

Blackboard Blogs

Why use blogs?

In a module you can create both public and private blogs. Blackboard uses the term blog of a public blog and journal for a private blog. Perhaps one of the more common uses of blogs is for reflection. However, there are many other uses for having blogs and journals in your module and this document will explore some of them.

Blogs and Journals allow students to:

- Privately reflect on their student experience
- Keep a diary or account of their progress
- Share ideas (or pretty much anything) with their peers
- Develop their “voice” in confidence
- Create portfolios
- Get experience with writing in a particular style
- Gain digital literacy

Blackboard specifics

- **Course Blogs** – a blog that everyone can read, everyone can post to and everyone can comment on
- **Individual Blogs** – each user has their own space to post to. Everyone else can read these posts and comment on these posts
- **Journals** – a private blog. Each user has their own space to post to. No-one (other than module leaders) can read these or comment on them

Private Reflection

One of the most powerful aspects of a journal is that it creates a space for students to reflect privately on their studies and experiences. They can express their emotions in a space that is just for them. Constructivist pedagogy is firmly based around reflection as a tool for moving forward. Schon is famous for his work on reflection on action – thinking about what has happened after the fact. Kolb details a

process of experiential learning with revolves around active reflection. Reflection can be deeply personal and so the reassurance that a blog can be made private should encourage the students.

It should be noted that private blogs (journals) are visible to module leaders. You might want to let the students know that you do have access to their journals. Conversely if students know that you can read their journals they might start to use their journal as a place to ask you questions. If you want this to happen then by all means encourage it. However, this does therefore require you to check all journals on a regular basis and respond to any questions. Whilst not a problem, this can put an exponential burden on your work load and there might be other, more effective ways to deal with student questions (such as a discussion board). Whichever route you take, it's always good to keep the students clear as to the aims and goals of such a tool.

Diary

Similar to the idea about private reflection, a diary of events can be very beneficial to students. Jenny Moon talks directly about different approaches to reflective diaries which could be realised through blogs and journals. After a session of whatever type, encouraging students to write up what they experienced can help them focus their attention. It could incorporate elements of reflection if the student required, or it may be just a record of what has transpired. If it is done straight after a session, it can help some students think about what they have been doing and consolidate the sessions. It might even promote some extra thinking space and give students a platform to explore ideas and concepts further. At a later stage in the course, students can refer back to these online "notes" and this can often jog their memory of what happened.

Share Ideas

A blog can be used to share almost anything. Here are just a few ideas:

- an interesting website
- details about an up and coming event
- a presentation pitch
- an idle thought to come back to and so on

The list is endless.

In a blog, students can also upload their own files. So if they want to show their peers a PowerPoint presentation they are working on, a blog can be used for that. Other students can add their own comments to any such idea, and this will hopefully inspire others to start communicating and opening dialogues with each other to further progress ideas.

Develop a Voice

Students can share ideas with their peers publicly, but this space is still "safe" in that it's only visible to other students on the same module. This could have the benefit of allowing students to develop their own style in a safe environment. Some students might feel uncomfortable expressing themselves knowing that anyone can read their posts. With a blog inside a module, only their peers can read their posts. This safe, nurturing environment can allow students to develop. Peer support (or at least positive critical commentary) can allow students to not only develop themselves, but help other students to further themselves.

Create Portfolios

Blackboard provides the opportunities for students to develop portfolios in several different formats. There is the option to use wikis in your module which allow students to create a detailed and accurate portfolio. However, a blog might be a simpler approach to this technique. Students can add a variety of different types of content. Or it may simply be articles about what they have done. Whilst there are other more suitable tools, if you are already using blogs the familiarity of the tool could benefit some students and allow them to populate their portfolio.

Writing Styles

Writing regular posts will beyond a shadow of a doubt enable students to develop writing styles. Here are a few ideas to expand upon this:

- Pose a word limit on a post. This has the effect of honing writing skills down as students struggle to keep within the constraints. In so doing, they will become more effective in their communication, and this will certainly aid in acquiring a deeper knowledge of the subject.
- Try and get students to write without using personal pronouns. As a lot of academic work frowns upon personal references, this could be a good inroad into developing this skill.

Digital Literacy

At its very basic level, a blog can be used very easily. Students click on a few buttons (like Create Post and Submit), type in their post and they could get away with just that. However, once the students become more familiar with blogging, they might want to experiment with adding other elements. We mentioned before that students can share a wide range of items. Blogs allow students to experiment with different elements such as:

- embedding an image
- uploading a document
- creating an external link to a website

Whilst the purpose of the blog might not be to specifically learn these skills, there is an intrinsic aspect to the use of blogs that will allow students to inherently develop their own digital literacy.

Taking this concept further, a blog doesn't have to be just text. A blog could be a video blog. Students can record themselves using a variety of different devices and upload these into the blog. They could record themselves speaking and upload the finished audio file. Not only does this help with digital literacy, it could also help with accessibility issues.

Conclusion

Blogs and journals can be used for a variety of uses. As a primary tool for reflection, they can allow students a space in which they can explore a wide range of features in a safe and secure environment. Being relatively easy to set up and use, a blog can be quickly placed into your module. With a little bit of creative thinking, they can benefit the student in many ways.