



# LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE



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## CASE STUDY

# Using Blogs for peer feedback and discussion

Featuring: Tam Nguyen, The University of New South Wales

- Context** - 20-30 students in a 1st year Architectural Design Studio
- Description** - Blended studio. 4 hours face-to-face + blog online outside of class time  
- Students use blogs in a password protected environment for posting progress work for peer feedback and discussion in support of face-to-face studio
- Technology** - Blogs within the [Blackboard](#) learning management system (LMS)

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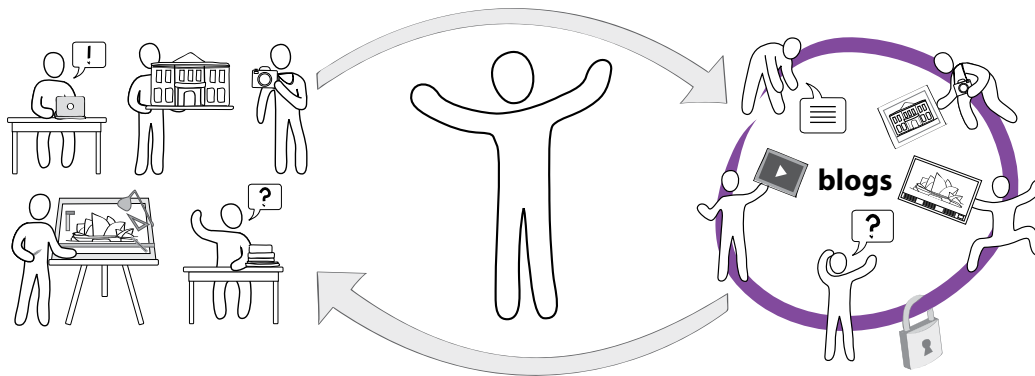


## Aims and overview

This case study aims to describe how a blog was used in one particular teaching context to promote peer-to-peer interaction, feedback and discussion. While the case study does examine one particular teaching application of a blog, the principles discussed can just as easily be applied to any teaching situation where the ability for individuals to chronologically record a learning process, collate different learning resources such as text, video and audio, and increased peer feedback or discussion between students is desired. This episode will examine the context, planning and teaching within the case study, and highlight any issues that were encountered, and benefits that make this type of online teaching worthwhile.

## What is a blog?

A blog is a blend of the term 'web log'. It can be thought of as a type of online diary or '[soapbox](#)', usually open to the public - although some blogging platforms allow you to limit who can read the entries. Entries can be chronologically recorded in what are known as 'blog posts'. These posts usually appear in reverse chronological order, meaning that newer posts are at the top of the page. There are several types of blogs. The more traditional contains text based posts, however more recently blogs specifically for images or videos have also emerged. Microblogging has also become very popular, where entries are very short. One example of a microblog would be [Twitter](#), where posts are limited to 140 characters.



A 'blogger' can post a wide range of material, such as text, images, videos, audio and links to other web sites. Readers can usually leave comments for the author, sometimes anonymously, and because of this blogs have become a popular forum for expressing opinion and encouraging debate.

## Examples of blogging software

There are two main types of blogging software, those that are free, and those that are proprietary and must be paid for. Below are some commonly used platforms that support blogging for you to investigate:

- [WordPress](http://www.wordpress.com) [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) (open source)
- [Blogger](http://www.blogger.com) [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) (open source)
- [Moodle](http://www.moodle.com) [www.moodle.com](http://www.moodle.com) (open source)
- [Blackboard](http://www.blackboard.com) [www.blackboard.com](http://www.blackboard.com) (proprietary)

## Case study outcomes quick summary

### Key benefits

- Easy to set up, little technical knowledge required
- Most students already understand the concept of blogs
- Students create and maintain their own content
- Students can integrate material from a variety of existing social media platforms such as [YouTube](#) and [Flickr](#)
- Increased student engagement with the class and each other
- Individual student progress is monitored online, leaving class time free to explore concepts in more depth
- Increased level of feedback for students from teachers and peers
- Students end up with a record of their developmental process enabling them to develop a more reflective working practice
- Critical analysis skills are improved, as is the confidence to apply them in peer review
- Improved presentation skills
- An improved level of student outcomes and grades

### Key issues to consider

- Some students disliked technology and did not understand relevance immediately
- Blogs can take some time to monitor, especially with a larger class size
- Not every student inherently has the technical skills required to use the blogs without some form of support and assistance

## Motivation for adopting an online teaching strategy

Tam's use of blogs within her studio class was motivated by the fact that time within her four hour face-to-face studio class was not being used as effectively as it could. Much of Tam's time was spent watching student presentations, and giving one-on-one feedback with students about their progress work. This in effect discouraged the students from giving peer feedback or engaging with each other in discussion about their work, as the teacher was seen to be the only legitimate source of feedback and guidance.

Because so much class time was used in this way, there was little time left to fully explore architectural concepts in any depth. The result was that students would leave the classroom without any real understanding of key concepts and how to apply them in their own work. Tam decided that more time was required in class to help students understand design fundamentals.

Tam wanted to take the feedback process out of the classroom during developmental stages of the students' assignments, leaving more class time to explore the important concepts that the students were missing, with the aim of improving the standard of their work.

## Why blogs?

As a part of Tam's class, the Blackboard learning management system was already being used to disseminate class outlines, etc. Tam chose to use blogs because of the following reasons:

- *Students could build a progressive record of their development progress using the blog's natural method of chronologically ordering posts*
- *Blogs allowed for the integration of many different types of media. Students in the class are asked to develop video content via YouTube, and asked to build image libraries in Flickr and embed both in the blog*
- *Each student was responsible for maintaining their own blog, meaning after the initial set up, there was no intervention required from the teacher*
- *The technology was already available to her as part of the Blackboard software.*

## Planning

Tam found that planning how the blogs were to be used and integrated with the face-to-face studio was of the utmost importance. Introducing technology into a class can actually be counterproductive if the issue of how the technology will be used and for what purpose is not considered well in advance. Some of Tam's key planning considerations included:

- *For more help understanding the potential of blogs, look for case studies, research papers and other examples that examine the positives and negatives of the technology and related pedagogy*
- *Look at real blogs online, and see how they are actually being used*
- *Once a greater understanding of blogs has been achieved, ask yourself the question, "do I really need to use a blog?"*
- *Consider how using blogs will actually help the students*
- *Ensure that the class is already completely designed and objectives and outcomes are determined before any technology is chosen*
- *How does using blogs fit with the existing face-to-face class time? Be aware of duplicating workload for students and the teacher. How can the blogs simplify and make the face-to-face time more productive?*
- *Look at one aspect of the blog in detail at a time, and determine how it can directly support students in achieving the learning outcomes of the course*
- *If a feature seems unrelated to the aims of the course, it doesn't have to be used*
- *Define what the exact purpose of the blog is. How will it be used? What should students post there? How often should they post? What will the teacher's involvement be? Is it a casual environment, or a place for final presentation? Are peer comments on student work encouraged?*
- *Consider the issue of privacy. Should students' personal details and work be posted publicly and viewable by anyone, or should the activity take place privately behind a password protected system? This will effect the type of software you choose*
- *What will the teacher's role be within the blogs? Will it save time or create extra work? What is the size of the class and how many blogs would need to be monitored?*

## Teaching

Tam found that she needed to change the way that she approached teaching when using blogs in the following ways:

- *It was important to explain the purpose of the blogs to the students at the start of the class, so they understood the expectations and how the blogs were to be used*
- *Whereas in the classroom Tam was the centre of the student learning experience, when teaching within the blogs her role was much more as a facilitator than the centre of knowledge, guiding the tone of peer comments and providing support and encouragement for contribution*
- *Checking in and making comments on blog posts was essential so that students felt as if the blogs were a valuable and necessary component of the class*
- *Only small amounts of feedback for each student were required as compared to the face-to-face studio, because other students were sharing ideas and knowledge and criticism with each other*
- *Checking the blogs meant making several short visits over a week, rather than checking in only once. In this way a momentum could be maintained, and the overall time required to read and teach was reduced*
- *As the semester progressed, it was found that the students continued to take a more active role in peer review and discussion within the blogs, with a large volume of posts and comments. This meant that Tam could offer less guidance and give more freedom to the students in their use of their own blog*
- *The introduction of the blogs also changed the way Tam taught in her face-to-face class, as many of the activities that used to take so much time in class were now being done online. This necessitated a change in teaching content and technique in the studio*

## Additional Benefits

There were many benefits that came out of adopting blogs as an addition to the face-to-face studio teaching for Tam and her students. These are outlined in the contextual summary on page 2 and do not need to be repeated here.

However it is worth noting that one of the biggest benefits for the students was something that was not planned, but evolved naturally from the way the students used the blogs. Initially, students commenting on other students' blog posts was not considered for inclusion as a learning activity. It was the fact that the students began to comment on each other's work that alerted Tam to the potential of using this feature as a powerful tool for developing reflection and critical analysis skills within the students. Tam then adjusted her teaching to incorporate comments and peer review as a primary component of the blog process. A certain amount of flexibility when teaching online can be beneficial, allowing adaption of new teaching approaches to maximise unforeseen benefits.

## Issues to consider and suggestions for dealing with them

Despite the fact that the use of blogs successfully freed up time in the face-to-face classroom, there were a few issues that arose during the semester that are worthy of consideration. *Tam offered the following suggestions to help overcome them:*

- **Issue**

*It did take some practice to balance the amount of time spent teaching online with that in the face-to-face classroom. Tam felt that time needed to monitor 20-30 student blogs was manageable, but that it might prove problematic for larger classes*

**Suggested strategy**

*Utilise the power of peer feedback and review. If students are commenting on each other's work, then it changes the perception that the teacher is the only one that can provide valid feedback, and takes some of the load off the teacher. Providing students with guidelines on what makes effective feedback, allowing them to share existing knowledge and skills, and rewarding feedback with positive comments will encourage students to engage more with each other.*

- **Issue**

*Some students really resisted using the technology and didn't understand the relevance of the blogs to the studio process*

**Suggested strategy**

*It is essential that the role of the blog is explained to the students at the start of the class. Care should be taken to help students understand that using the blog is not just an extra task and more work, but that it is an essential and useful part of the learning process. Explain how it will save them time in the classroom, and how it can help them get more useful feedback to make their projects better in the long run.*

- **Issue**

*Some students didn't have a high level of technical skill*

**Suggested strategy**

*Build in some time in the face-to-face classroom to introduce and familiarise students with the blog and its features. Start using the blog slowly at first, introducing new features in different stages. Other students are also a valuable source of technical support, and encouraging peer assistance by setting up a question and answer section is a good way to encourage this.*

- **Issue**

*Although students interacted so much more online, it didn't increase their interaction in the classroom*

**Suggested strategy**

*It's hard to combat human nature, and often people feel more comfortable contributing online because there is an element of security and anonymity. However one way to try to encourage the interaction from the blogs spilling into the classroom would be to develop tasks that contain components that need to be completed in both the face-to-face and online environments. For example, in the blogs, the students posted their developmental process and got a good level of feedback, but this was in some ways isolated from what went on in the classroom, where the time was spent more on understanding fundamental concepts. It could be that an in class discussion about how the concepts being learned could be applied to other student's projects would help bring online and face-to-face together more, and increase interaction and discussion face-to-face.*

## Conclusion

We hope that this case study has inspired some ideas about how blogs could be used in your own teaching, and has highlighted issues that need to be considered need to be mindful of. Make sure if you are thinking of using a blog in your own teaching, you refer to our other episodes to help with planning and pedagogical approaches.

For technical help with starting your own blog, please see the related [technical glossary episodes](#) that will explain how to set up a simple blog using different technologies.

## Additional reading\*

Churchill, D. (2009). [Educational applications of Web 2.0: Using blogs to support teaching and learning](#). British Journal of Educational Technology, 40(1), 179-183.

Eastment, D. (2010). [Blogging](#). ELT Journal, 64(1), 119-122.

Farrand, P., Perry, J., & Linsley, S. (2010). [Enhancing Self-Practice/Self-Reflection \(SP/SR\) Approach to Cognitive Behaviour Training Through the Use of Reflective Blogs](#). Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy, 38(04), 473-477.

Loving, C. C., Schroeder, C., Kang, R., Shimek, C., & Herbert, B. (2007). [Blogs: Enhancing Links in a Professional Learning Community of Science and Mathematics Teachers](#). Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 7(3), 178-198.

*\*Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access*

## Acknowledgements

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**Tam Nguyen**

*Associate Lecturer, Faculty of the Built Environment*



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### About the project

The [Learning to Teach Online](#) project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

### About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

### About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

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