siemens & Matheos, 2010). Digital technologies are currently transforming higher education at all levels, and various forms of social media in particular are ‘fostering a new scholarship based on open participatory practices’ (Siemens & Matheos, 2010). Social networks can provide opportunities to share ideas about what is valuable—a blog might act as a ‘hub’ that brings together people and ideas that can in turn feed back into wider networks (Siemens & Matheos, 2010). Academic developers and learning advisors benefit from looking outward in the context of a digitised and globalised higher education system. This case study explores how blogs provide one pathway that promotes an appropriate and effective form of connectivist learning.

Together, theories of community of practice and connectivism help us understand how an academic developer community can interact within a broadly networked community and how exchanges between these informal networks in turn feed back into our teaching and research as academic developers. We propose that digital technologies can effectively build authentic networks of learners, with direct implications for academic developers seeking to enrich their knowledge and practices by connecting with and learning from each other in informal ways.

Changing context for doctoral writing and academic development

The *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog is one response to what is seen as a complex and demanding aspect of academic life—that is, the increasing workloads and challenges of supervising doctoral students in a context of unprecedented change and expansion (Aitchison & Guerin, 2014; Austin, 2002; Carter et al., 2010; Carter & Laurs, 2014; Catterall et al., 2011; Kamler and Thomson, 2014; Lee & Danby, 2012). Added to this is the

increasing diversity of those who undertake doctoral studies, bringing with them a broad range of educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as varied motivations for and expectations of their doctoral experience (Manathunga, 2010). This diversity enriches the knowledge produced in doctoral studies in very positive ways, but it also carries with it new complications for supervision and thesis writing.

As the university context for doctoral studies changes, so too, the doctorate itself is changing (Go8, 2013), as well as the dissertation genres and writing challenges that accompany those changes. For example, thesis-by-publication genres are still evolving (Jackson, 2013), professional doctorates may require theses to meet industry specifications, and interdisciplinary studies require doctoral candidates and their supervisors to take significant intellectual and emotional risks (Manathunga et al., 2005). Academic developers can play a valuable role in providing knowledge and expertise to both supervisors and doctoral candidates facing these challenges (Carter & Laurs, 2014).

Changing platforms for learning: social media and academic blogging

Social media is exploding into our lives, infusing and collapsing private and public personae. Social media, or Web 2.0 technology, is generally understood as highly accessible media for large-scale social interaction that incorporates aspects of user-generated content (Gruzd, Staves, & Wilk, 2012; Tenopir, Volentine, & King, 2013). It includes a variety of tools and applications including Twitter, online videos, podcasts, social networking sites (such as Facebook), academic networks such as LinkedIn and Piazza, and blogs.

There is a growing uptake of multimodal technologies in undergraduate education, particularly for distance delivery; many teaching academics draw on the strengths of students attuned to connectivist practices, combining social media tools such as blogging with other tools like wikis, journaling and document sharing (Conole & Alevizou, 2010). Yet on the whole, academics tend to use social media in their private lives rather than in their professional spheres (Gu & Widen-Wulff, 2010). A recent UK study of scholarly reading behaviours and social media found that ‘although most UK academics use one or more forms of

social media for work-related purposes, frequency of use is not as high as might be expected' (Tenopir et al., 2013, p. 203). Nevertheless, outside the classroom, increasingly academics are starting to use social media professionally to keep up to date, to collaborate with colleagues, to (self-)promote and disseminate research. For social scientists especially, the speed of information dissemination afforded by social media provides significant benefits over traditional means (Howard, 2011). Demographic information is also interesting—Tenopir et al. (2013) found high-frequency users or creators are likely to be 50 years old or younger, and that 'they read more scholarly materials than others' (Tenopir et al., 2013, p. 203). They also found that 'social scientists and humanists [sic] are more likely to be bloggers' (p. 203). The relatively recent and growing interest in these new forms of communication mean that they provide an opportunity for academic developers to engage with each other and with disciplinary academics; to date, this opportunity has not been fully exploited.

The literature indicates that there are a number of benefits associated with academic blogging; blog creators and readers report the benefits of blogging for disseminating information, for engaging in informal conversations and connecting with communities (Lupton, 2104), as well as finding new and different authorial voices through web writing (Kirkup, 2010). Blogging has been recognised as a powerful tool for reflection and has been used for researcher development by doctoral students (Ward & West, 2008), established academics (Steel, Cohen, Hurley, & Joy, 2012) and researchers (Gruzd et al., 2012).

Mewburn and Thomson (2013) detail the altruistic characteristics of many academic bloggers. They describe how many build distinct communities of practice writing 'for each other' by providing information, mentoring, advice and support on specialist topics and wider issues in higher education. They see these kinds of blogs as 'virtual staff rooms' where personal and professional matters are open for discussion, and writing styles necessarily are diverse—academic developers can make use of this compatible medium.

The *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog

Starting out

Stepping into social media to create the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog was by no means seamless for us. We acknowledged that our novice status would require a realigning of our writerly identities, the development of new voices, and the learning of new skills for mastering the blog site technology. Inger Mewburn, aka the Thesis Whisperer (<http://thesiswhisperer.com/>), was our primary mentor and we learned from her the value of having ready access to a supportive, tech-savvy colleague. One of the potential pitfalls of entering into the world of social media is a lack of understanding of the technology itself; in order to be credible, it is necessary to learn how to manage the software and how to behave in this sphere.

Editorial community of practice

The extra workload entailed in running a blog has been managed by rotating editorship. This monthly responsibility entails weekly postings, responding to comments from readers, and website maintenance. Posts are circulated for feedback from the other editors before publishing in order to smooth the prose, to ensure posts are concise, that ideas are relevant to our audience and communicated clearly. Having each other as critical friends and collaborators is a very positive part of our academic lives. At times it has felt like a meta-dimension: as we wrote posts about writing and reviewing, writing and identity, writing and social negotiations, we were living and performing our topic as academic developers.

Posts mostly link closely to our daily work as academic developers. We recognised that active blogging needs to fit pleasurably into academic life: the jaunty, less formal tone requires enjoyment in the writing itself and engagement with the community of readers. Sometimes posts might be triggered by an insight or observation, a recent conversation, an anomaly that suddenly becomes apparent, or a threshold concept relevant to supervision or doctoral writing. Often teaching materials or ideas from the editors'

research outputs are adapted to become little hors-d'oeuvres rather than the full main course of a seminar or journal article.

One of the challenges of developing the *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog has been learning the genre. Blog posts are different from most other academic writing; posts are much shorter (approximately 800 words); they aim to invite comment; they are written for a broader audience; and they are written in a more relaxed and personal style. While blogging demands a different voice that celebrates the personal, this site is also scholarly. *DoctoralwritingSIG* is a shared professional forum originating in an academic conference and connected to our institutional, professional and collective identities. Thus the aim is to foreground personal voice and reflection, while at the same time recognising the constraints of a public and connected presence.

The community of readers and contributors

Beyond the immediate community that runs the blog, this forum allows for interaction with a broader community of practitioners in the field. The uptake of the site indicates that academic developers have welcomed informal learning opportunities such as the blog offers. Of course, this blog community is relatively small compared to others (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013); nevertheless, it continues to grow. At mid December, 2014, the blog registered 131,854 views in just over two years of existence. Over this period, 509 comments have been written. There are over 1,000 blog followers and nearly 900 twitter followers, and the site has averaged around 200 views per day in 2014. Viewers come from 184 countries around the world, the USA and the UK having the greatest number of hits (29,489 and 23,439, respectively). Australia comes in next at 21,242, followed by New Zealand, Canada, India, Germany and Malaysia sitting in the 3,500 to 6,000 range.

Although the original intention had been to write mainly for other learning advisors, writing teachers and academic developers, it soon became apparent that a high proportion of readers were doctoral candidates and supervisors. Arguably, this broad readership maps onto academic development teaching roles and thus,

informed by such networks and individual institutional experiences and research, the *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog topics cover a wide and eclectic range of issues.

The post that has attracted the most number of views to date is, curiously, *Writing the acknowledgements: the etiquette of thanking* (13 April, 2013). Although the the acknowledgement section is not an examinable component of the thesis, this interest suggests that the act of acknowledging those who have helped along the way is an important element in establishing one's own emerging researcher identity. The post with the greatest comment engagement is *Mother guilt and the PhD* (10 June, 2013). It discusses the guilt sometimes experienced regarding the time spent on a PhD instead of with children. The responses to this post differ from comments received on most others; they are more personal and generally quite extended by comparison. In these contributions there is a great deal of self-revelation; perhaps more surprisingly, contributors speak amongst themselves, responding to each other's stories by offering advice, condolences and support, offering the kind of support Azad and Kohun (2006) see as often lacking in doctoral candidates' environments. The interactions around this post reveal the need for forums where students can share honestly (and sometimes anonymously) the more painful and conflicting moments of the doctoral journey.

Guest postings are invited from other scholars with an interest in doctoral writing. At December 2014, *DoctoralwritingSIG* has had 12 guests. Some of these authors write from a doctoral student perspective, for example, about writing in English as an additional language (Jensen, Wichmann-Hansen & Cozart, 6 May, 2014), or seeking an authentic indigenous voice (Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 8 February, 2014), or about the emotions involved in writing when the topic is deeply personal and shame enters the experience (Burford, 2 August, 2013). Other guest authors are drawn from our academic communities; blogs may be written from the stance of an academic developer, learning advisor or supervisor. Some suggest academic teaching practices around how to argue a strong case for some aspect in the thesis (Bruce and Carter, 5 June, 2014); how to produce something that is both original and meets generic criteria (Laurs, 29 November, 2013); and how to

use metaphors at a deep level to sustain the thesis structure (Kelly, 10 October, 2013). A mentoring plan for students as reviewers showed an alternative means for student enculturation within the academic community (Maher, 13 September, 2013). Another post pointed out that feedback on writing should aim to improve both the writing and the writer (Paré, 21 February 2013). The issue of restricting thesis length was debated in another post (Walker and Carter, 13 October, 2013).

Building a community of practice

Blogging serves well those who believe education should be socially liberating rather than furthering the interests of a neoliberal enterprise. Social media is predicated around a philosophy of open access and unfetters users from the hierarchy of universities. This resonates with the flat, democratic structures and distributed learning advocated by connectivist principles (Cormier, 2010). Communicating through social media allows for participants to develop alternative learning networks with members of the online community, and can therefore mitigate sole dependence on supervisory support; such independence and autonomy is generally regarded as a desirable Graduate Attribute of research students.

The *DoctoralwritingSIG* blog might be detached from accountability regimes, but is recognised as having real traction within the negotiations of academic writing. One reader reported finding valuable answers to a variety of academic issues:

My thesis is due by the end of the month, so all the information that has been posted here, among other sites, along with the discussions, has cleared up so many remaining questions I had. (Comment, 17 Dec 2013)

Good support on campus is often organised through appointments with academic developers and timetabled workshops; informal social media allows this support to be sought and found without time or special limitations.

Although it is clear that the majority of readers who comment on the blog are doctoral students, academic developers and supervisors also follow the blog, as evidenced partly from private correspondence and personal conversations, and also because they sometimes link their own blog sites to ours. We link to others' sites too, reproducing the kind of networking that occurs at conferences. In a globalised world, networking can more readily cross national and language boundaries, and academic developers, no less than others in higher education, need ways of creating these collaborations and connections (Lee et al., 2013). This blogsite emerged from the QPR conference but has connections beyond the people in attendance there; it has rhizomatic energy of its own. It exemplifies Bruffee's (1999) observation that, in academia,

Knowledge communities are nested within one another like condiment tins or Russian dolls...each knowledge community is enveloped by, immersed in, and involved with other larger knowledge communities, and each knowledge community has smaller knowledge communities enveloped by, immersed in and involved with it. (p. 267)

Reflecting on this, it is clear that the blogsite is an appropriate mechanism for academic development work, particularly in an environment where funding and resources are dwindling; the informal learning communities favoured by connectivism come to the fore in such circumstances.

Inviting an author to contribute a blog not only enriches the site content, but also expands the reading audience, since these people carry their own followers to the site to connect into a new information hub. So, too, does linking and referring to others through referencing, tweeting and reblogging. In this online community retweeting and reblogging, 'liking' and commenting, are activities that connect readers and creators of the medium, building networks of knowledge that radiate rhizomatically from the hub of the blog itself (Siemens 2004).

Community doesn't only exist online, however; a number of posts have lead directly to on-campus initiatives. Posts inform the editors' academic development work—for example, the post *Mother guilt and the PhD* (10 June, 2013) became a key resource on real-life experiences when one of the editors was asked to

contribute to a forum on balancing life and doctoral study at Charles Sturt University, 2014. Learning works both ways—for example, after reading a blog on reviewing, a US colleague decided to establish an initiative for developing reviewing skills for doctoral scholars within the context of the American Educational Researcher Association.

Writing for the blog encourages a focus on writing issues that arise in other parts of our work as academic developers and learning advisors. For example, collaborative writing with researchers from other disciplines recently provided a salutary reminder of the situations doctoral candidates sometimes face in interdisciplinary projects, particularly those who are preparing theses by publication. Rather than simply resolve the problem at hand and forget about it, this experience provided a useful topic to explore in more detail in the blog, opening up a space in which to air concerns and locate resources for others in similar situations. Thus, a blog conversation about how to assign authorship based on percentages of work done became a resource for members of a broader community.

Implications for academic developers

These reflections on the professional and personal benefits from communicating in this digital space are presented in order to provide useful, practical lessons for other academic developers interested in expanding their practice to include engagement with social media. Of particular value are the ways in which this kind of professional practice can continue to develop writing and communication skills, while simultaneously developing a collegial community.

The process of preparing weekly posts can teach the authors a great deal about writing, not only through the feedback received from other editors on draft blogs, but also through observing other editors' writing processes. Writing on a regular basis about writing creates a heightened awareness of what can otherwise be unconscious practices; this in turn enables the articulation of that knowledge and experience for participants in workshops and programs. The process of having posts guided by the editorial eye of the other

contributors can foster individual voices while authors still benefit from peer review. Although generally abiding by the advice from fellow bloggers, authors can retain the liberty of ignoring specific suggestions in ways that are not quite so easy when publishing in conventional journal articles or book chapters. The opportunity for readers to comment on the blog mitigates the sense of writing into a void that can sometimes accompany more formal publication practices. A more immediate dialogue with community in turn informs bloggers about what is of value to others who work in academic development. These processes can connect bloggers into the community of academic developers, enabling them (and quite possibly their readers and contributors) to develop a stronger sense of an academic developer identity more generally as they all participate in the community.

From the perspective of professional development, writing a blog creates the opportunity to explore small, discrete ideas in rather more detail than would otherwise be the case. Knowing that material is needed for the blog encourages consideration of annoyances, worries, and triumphs that are not (initially at least) substantial enough to constitute a full-length article. In this way the blog facilitates academic developers to work as reflective practitioners by opening up spaces for writing (indeed, the responsibility of being accountable to the blog editors for providing material for regular postings pushes one to think harder and write much more than previously).

On a more personal level, writing a blog with peers offers the deep satisfaction of working collegially and collaboratively with like-minded scholars on an ongoing basis. When these peers are outside one's own institution, the focus can be entirely on intellectual issues: this is a tonic in what can otherwise seem to be a profoundly competitive and cut-throat environment. Editing a blogsite provides a mandate to expand the network through the broader community of academic developers—to follow up on brief conversations at conferences or to approach those whose work is admired—by inviting guest contributors, which in turn

enhances the bloggers' own understanding of the potential of academic development roles their area of expertise.

We argue that academic developers are likely to find considerable professional (and personal) benefits in starting a blog on a concern central to their work. Specifically, the findings of this case study reveal the benefits of working collegially—for moral support, workload management, for quality control and for inspiration. There is no doubt that blogging takes time; but it is time that is well rewarded, especially when shared. Further, this case study reveals how important it is to engage with others as a blogging community begins to evolve online; participating in mutually supportive activities such as tweeting, retweeting, and 'liking' further expands and builds community.

But perhaps most importantly, the community of academic development practitioners can benefit from social media that enables a greatly expanded repertoire of exchange and networking across traditional boundaries of discipline, space and time. The opportunities afforded by blogging communities and their practices bind all of us more closely as academic developers, irrespective of geographic location and institutional loyalties. By detailing our experiences on setting up a professional blog, this research intends to support others' forays into social media, thus providing the means by which academic developers might build new platforms for global exchange.

Conclusion

Learning and teaching in doctoral education has always been amorphous and especially so in regard to doctoral writing, where responsibilities are contested and student autonomy is a target capability. Academic developers often work with both students and supervisors in this area that is characterised by numerous pathways for writing development. In describing and reflecting on what was learnt from establishing a blog site, we encourage academic developers to step into digital media so that their expertise and experience are opened to the communities of practice that overlap with their own fields. This case study explores how three

colleagues came together to experiment with social media with the aim of building an informal learning community around doctoral writing pedagogy. We have been surprised at the impact of our contribution and believe that other academic developers and learning advisors will also benefit from similar ventures into social media as they share their knowledge and concerns, and connect into wider networks of colleagues around the globe.

The *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog was originally envisaged as a forum for exchange between some 40 people who had expressed a special interest in doctoral writing at the QPR conference. What started as a reasonably ‘homely’ enterprise has become the hub for global exchange between a network of scholars and researchers; furthermore, it has become part of a network of academic bloggers who connect through blogs and multiple other online media. The instigators of the blog have developed as a community, establishing practices that other communities of academic developers may consider making their own. True to the principles of connectivist learning, the blog has been the vehicle for the creation of a large and dynamic, multifaceted community engaging in practices concerning doctoral writing.

We have detailed aspects of this experience so that others may follow suit should they wish. But care should be taken in recognition that open blogging alters the parameters of one’s community and necessitates a different level of control (Lupton, 2014). Some colleagues simply don’t participate in such online spaces, while at the same time a forum like this can enjoy a huge and unidentified readership that is connecting into the informal learning opportunities offered here. Blog posts can be selected and monitored, but it isn’t always possible to foresee what will engage the readership—nor who those readers might be. Blogs can create a fluid and unpredictable, albeit stimulating, community.

This case study shows how academic blogging has furthered our work as academic developers and learning advisors on two fronts: by engaging supervisors and their doctoral students, and by sharing insights with other academic developers. However, as blogging becomes more ubiquitous, there is the possibility that

its popularity may undermine its value on account of the sheer abundance of such outlets. Perhaps within-institutional versions of the *DoctoralWritingSIG* blog may offer useful localised models of learning networks. What has become abundantly apparent is that blogs like this can create public and global versions of the informal learning of staffroom and corridor exchanges that have engaged and stimulated academics for decades. Such collegial sharing of practice is the essence of academic development.

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