

CEMP PAPERS

## Blogging @ BU: IHCS Case Studies

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Work in Progress  
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#### **TITLE**

Blogging @ BU: IHCS Case Studies

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper provides details on ten IHCS case studies using a variety of internal and external blogging tools during 2006. This addresses the first aim of the Blogging @ BU project which was helping to inform future Bournemouth University strategy regarding the use of blogs. All case study participants were either interviewed or replied to a short questionnaire during late 2006 as a checkpoint to evaluate their experience so far. The paper will discuss these experiences and focus on particular points of interest from a strategic and personal viewpoint.

A blog (or web log) is what Scott (2002 cited Clyde 2004) defines as “a web page containing brief, chronologically arranged items of information”. Winer (2003) also provided a good definition describing a blog as “a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser”. Beyond these basic definitions, agreement tends to split based on what a typical blog can offer. Clyde (2004) even suggests that due to constantly changing environments and ever-expanding possibilities, attempting to define a blog at a particular point in time is “an exercise in futility”. A blog could also be described as a method of publishing information on-line, similar to keeping a journal and writing entries about what someone is thinking, ideas they might have, places they may have visited or events experienced. Each new entry (or post) is added, with the most recent entries shown on the first page with older entries archived to sub directories. The blog therefore provides a continuous progressive view of an owner’s work, ideas, activities and development or whatever they might be interested in discussing.

There is sometimes confusion when trying to identify the difference between a blog and a conference facility. A blog offers a much more advanced environment than a discussion forum as it provides personal and intellectual ownership of material, the ability to visualise and interact with concepts and a place to treat as a personal opinion column rather than a shared discursive space. The use of links within a blog allows for knowledge to be contextualised within the wider world and the frequency of update is designed around regular visits - highlighted by the reverse order of posting - unlike a discussion forum where an argument is usually worked through sequentially from first post to last. A blog usually belongs to a single person with the owner periodically writing entries and publishing, but multiple bloggers - a blogger being the usual term for people writing blogs - can also contribute to one blog. Blogs can be maintained by individuals, groups, institutions and corporations with examples covering a diverse range of areas including politics, commerce, professional

and personal interest, in addition to education. Traditionally, journals have been private or even secret affairs, and were never linked to other journals. Blogs, by contrast, are social in nature encapsulating the ethos of Web 2.0, whether they are open to the world as a whole or only to a small select group.

From an educational perspective, Richardson (2006) provides some potential educational benefits of blogs as identified by Fernet and Eide:

- Promoting critical and analytical thinking;
- Promoting creative, intuitive and associational thinking;
- Promoting analogical thinking;
- Potential for increasing access and exposure to quality information;
- Combining the best of solitary reflection and social interaction.

A glance at current academic blog use suggests a number of positive reasons for academic blogging. Esther Maccallum-Stewart - an academic using blogging to teach and research - feels researchers are drawn to blogs because they're useful knowledge management tools - a place to test out and develop ideas (McClellan 2004). She researches popular culture during World War I and had already started a personal blog when she found she was adding academic ideas and thoughts. The blog allowed her to create a repository accessible wherever she was working "a place to store ideas, links and references" (BBC 2005a). The blog helped her to focus her research more effectively with the search facility letting her find ideas quickly and making it easy to connect and track related material online. The blog had become "an indispensable part of her academic working life" (McClellan 2004).

Blogs allow work to be easily shared with peers and students. They can provide easy online access to students and improve communication outside of the classroom. Trafford (2005) notes that for the tutor, blogs have a number of attractions:

- Convenience of access to view and where appropriate, provide responses;
- Interacting to guide the author to address particular issues;
- Supporting longitudinal surveys on a continual basis;
- By grouping together, enabling tutors to gain a broad picture of their students as a whole, and highlighting particular issues.

Mesa Community College's Rick Efland, maintains a blog to pass along links and comments about topics in archaeology (Downes 2004). Maccallum-Stewart's blog gives students access to resources,

information and courses on demand and allows her to see queries raised and pass information to her group (BBC 2005a):

I feel very strongly that information should be disseminated into the Internet world, but I also feel that academics can become too insular, constructing their own language and cliques which do nothing to promote the getting of knowledge.

The social networking element of blogging became very important as her blog helped her build links and share ideas with researchers in similar areas at other universities and also drew in non-academic readers (McClellan 2004). Anne Galloway, a PhD student also felt it was important that her research be publicly accessible (McClellan 2004). As it was supported by government scholarships she wanted to see how blogs could encourage greater academic accountability to the public and greater interaction with her research.

Blogs can also positively impact on the development of a writing style. Maccallum-Stewart felt that writing every day for her audience - making sure her arguments were clear and concise - had helped her prose style and that she now wrote "in a more accessible, less academic way" (McClellan 2004).

There is also a sense that blogs give staff a freedom and informality of tone impossible in journals. Penenberg (2005) feels that blogs function like peer-review journals do in the academic world, with a key difference:

The distribution of articles in academic journals is largely controlled by a publishing cartel that charges exorbitant amounts for subscriptions, which are subsidized by the institutions and universities that can afford them. Think of it as the socialist model for informational exchange. This dampens participation (read: supply of ideas and input) and, I would argue, deleteriously affects the level and quality of discussion. With blogs, however, anybody with an Internet connection can engage anybody else. Concepts are presented, attacked, sliced, diced, added to and subtracted from, mangled, massaged and molded until what is left is an amalgam of the finest we as an online society have to offer. For the digitally well-endowed, it's akin to free-market capitalism, with information as its currency.

This view is also supported by Steven Shaviro (McClellan 2004):

Academic writing and publishing depends on peer review. It serves as a filter to weed out slipshod work. But it is also constraining - the norms enforced by peer review, by dissertation advisers, journal editors and so forth, often have a built-in bias against new, experimental work. So I can see blogs as an alternative space for research, not replacing peer review but existing alongside it.

Other benefits include accountability for theories. Jill Walker suggests blogs make academics more accountable (McClellan 2004):

If I write something about people, academically, and publish it online, they'll find it and talk back in their blogs. I have to deal with that. I can't stay safely in my ivory tower. And frankly, I don't want to.

Duffy (2007) suggests reflection on teaching experiences and posts regarding professional challenges and teaching tips for other academics as two possible uses of blogs from a personal academic perspective. Considering the concept of reflective learning, Gibbs (1988) felt

It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.

Blogs can function as a mechanism for reflective writing allowing bloggers to gain insights into their thoughts at a particular moment for a deeper reflection of an experience. For example, having created blog entries as records and summaries of activities over a period of time, an academic could revisit entries and reflect upon them; what they had done, what they had learnt, the methods they had used; and the successes or failures where applicable. Trafford (2005) saw blogs

Providing a medium that facilitates reflection about life over an extended period as well as capturing something in an instant - an instantaneous note to capture a concept before it escapes.

He considered that academic staff could benefit from maintaining a reflective blog, whether as a manager or as an academic.

Educause (2005) provides some negative aspects to academic blogging. Intellectual property is a concern for universities, given the implications of hosting blogs that might include content used without correct attribution. Similarly, their open nature make blogs easy to copy and use elsewhere so some might be wary of sharing fledgling ideas, or see boundary pushing theories reproduced elsewhere before publication. Maccallum-Stewart had occasionally found her ideas elsewhere but was not unduly concerned, sending emails to get them taken down. She also felt that as blogs dated ideas, posting them could be seen as putting down a marker confirming someone had come up with an idea first (McClellan 2004). This can be a problem on some blogging systems where posts can be dated retrospectively.

Users visiting a blog might view it as factual and authoritative, when in essence it's the equivalent of a soapbox. Unlike discussion areas, blogs are unmediated and offer a different arena for expressing attitudes, opinions and ideas. While this may be acceptable, it could be seen as inappropriate for a blog hosted on an institutional server. The academic Chris Bertram has warned of a growing tendency for universities seeking to impose more corporate control over what academics do (McClellan 2004). Indeed, some universities have preferred to adopt forms of proprietary courseware that lock out people from outside the university. He foresees confrontations between academics who want to use blogs and the administrators who want to exercise control. As Downes (2004) queries, what happens when the free-flowing medium of blogging interacts with the more restrictive domains of the educational system? Blogs can also contain inaccurate or biased information. Examples include the University of Birmingham who stopped hosting personal websites and blogs maintained by academic staff, following controversy over links to alleged anti-Semitic content (McClellan 2004). Similarly, Harvard Weblogs contained a blog where a student posted internal memos from Diebold Election Systems suggesting their machines

faced numerous problems. The company threatened legal action against the student and Harvard (Downes 2004).

Finally, McClellan (2004) notes, the blogging academic might be seen as the latest incarnation of the media don, ready to simplify complex ideas in return for a few minutes of fame. The simplicity of blogging can lend itself to assumptions around actual use as a valid means for communicating and developing research ideas in comparison to traditional methods such as writing for journals and conference presentation.

#### THE BLOGGING @ BU PROJECT

In October 2004, at a meeting of The School of Health and Social Care (HSC) School Committee, it was suggested that staff might consider setting up blogs as one form of collaborative dialogue. Further discussions between HSC and colleagues from the schools of Design, Engineering & Computing (DEC) and Services Management (SM) during December 2004 and January 2005 highlighted this was an area all three schools considered an important future learning tool. One which could be used by both staff and students to assist with learning & teaching and research based activities.

A project brief was written during February 2005 and submitted to Academic Services for approval in March. When the first draft was submitted, the initial project goal was

- To design and produce a prototype blogging mechanism for staff use within school learning and teaching sites.

This would be followed by a period of evaluation and dissemination which would help to inform any future university strategy regarding the use of blogs, with the aim of re-engineering the prototype for a live launch where it could be utilised across the university. During this period DEC had to withdraw from the project due to staffing changes taking place within the school

Due to the changing technological environment within the period of the project development and considering research undertaken before commencing the project, it became clear that the initial goal did not reflect current pedagogic thinking. We decided to reflect more closely the new approaches being suggested, with the new project goals subsequently identified as:

- Research the area of blogging and examine good practice with special interest in the area of educational blogging.

- Initiate a range of case studies utilising staff and students (where appropriate) within HSC and SM using a variety of internal and external blogging tools.

This report provides details on the blogging case studies that took place in HSC during autumn 2005 - 2006.

## **1: Eileen Richardson**

Eileen is employed as International Project Officer. She liaises with the Bournemouth University International Office in relation to nursing and midwifery issues, identifying and developing proposals for international collaboration, identifying sources of financial support for international collaborative projects and providing leadership in HSC links with European organisations.

Eileen began using the Elgg blogging tool in November 2005. The purpose of the blog was to describe some of the international activities she was undertaking and to note any salient points that might be of interest to others. There was also the possibility of forging new links and connecting with other interested parties who might come across her blog.

So far the use of her blog had been limited to a couple of detailed posts concerning the places and conferences she had visited. Eileen works part time, travels extensively within the UK and abroad and her schedule is varied dependent on where she needs to be. She found the amount of time available to blog was limited due to her work pattern and the small amount of time she spent in the office. Eileen also maintained a diary and found this was easier to update regularly as it was already part of her daily routine. Also it's availability in places where a computer would not be available made it a lot easier to pick up and write in when she wanted. She did not have that same feeling with her blog.

Eileen had found the blog of limited usefulness and still used email as her preferred method of communication. She found that like her experience with using Blackboard on a recent EU/Canada project, collaborative communication is dependent upon group participants. If people are willing to communicate then they will, but some members will only do so if they forced into it. She was willing to continue blogging and see what happened and was aiming to maintain a more regular publishing schedule if the time and opportunity allowed.

Eileen could still see some potential in blogging but during the case study period her initial reservations had not really been answered with any clarity.

## **2: Dr. Eloise Carr**

Eloise is a Reader in Pain Management Research and Education. Her research is in pain and includes the management of low back pain, day case surgery and doctoral education. Eloise was one of the founding members of the Royal College of Nursing's Pain Forum and has served on the Council for the British Pain Society.

Eloise began using Blogger in November 2005. This group blog aimed to provide a place for pain educators to share ideas, thoughts and struggles. They could bring their thoughts on how they might improve the knowledge, skills and attitudes of health professionals and their management of pain. In particular at undergraduate level, with a view to sharing philosophical ideas about education or suggesting practical ways of bringing about change. Eloise also began using an Edublog at the same time for a personal blog - Pain Education in the Curriculum.

Since the blogs had been set up, Eloise had posted to them intermittently - two or three times to the group blog and not at all to the personal blog. The main problem regarding the group blog revolved around the difficulty of using the tool, as people had to be invited and then sign up to it before use. As none of the international group members had responded, the possibilities for discussion had not materialised. Eloise felt this was either due to time considerations or their drive to participate not being strong enough. Use of the personal blog had been difficult for her when added to the workload of keeping up with email on a daily basis.

Eloise considered the blogging experience to be slightly over hyped and thought that discussion forums were a good alternative with a specific question and answer format alongside useful links to resources. She felt this was a better method of collaborative communication but would consider resurrecting the blog at some point. However, to get the most benefit out of it she would need to see examples of blogs working well to get some new ideas. She

was very supportive of the idea behind blogging but felt it didn't quite work for her on this occasion.

Eloise thought that students could gain a great deal of support from informal chat rooms and that blogs might be a way of supporting them. With this in mind she had looked at incorporating the option for students to blog within the next intake of the MA Managing Lower Back Pain e-Learning unit. Blogging the unit would be a chance to complement or possibly replace putting down student thoughts and ideas about activities in the unit Discussion Forum. Unfortunately no students in the September 2006 intake wished to maintain a unit blog preferring the traditional discussion forum.

Eloise had also recently initiated a blog on a large externally funded three year research project around managing pain in Primary Care. Initially this Blog will be for members of the core team but she anticipates that a Blog will be very useful for those involved in the project to share their collaborative and interprofessional journey.

### **3: Professor Les Todres**

Les is a clinical psychologist and Professor of Qualitative Research and Psychotherapy. He takes a leadership role in the formulation and implementation of research and consultancy programmes that utilise qualitative research methodology and focus on themes that emphasise the user perspective in health and social care. He co-founded and co-leads the Centre for Qualitative Research (CQR) within HSC.

Les began using Blogger in November 2005. This group blog - called Centre for Qualitative Research - was set up with the aims of stimulating debate and discussion in the areas of qualitative research and of creating interaction between colleagues. A short time after the blog was set up, an email group was also created for the CQR which Les felt was more geared to facilitating interaction than the blog. Additionally, CQR also made use of an external website which had been well used since inception. Consequently, the blog had not been utilised.

When the blog was set up, Les had no clear opinions around how it would be used other than using it as another channel for dissemination and as an experimental tool. This he felt had maybe caused him to look at other communicative methods in preference as they were more clearly defined in their purpose - like the email group or website. Another of his reservations was a hesitancy to publish formulative ideas before they were ready from his point to enter the public domain. He preferred to do this in a smaller private context but stressed this was not because he was reluctant for his ideas to be made available in the real world. Finally, like some other case study participants he found blogging was low down on his list of daily priorities.

His preferred methods of collaborating and sharing ideas with colleagues around the world were still the use of personal email groups in Outlook. A recent example being his collaborative work with Vaxjo University in Sweden.

### **4: Professor Iain Graham / Coehre**

The Consortium of Institutes of Higher Education in Health and Rehabilitation (Coehre) was established with the support of the European Commission and within the framework of the Erasmus-programme. The consortium was formed as the result of a European congress of eight Institutes of Higher Education in Health and Rehabilitation.

Iain – then president of Coehre – was interested in investigating new collaborative methods with his role encompassing membership activity and development, public relationship building, political lobbying and alliance and partnership building. He began using Blogger in December 2005, his blog aiming to provide updates on the progress of the organisation as a complement to the monthly presidential bulletins published on the Coehre website.

The theme of the April 2006 Coehre Conference, held in Setubal in Portugal, was initiating a process placing the issue of bridging between education and health services on the political and professional agendas of relevant sectors. The local conference team began using Blogger in October 2005, setting up a group blog - Bridging in Setubal - with the aim of discussing and highlighting aspects and historical characters of Setubal prior to the conference taking place.

The conference blog was deemed a success in attracting members inquisitive about the conference and its location. It had a definite brief and in the short time it was active provided useful information for conference participants on Setubal. The presidential blog although posted to infrequently, suffered in comparison to the monthly bulletins. The more detailed posts were considered to be the best place to put important organisational information, leaving very little available to put on the blog other than visits, conference information and preparation details (although these were also catered for on the website).

Whilst appreciating there was a lot of potential in using blogs to disseminate information to the membership, Iain felt it was more beneficial to concentrate effort on the monthly bulletins rather than the blog. As these were sometimes two to three pages in length they would not sit very well within a blogging environment with short postings usually the norm. The blog was withdrawn in August 2006. Personally, Iain found the technology behind blogs hard to get to grips with and not very easy to use during the short periods when he was working on Coehre business. His workload for HSC and Coehre meant it was not possible to spend much time experimenting or concentrating on blogging himself.

##### **5: Bernice Baker / eNWI**

Bernice is a freelance consultant nurse with a background in A&E, Occupational Health, Nurse Practitioner Roles and Education. She also teaches about professional issues, accountability and entrepreneurial awareness for nurses and has been involved with NHS Direct and NHS 24 training and education. One of her portfolio roles is as a Lecturer Practitioner and Consultant with HSC. She is interested in nurses developing e-health with a full multi-disciplinary systems awareness of the possibilities.

Bernice began using an Edublog in December 2005. With her personal blog - e-health discussion - Bernice had not actually blogged since it was set up. This she said was a combination of not really knowing or being able to define a clear purpose for its use and she couldn't see what would be gained to justify the effort and time in using it. Coming from an NHS and nursing viewpoint, she felt that blogs would mostly be used by those working with computers or who liked to communicate via PC, an audience not including the average nurse. She thought nurses would be slow in taking up blogging but also felt people had said the same of text messaging and that view had altered over time. She felt that as mobile web access improved and people became less tied to desks then e-communication areas would become more accessible - although how many people would wish to blog remained to be seen.

E-Health Nursing Wales (eNWI) decided to pilot a group blog in January 2006 using Blogger. The blog was started with the aim of enabling members to discuss issues brought up by nurses in Wales with the hope that eNWI members and nurses across the world would enrich discussions. On the blog, eNWI posted an early conceptual model to stimulate members into discussing whether it related to their own area. In the message, healthcare professionals were invited to give the model evolved by Dr Rodney Hughes at Bangor University some thought and respond to questions. Bernice felt the eNWI blog was started with too complex an idea for the average

IT wary nurse as no chat had been entered into since launch, even though it had been strongly promoted through their website. However, it had resulted in Dr Hughes being contacted by a Canadian University interested in developing the model. This has resulted in an intellectual property agreement between the two universities to permit Canadian development of the concept. The association had also heard that readers in Birmingham had visited the blog and were using the model to underpin multi-ethnic approaches to records. Neither party had posted comments, but these contacts showed the blog was being visited with positive outcomes. It seemed the eNWI blog was useful for pushing information to a limited group of users in the nursing world but at the moment was not deemed an acceptable method for two-way communication.

Comparing other methods of collaborative communication Bernice felt email, chat sites and listserves were well known, but even these were only tolerated by the few as the amount of junk email received often outweighed usefulness. She could visualise the value of e-discussion but felt this had nursing limitations concerning awareness and pc access for post registration nurses. She was not sure that blogs were the answer for nursing per se as she found them confusing and not user friendly even though she was a relatively computer literate nurse. She questioned why a nurse would waste time posting to a blog that few other nurses/others ever visited. Also the concept of a blog full of anecdotal personal opinion is the antithesis of the current push for nursing to stop this approach and to adopt an evidence base/justifiable practice based on sound validated method – and not anecdote/ritual. She thought effective e-discussion forums for nursing would be those that permitted users to choose the methods they most liked and not just one particular flavour. Much of nursing interaction needs a face to face option – for sharing of complex, often emotive and personally challenging, elements. Those offering a synthesis of options in addition to face to face interaction that were sources of useful information – such as an intranet offering multiple options – would probably be the most effective.

## **6: Sarah Cheesman**

Sarah is a Practice Development Consultant in Health and Social Care and is also a programme leader for clinical leadership. Her clinical work focuses on health promotion and health screening in non-traditional settings. One of her projects is involvement in the development of a Health information shop located within the Asda store in Bournemouth.

Sarah began using Edublogs in December 2005. The blog - Academics in Asda - was set up to use as a reflective diary for what was happening within the health information shop during the month. The blog was also created so she could try her hand at blogging and to spread the news of what she had been doing to a wider audience.

Immediately after the first couple of postings, Sarah started to receive large amounts of spam comments on her posts, which caused her to stop using the blog. Consequently she had only blogged three times. During the early part of 2006, Edublogs experienced numerous problems with spam attacks causing problems for a large percentage of their user base. These problems were subsequently fixed in a system upgrade alongside time consuming personal maintenance – configuring additional spam protection software, continued mass deletion of offending posts and closing off comments. However, users like Sarah who did not have the time required to adequately respond to the problem of bulk spamming were left with a less than satisfactory environment to blog in and no real technical support.

During her short period of blogging Sarah had received one useful follow up comment and she did see potential uses for blogging with HSC students; for example students being able to discuss their experiences in a reflective manner. She was disappointed by the spam attacks but felt if she could successfully prevent this from occurring she would blog again or alternatively think of doing something on another social software platform like MySpace in the future.

## 7: Andy Pulman

Andy is HSC Web Team Leader. He manages the development of HSC websites and has helped to produce and support a range of web resources and initiatives.

The aim of this case study was to compare and contrast the experience of using different blogging tools to obtain an objective comparison on how they performed while also gaining an insight into blogging. A Blogger blog was written for pleasure and contained weekly posts about music. A Bloglines blog contained details on the Blogging @ BU project whilst an Elgg blog contained interesting stories about blogging. An Edublog contained details relating to the use of e-Learning and social software whilst an HTML constructed blog contained personal postings and achievements. All blogs were started during the latter part of 2005.

Andy had found the Edublog had evolved into a place for posting articles and points of interest, which had helped to formulate thinking and ideas around areas like simulation and social software. This had been very helpful in his work and had also been useful when attending conferences and presentations becoming a portable case of references and resources. Blogging about the project had been more difficult because of the nature of writing about something which would need to be duplicated in a report and the time pressure to write ongoing thoughts about the project during term time. He felt this particular project didn't really lend itself to the medium, as other case study participants would be providing the actual experiences along with their blogs. In comparison, a project diary of an MA Interactive Media unit which he had recently completed would have been a good example for this type of blog to work in. Andy deemed this blog to be a failure and had stopped posting to it to concentrate on writing the project reports. The Elgg blog concerning blogging had been overtaken by the Edublog, consequently postings to that blog had been limited, whilst his personal blog had also suffered from time pressures - he had found that writing about personal achievements

was ok but could not really find it in him to post up personal musings about life and family. Finally, the music blog had been a mixed blessing. He had experienced the difficulties in posting when you had nothing to say, finding regular time to write weekly posts to be very difficult to maintain. In fact sometimes, the goal of writing about a subject he loved had occasionally turned into a chore in order to maintain a regular publishing schedule.

In terms of usability and features Andy considered the best blogging tools to be Blogger and Edublogs. Blogger was really simple to set up and amend whereas Edublogs used Wordpress making it extremely easy to customise and format. Both systems were also very easy to post to. Unfortunately although Bloglines had fantastic capability for organising RSS feeds, the customisation features were not easy to get to grips with and the interface was fiddly. Elgg though very interesting lacked in basic look, feel and usability even though it scored highest in Google search rankings. At the end of the case study, Andy has decided to stop using Elgg and absorb postings into his Edublog. Bloglines would be kept on only as an RSS aggregator and any future postings would be in Blogger (music) and Edublogs (work and research). His personal blog would be decommissioned and achievements amalgamated with his online CV.

Overall, Andy had found blogging to be a really useful experience that for him had lived up to the hype and offered fantastic potential if harnessed in the right way. He would continue to promote the use of this technology where possible in his role.

## **8: Professor Jonathan Parker**

Jonathan is Head of Social Work and Learning and, with colleagues, has developed the Centre for Social Work and Social Care Research. He is co-editor of the Transforming Social Work Practice series and has published widely in social work education, practice learning, theories for social work and dementia and palliative care. He is currently engaged in research into effectiveness in practice learning.

Jonathan's Edublog was dedicated to debating issues in contemporary social work and critically exploring aspects that might be controversial or challenge received ideas, especially concerning theories, models and methods for practice. It was also hoped to generate ideas for academic debate.

Jonathan had blogged intermittently so far mainly because he hadn't paid a great deal of attention to it or used it other than in the initial week it was created. The key reasons for lack of use so far had been other demands on his time and trying to prioritise conflicting demands. Jonathan was also a little disappointed with the potential for interactivity but this might be more the result of not yet having used his blog enough to judge its capabilities. Like other case study participants, he felt the blogging experience to be slightly disappointing but thought he needed to understand the possibilities first and get used to using it more actively and regularly before dismissing it completely.

Jonathan felt that in comparison to other methods of collaborative communication such as closed lists and discussions groups which were useful, the presentational capacity of a blog added something extra. He hoped to continue using his blog and saw blogging in HSC opening up opportunities to students (whom he acknowledged were often more IT literate than established academics) who would be capable of using blogs to develop debate, create thought and establish a forum for academic development.

## **9: Jan Watson**

Jan combines her work as a Diabetes Nurse Specialist with a Lecturing post in HSC, where she is also responsible for developing courses in Diabetes Care for nurses and other health care professionals. Jan's previous experience includes both ward and specialist nurse work at Dorset County Hospital and her special interest is in how people can reduce their risk from heart and circulation problems.

Jan's blog was set up in Edublogs to share experience in her subject with others and get comments back from interested parties. Since the blog had been set up Jan had not blogged to it, mainly due to it being just one more thing to think about in an overfull day. Jan thought that blogging could become threatening if it lurked in the back of her mind as something that should be used and she was unable to get around to doing it, which she also felt was the same with other methods of collaborative communication

Jan thought that as with all IT skills and uses, it came harder for those people who had not grown up with it. Using IT did not come high on her list of priorities and she thought that it might be easier if she programmed specific time into her day - but unfortunately she did not have it at the moment. She could see the value and potential of blogging and felt that if she could find time to concentrate on it that she would.

Jan was also considering using a fake character blog within the Wessex Bay Community. This would feature a character that would be diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes and then follow their journey through the discovery and treatment of the condition - mapped through the blog the character would keep.

## **10: Wessex Bay Community**

The Wessex Bay Community is a virtual resource supporting face-to-face learning and teaching within HSC courses. It comprises a range of residents and health and social facilities that reflect a seaside community with rural boundaries, similar to that in which some students are likely to practice. The community is used as a specific resource for directed learning and teaching activities within the pre-qualifying interprofessional education curriculum. It is available for all HSC students to access as a stand-alone resource, in order to support personal study and to encourage reflection and problem-solving in relation to actual patient and client experiences.

After the first year of use in 2005, some students fed back that they thought the community was not as interactive as it could have been. As one of the ways of addressing this aspect, for the second year of development a fake newspaper blog - The Wessex Bay Post - was created using an internally hosted Wordpress blog. The intention was to provoke a similar response to a real local newspaper - highlighting and reporting local issues and encouraging debate which students and staff could engage in. A secondary goal was to provide a place for advertising members of the community that did not yet have an academic owner. The blog was intended to be bi-monthly, with the first two articles featuring a local convict about to be released from prison and a lorry driver facing up to losing his job after recovering from a leg operation.

The idea behind this approach came from the rising use of fake blogs in media environments. The BBC (2005b) reported on how criminals were starting to use fake blogs to snare victims. They can also be used as a form of viral marketing where advertising agencies attempt to generate interest in products by creating fictional internet characters. In 2005, Cohn & Wolfe, a PR firm, had to apologise after using a fictional character to leave a series of thinly veiled advertisements on blogs and other websites (Sourcewatch 2005). Taylor (2005) writing about the use of blogs to promote products and

companies named them "story blogs" emphasising that everything about them was part of the fiction and story being told. He believed as blogs by themselves had no constraints or requirements, they were essentially communication tools waiting to be sculpted into something useful, interesting or entertaining. He looked forward to creative writers being inspired and demonstrating how story blogs could become some of the most engaging content in the blogosphere.

The potential of creating story blogs to provide more engaging deeper learning experiences within the Wessex Bay Community is an intriguing area with many possibilities beyond the initial newspaper blog and it is hoped this approach will grow as the community develops.

## CONCLUSION

Examining the HSC Case studies, how do the findings compare to the optimistic views posited earlier? A small percentage of HSC case studies illustrate that if targeted correctly, and with the time and inclination to make use of them, blogs can provide some benefits for academic staff. However, those that have not been able to formulate a clear role for their use or have been unable to prioritise them have not been able to utilise them effectively.

Positive points highlighted involve the potential of engaging students with blogging for research, learning, discussion and reflection. As Richardson (2004 cited Downes 2004) notes, blogging, offers students a chance to

- Reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it;
- Carry on writing on a topic over a sustained time period;
- Engage readers in a sustained conversation that leads to further writing and thinking.

HSC students were invited to participate in some case studies but these were not taken up. A cohort on the Understanding & Using Information e-Learning unit was invited to blog alongside discussion forum postings and although some students expressed interest none took this further. Similarly, a group of Social Work students were invited to blog their experiences of creating a website using a group blog. The students were initially keen but were unable to progress beyond the meeting where the idea was proposed.

There were limited examples of success with blogs bringing people together and in one case allowing a collaborative link to be made internationally. Similarly, the use of a pre-conference blog prior to the Setubal conference for Coehre was deemed successful, but these minor positives have either been as pure information pushing or as personal development rather than a collaborative mechanism, and

have not been reflected in the other case studies.

One of the most important findings involved the pressures of maintaining an active blog in the midst of a busy academic year. Setting aside free time to blog, remembering to regularly post and difficulties finding something to write about were all problem areas highlighted. Indeed Nielsen's suggestion (2005) of having blogs in reserve for periods of time when writers block emerged seemed particularly prescient. This also seemed to confirm Downes (2004) view that blogging starts off resembling a form of publishing, but as time passes resembles a conversation - and for a conversation to be successful, it must be given a purpose. In common with other forms of collaborative communication, a perceived lack of response from the HSC group blogs discouraged and limited users from continuing to experiment with them. When compared to mailing lists and discussion forums, there was a widely perceived notion that blogs in the case studies did not provide the same-shared experience, ease of use, or impact. This mirrors Potts (2004) view on one of the reasons why his blogging pilot failed:

Email is still easier to use when sharing links, news clippings, or thoughts on a topic. The client is almost always open on a user's desktop and the interface is very familiar. And, many things you want to share about come in the form of email so you hit forward and go. Also, unless everyone is aggregating internal feeds religiously, you cannot be sure someone got your post. Email is closer to a guaranteed read.

This view could possibly be viewed with Bernice Baker's comments about text messaging. It may be that blogging will take more time to bed in and be seen as successful before it becomes more commonly adopted. The other negative area identified involved spamming which provided difficulties which could not be easily solved without time consuming and consistent effort - another disincentive to blog.

A final reflection involves the pace of technology. In the time between this project being commissioned and written up, several new web technology tools have emerged and entered the mainstream. Web 2.0 social software tools evolving from the same arena as blogging now include Wikis, Podcasts, Really Simple Syndication (RSS), Flickr, YouTube and MySpace. Within blogging software, the user can now add sound and vision and post from mobile devices like phones and gaming devices broadening the educational possibilities further. Fraser (2005) feels that although edublogging is still relatively young and that more research needs to be undertaken before blogs become an ordinary part of an educator toolkit, they are capable of supporting effective creative and engaging learning for all types of learners. Although the world of secondary schools she writes of might seem remote to university educators, these students, when they enter university, may have had more experience writing online than with pen and paper. Such students will bring with them a new skill set and attitude with the implication they will expect to continue using these tools when they enter higher education (HE). Is it possible for the pedagogy for HE use of social software tools to keep pace with the technology itself and will academics manage to up skill and match the next generation of learners adept at using the technology and expecting to make full educational use of it?

Undoubtedly, for disciples of the edublogosphere and certain academics, blogs might be considered to offer great opportunities, but this hasn't been supported by the findings of the HSC case studies. There seem to be many hurdles to overcome in HSC before blogs can be seen as a truly revolutionary and compelling technology that demands to be used as a part of an HE toolkit. In HSC, whilst the thinking remains that blogs might be of tremendous value in the future, the majority view is that at present they do not seem to be taking academic users any further forward than discussion groups and email discussions currently do. As Pilgrim cautioned, "writing weblogs is not for everybody" (2001 cited Downes 2004), and it seems in HSC that it is only for the small minority at present.

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