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Investigating the emerging generic features of the blog writing task across three discrete learner groups at a higher education institution

Triona Hourigan^{a*} and Liam Murray^b

^a*Institute for the Study of Knowledge in Society, School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, University of Limerick, Plassey, Co. Limerick, Ireland;* ^b*School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, University of Limerick, Plassey, Co. Limerick, Ireland*

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Because of the recent revolutionary developments brought about by Web 2.0, the emergence and popularity of blogs as learning tools represent an important area of consideration by the higher education sector. Indeed, while many researchers have acknowledged the advantages of using blogs in this environment, it is clear that more investigation is required in order to expand and develop our understanding of their potential uses for academic purposes. As such, this paper will outline and describe the emerging features of a generic blog writing task recently implemented at an Irish higher education level institution. Using an action research methodological approach (McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J., (Eds.). (2002). *Action research: Principles and practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer), the blog writing task is integrated into three separate undergraduate degree modules, allowing us to compare and contrast student reactions to using this medium for academic purposes. Looking at the emerging content, we shall subsequently reflect upon particular contextual and specific pedagogical factors in order to propose a generic methodology for future cross-disciplinary teaching activities.

Untersuchung der sich abzeichnenden spezifischen Möglichkeiten der Blogs nutzenden Aufgabe zwischen drei getrennten Lerngruppen einer höheren Schule

Aufgrund der neuen revolutionären Entwicklungen durch das Web 2.0 zeigen das Bekanntwerden und die Popularität von Blogs als Lernhilfe ein wichtiges Gebiet von Überlegungen durch den Bereich der Höheren Bildung an. Während schon viele Forscher die Vorteile erkannt haben, die durch die Nutzung von Blogs in diesem Umfeld möglich sind, wird klar, dass mehr Forschung nachgefragt werden wird, um unser Wissen und Verständnis über ihre Möglichkeiten im akademischen Bereich zu erweitern. So soll dieser Beitrag die aufregenden Möglichkeiten der Verwendung eines generischen Schreib-Blogs umreißen und beschreiben, der kürzlich an einer irischen Hochschule eingerichtet wurde. Benutzt wurde ein aktionsmethodologischer Ansatz (McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Action research: Principles and practice*. London, RoutledgeFalmer), wobei die Blog-verfassende-Aufgabe in drei getrennte Anfängermodule integriert war, was uns erlaubte die Reaktionen der Studenten bei der Verwendung dieses Mediums für wissenschaftliche Zwecke zu vergleichen und sie gegenüber zu stellen. Was den entstehenden Inhalt angeht, so werden wir später bestimmte kontextuelle und

*Corresponding author. Email: triona.hourigan@ul.ie

spezifisch pädagogische Faktoren überprüfen, um eine generische Methodologie für zukünftige fachübergreifende Lehraktivitäten zu entwickeln.

A la recherche des caractéristiques propres qui apparaissent dans les activités d'écriture de blogs, le cas de trois groupes d'étudiants séparés dans un établissement d'enseignement supérieur

Du fait des développements révolutionnaires récents qu'apporte le Web 2.0, l'apparition et la popularité des blogs comme outils d'apprentissage représentent un champ d'études important pour le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur. En fait, bien que de nombreux chercheurs aient reconnu les avantages que présente l'usage des blogs dans ce cadre, il est clair que l'on a besoin de recherches supplémentaires pour étendre et développer la compréhension que nous avons des usages que l'on pourrait en faire à des fins universitaires. C'est ainsi que le présent article va esquisser et décrire les caractéristiques qui se dégagent d'une tâche d'écriture de blog récemment mise en place dans un établissement d'enseignement supérieur irlandais. En suivant une approche méthodologique basée sur la recherche-action, (McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Action research: Principles and practice*. London, RoutledgeFalmer) la tâche d'écriture du blog est intégrée dans trois modules de premier cycle distincts, ce qui nous permet de comparer et faire contraster les réactions des étudiants face à l'emploi de ce medium à des fins universitaires. Ensuite, en examinant les contenus qui apparaissent, nous réfléchirons sur les facteurs contextuels et spécifiques dans le but de proposer une méthodologie générique pour les activités transdisciplinaires futures.

Una búsqueda de las características genéricas que surgen en las actividades de escritura de blogs en tres grupos separados de estudiantes en una Institución de Enseñanza Superior

A consecuencia de los recientes y revolucionarios desarrollos producidos por la Web 2.0, la emergencia y popularidad de los blogs como herramientas de aprendizaje constituyen un terreno de investigación importante para la Enseñanza Superior. La verdad es que aunque muchos investigadores han reconocido las ventajas del uso de blogs en este entorno, la realidad es que hacen falta los estudios adicionales para extender y desarrollar nuestra comprensión de sus usos potenciales para fines académicos. Dentro de esa perspectiva en el presente artículo, presentaremos los grandes rasgos y la descripción de las características emergentes de una tarea genérica de escritura de blogs que fue aplicada hace poco en una institución irlandesa de enseñanza superior. Utilizando un abordaje metodológico de tipo investigación/acción (McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Action research: Principles and practice*. London, RoutledgeFalmer), la actividad de escritura del blog fue incorporada dentro de tres módulos distintos del examen de pregrado lo que nos permitió comparar y contrastar las reacciones de los estudiantes al uso de este medio para fines académicos. Mirando los contenidos que surgen, podremos en la siguiente etapa reflexionar sobre los factores contextuales y pedagógicos específicos para proponer una metodología genérica para la enseñanza trasdisciplinaria del futuro.

Keywords: blogs; writing skills; reflection; integration; teaching methodology

Introduction

Over the past six years or so, blogs have emerged as an additional tool suitable for use in the practice of addressing written language skills for academic purposes (Bloch, 2007; Downes, 2004; Kim, 2008; Raith, 2009; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). In fact, the mechanical structure of the blog is often seen as beneficial for learning by chronologically ordering the user's postings (Alexander, 2006) and in doing so,

facilitating the level of transparency and accountability for the student. Understandably, while the ubiquitous nature of such technology is currently acknowledged (Technorati, 2009), its subsequent application and integration within a learning environment is often accountable to other pre-existent standards and expectations such as assessment procedures and learning outcomes. As such, many researchers have outlined useful tasks for applying the generic blog medium to a specific learning context, for instance the improvement of generic and foreign language writing (Downes, 2004; Leja, 2007; Tu, Blocher, & Roberts, 2008), addressing and promoting learner reflection (Murray & Hourigan, 2008; Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2008), and developing the concept of a supportive community (Luehmann and Tinelli, 2008; Sollars, 2007). Thus, it is valuable to reflect upon the actual impact of the particular written content itself and also the range of skills involved in the process. For example, Vie (2008, p. 23) acknowledges the “complexities” showcased by such tools, underlining the unavoidable and indeed inevitable “ramifications they may hold for our pedagogies and our field” (Ibid.). This point of view is further developed by Ford (2007, p. 9) who states that “higher-order thinking skills such as the ability to evaluate and synthesise” are important prerequisites when working within the medium of blogging. In our research context, we also remain aware of established views relating to classroom activities and assessment. As Chappelle (2001) pointed out a number of years ago, task creation, authenticity and, of course, purpose should be acknowledged as key considerations within any pedagogical landscape. Furthermore, the question of assessment is regarded to be another key feature, whereby the teacher should ensure the design of evaluation methods that are both reliable and valid (Huot, 1996). Moreover, when we consider the swift rise in popularity of blogging, alongside other content-producing tools such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, it is important to observe how the online experience is gradually moving back to its early expressivist origins (Hill, 2006). Certainly, this more engaging and interactive user experience is indicative of the current perception of the web as typically empowering the individual (Conole, 2008) and in doing so facilitating the potential for increased self-expression, creativity and potential interaction on a global scale.

Blogs may indeed be viewed as providing the opportunity for self-reflection and interactive learning in higher education contexts (Dippold, 2009; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Interestingly, research in this area has revealed two popular types of task employed by practitioners: (1) multi-authored collaborative group blogging (Bloch, 2007; Efimova & de Moor, 2005; Richardson, 2006) and (2) single-authored reflective blogging (Alm, 2009; Murray, Hourigan, & Jeanneau, 2007; Raith, 2009). However, neither task described here exists in strict isolation from each other simply because of the flexible and generic format of the blog. In fact, this medium can adopt additional forms and uses in an educational environment, including being exploited as a learning repository, a feedback tool (Dippold, 2009) or indeed a spoken language development tool (Sun, 2009). More importantly, each approach brings its own distinct set of skills and benefits to the overall learning experience and hence is dependent on the very nature of the specific task set by the teacher. While the blog offers a wide variety of functions to the student, such as comment posting, image embedding, podcasting and integrating RSS feeds, it is still vital to choose features that are relevant and appropriate to the task. For example, collaborative blogging may focus on peer discussion, collective dissemination of knowledge and also cooperation in the group creation of a single multi-authored document (Murray & Hourigan, 2008). In this scenario, students may use the comment function more frequently, as it matches the required objectives of the task.

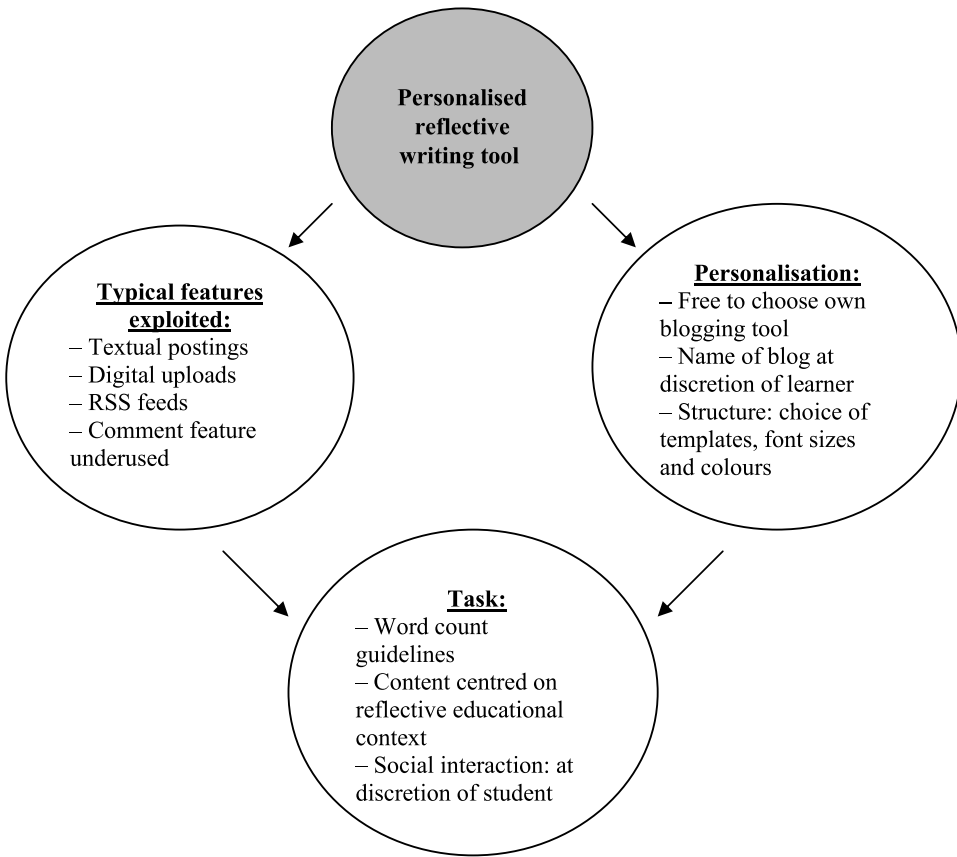


Figure 1. Defining the generic blog as a personalised writing support tool.

In this way, the amorphous structure of the blog medium should be seen as one of its inherent strengths, providing choice and flexibility in terms of features and functionality. Therefore, a blog should not be defined or restricted by any prescribed purpose or use but rather adapted to the requirements determined by the objectives of the assigned task.

Our own research on blogging has been and still remains focused on the production of single-authored reflective content. This distinct approach concentrates particularly on the development of the author's voice, with emphasis placed on the learner developing reflective content relative to the prescribed written task. This type of expressivist activity relates specifically to developing our understanding of the learner's individual perspective and on expanding our evolving definition of the academic blog in this distinct context as a "personalised writing support tool". In this type of task, collaboration between fellow students is not mandatory but strongly promoted if the learner deems it to be helpful or beneficial. Hence, the most popular features exploited by learners typically include text-based postings and occasional image postings (see Figure 1 for a representation of this specific pedagogical environment). Our research in the past has concentrated on single student groups working within language learning contexts. Issues previously discussed in these earlier studies included designing assessment criteria, exploring appropriate theoretical approaches and outlining language learning, and generic writing benefits (Murray & Hourigan,

2005, 2006, 2008; Murray et al., 2007). However, for this particular study, we decided to expand our data to include three groups of university students taking the following degree modules: (1) Writing Games Analysis for Computer Science; (2) Language and Technology; and (3) French Culture and Society. The objective here was to focus primarily on the main integration issues identified in these contrasting educational contexts in order to develop a generic methodology for integrating a blog for writing purposes. Our research questions included the following:

- (1) Can we actively expand our understanding of the blog as an academic writing tool?
- (2) In doing so, can we identify the generic methodological features of a blog integration procedure as explored across three cross-disciplinary groups of learners?

Thus, in this paper we shall describe the particular challenges that emerged when designing and subsequently integrating an academic blog as a “writing support tool” within these courses. The emerging contrasts and commonalities shall be employed in order to suggest a generic teaching model, which may be applicable to future educational blogging contexts.

We shall presently outline the student profile, the modules to which this task was applied and also the data collation methods employed in the next section of this paper.

Methodology

In this section of the paper, we shall describe and discuss the three class groups who set up and posted frequently on their own individual blogs as part of the prescribed module assessments. As well as noting the typical student profile, we shall also take into account the specific aims and objectives of the individual course in addition to the precise assessment procedures established by the teacher. Furthermore, we shall also elaborate on our data collation and analysis methods as part of our ongoing action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) in the area of academic blog writing. Please refer to Table 1 for a summary of the student profile,

Table 1. Summary of student profile, course details and assessment weightings.

Class group	Degree courses	Year	Module name	Blog task	Prescriptive elements	Other tasks
1, <i>n</i> =12	Multimedia and Games Development	4	Writing Games Analysis	15%	Weekly max. word count: 300; content: class-related	End-of-semester essay: 65%; presentation: 20%
2, <i>n</i> =43	Applied Languages; Education; Language and Cultural Studies; Erasmus	2	Language and Technology	20%	Weekly max. word count: 300; content: class-related	2 End-of-semester essays: 80%
3, <i>n</i> =73	European Studies; Law and European Studies; Insurance and European Studies; Language and Cultural Studies	4	French Culture and Society	10%	Weekly max. word count: 300; content: class-related	End-of-semester essay: 20%; translation: 20%; final exam: 50%

course and module details and the assessment weightings for the individual tasks prescribed on the different modules.

Description of student groups and modules

Group 1 comprised 12 final-year students undertaking a BSc in Multimedia and Computer Games Development at the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the university. This is a highly structured degree course with the chief aim of training students to develop multimedia gaming software on both a technical as well as a creative level. Up to this point in their studies, students would have undertaken modules related to key areas in this industry such as computer programming, systems analysis and software development. Understandably, because of the majority of previous assessments being based on technical output and content, many students on reaching their final year would not yet have had the opportunity to refine their generic written communication skills. In fact, many learners frequently reported a lack of practice in this important area of communication. As such, it was decided to introduce this task into the Writing Games Analysis module, which is introduced as part of the fourth-year curriculum of this degree. The primary objective of this course is to define and evaluate the art and practice of writing creative content for computer gaming. Unlike previous evaluations, students had to produce a standard academic essay at the end of the semester as well as a presentation earlier in the term. Remaining mindful of their lack of experience with essay writing in general, it was decided to expand the range of assessments on offer in order to include a mandatory reflective blog for students. Thus the evaluation procedure was as follows: oral presentation (20%), personal blog (15%) and end-of-term essay (65%). While both the presentation and the essay had specific content guidelines, the blog writing task was primarily established to give students the opportunity to maximise and optimise their writing practices and opportunities in preparation for their formal academic essay. The key prescriptive feature of their assessment was that the content of their reflections had to be related to any aspect of their studies in multimedia computer gaming with an upper guideline limit of 300 words per blog posting each week. We shall discuss the emerging themes in the analysis section later in this paper.

Group 2 consisted of a group of 43 Modern Foreign Language (MFL) students all registered on a second-year Language and Technology course. This was a common module for students taking different language combinations on three specific degree courses: Applied Languages, Language and Education, and Language and Cultural Studies. Students enrolled on the Erasmus Study Abroad programme also registered on this module. It is important to note that this is not a language-specific course but rather a learning strategy module, which introduces students to exploiting and evaluating various technologies in order to develop their own particular language learning styles. Hence, the lectures and labs that are delivered in English aim to help students to apply the generic skills developed here to their language-specific classes. The students enrolled in this course study a wide variety of modern languages such as French, Irish, German, Spanish, English as a Foreign Language and Japanese. As well as completing two technology evaluation projects worth 80%, students were also required to set up a blog in English in Week 1 of semester and to blog frequently on their respective language learning styles. The blog would eventually be worth 20% of the overall grade for this module (Table 2). More importantly, the content of the blog

Table 2. Breakdown of marks for the blog.

Module	Blog %	Breakdown of marks
Group 1: Games Analysis	15%	5%: Structure and coherency; 10%: content and development
Group 2: Language and Technology	20%	5%: Essay structure; 15%: content and development
Group 3: French Culture and Society	10%	3%: Language and grammar; 7%: content and development

had to be related to learners' growing exploration of their individual learning styles with again an average posting of up to 300 words per week. Students subsequently had to submit a formal essay discussing how they integrated the blog and the manner in which they used it to develop their reflective learning strategies.

Finally, Group 3 was made up of 73 final-year students taking French as a second language as part of their degree. Students who were enrolled on this French Culture and Society course came from a variety of specialisations, such as Language and Cultural Studies, European Studies, Law and European Studies, and Insurance and European Studies. The main purpose of this module is to introduce key aspects of France's links with Europe and the wider world. As well as attending classes on culture and society, students also had to attend a one-hour class devoted to the study of a post-colonial literary text. In fact, it was in this particular class that the blog writing task was applied. The main part of this assessment was the submission of an end-of-term 1700-word essay to be written in French on a theme related to the novel in question. In previous years, it had been noted that learners were not practising their written French adequately at this crucial time of their degree and thus it was decided to introduce the blog as a means to encourage more consistent and frequent writing in French. In this way, the 30% allotted to literary studies in this module was divided as follows: 10% for frequent blog postings and 20% for the end-of-term essay. The blog in this instance had to be written entirely in the French language and the content had to reflect specifically the themes discussed in the novel and also in class.

Data collation and analysis

In order to examine the generic features of the blog writing task, the main data examined in this paper is drawn from examples of content as posted by the students on their academic blogs over the course of a 12-week semester. Students from all three groups were invited to blog on either *www.blogger.com* or *www.wordpress.com* hosting sites, and subsequently to send their access details to the teacher. The blog addresses were then entered into the teacher's database and were regularly checked over the semester in order to ensure that students had properly set up their blog accounts. Additional observational data as noted by the teachers related to classroom activities is also taken into account in this analysis. Subsequent to the classroom integration exercise, the data was coded qualitatively using QSR N6 software as a means to identify the emerging themes and trends from the students' blog postings.

In the following analysis section, we shall discuss in more detail both the impact of the contextual factors as well as the main themes discussed in the learners' blogging efforts in order to explore further the overall integration process.

Analysis

Creation of a generic integration context: relevant factors to consider

In the case of all three degree courses, it was important from the very outset that the implementation of a blog as a “personalised writing support tool” adhered to a number of pre-defined pedagogical objectives. For our purposes, this process was influenced by four main guiding principles considered integral for creating a relevant learning environment. These included the following: the preferred theoretical approach, the importance of reflection, the task rules and finally the transferability of blogging to additional contexts. As discussed earlier, our theoretical approach explores specifically the area of expressivist blogging, which favours content produced by one single student author. The aim here is to establish the necessary creative writing environment for learners in order to encourage a deeper approach to their respective written work. Indeed, the common theme of reflection was a key skill, which we wished to address across all course groupings. Hence, in the design of the various tasks for the three different degree modules, it was essential to try to encourage learners to move away from the predominant surface and strategic approach to their learning, which often seems to prevail at this stage of their studies. Alternatively, it was hoped that they would address the development of a more rounded and deeper attitude to the acquisition of knowledge. Our definition of reflection for the purposes of this study continues to be informed by Dewey’s (1933) classic yet still pertinent early observations on the inherent usefulness of this complex activity. At its very core lies the potential to develop many important skills for both formal and lifelong learning approaches including problem solving activities, the ability to search, explore and analyse to the point where a potential solution can be developed for the activity in question. In addition, it is important to remain aware of the advantages reflective practice presents for deeper learning (Bold, 2008) and to help students to prepare for the demands of the professional world (Chen, Wei, Wu, & Uden, 2009). Furthermore, we recognise the need to allow learners the flexibility to experience doubt, inner discomfort and disorientation (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1990) as part of the type of reflective situation that emerges in their individual learning styles.

The rules of the appointed task were considered another key feature to ensuring the success of the blogging activity for the students. One recurring theme in our action research over the past number of years is hesitation by many students to embrace the blog as a legitimate writing tool for their studies. In many cases, the predominance of *MS Word* for writing tasks has led certain students to resist initially the idea of switching to a Web 2.0 tool for part of their modular evaluation. In an attempt to avoid any problems at the initial outset, it was decided firstly that the blogging exercise would remain a mandatory part of the three formal course assessments. Another feature of the integration process included the necessity of “selling” the transferability of the blog writing task to the students from the very outset. As a means to highlight the many advantages of this kind of writing assignment, the blogging exercise was designed as a core activity within the course structure of all three modules. It was intended that the reflective blog would feed into other aspects of the learners’ assessments as well as providing students with a good grounding in generic skills, which could be potentially suitable for the professional workplace. Thus, it was important to implement a prescriptive yet adaptable task, which permitted the learners to be creative. Depending on the actual focus of their respective modules, learners would

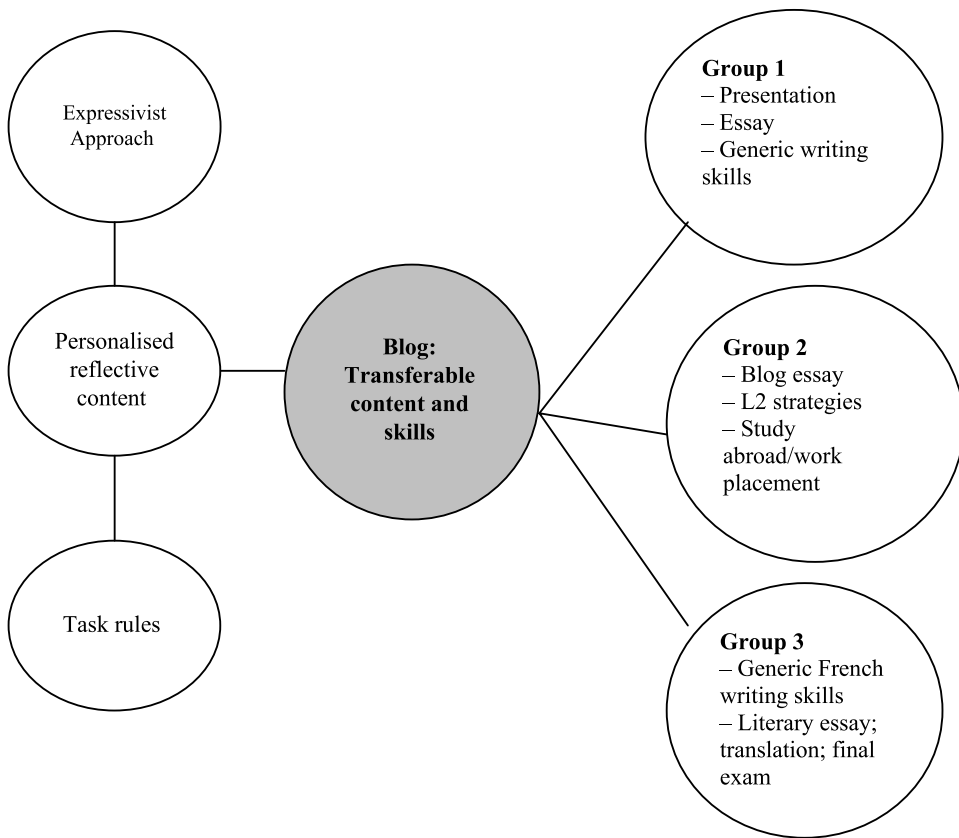
**General integration
guidelines for blog****Additional modular tasks**

Figure 2. Representation of transferability of the reflective blog writing task.

have the flexibility to explore a number of relevant themes while remaining scaffolded by the generic objectives of the assignment itself. As noted earlier in Table 1, all of the three modules comprised different sets of tasks to be completed by each student. It was intended that consistent blogging would emerge as a beneficial component for learners as part of the knowledge creation process. Moreover, this would present the possibility of applying both the generic and specific skills acquired in this blogging exercise to other prescribed modular tasks. This important aspect is outlined in Figure 2. Therefore, the Multimedia and Computer Games Development students (Group 1) had the opportunity to practise their generic writing skills in preparation for their final essay as well as to reflect on content for their oral presentation on the topic of Writing Games Analysis. The group of students taking the Language and Technology module (Group 2) had to use the blog in preparation for the end-of-term essay based on assessing their own learning styles in addition to two other evaluative projects on software integration. Finally, the fourth-year students of French (Group 3) would also benefit in developing their French written style for their end-of-term essay as well as additional written language assessments such as translation studies and the final end-of-semester exam.

Blog postings: emerging themes from the three student groups

Remaining mindful of the generic blogging context established in these three separate groups of students, we shall now take into account a number of significant trends that emerged from the student blogs over the course of the semester. These particular themes shall be considered in our overall evaluation and conceptualisation of the blog medium as a personalised writing support tool. In addition, the relevance of this medium as a support for the development of writing skills in higher education will also be taken into consideration.

The content from Group 1 taking the Writing Games Analysis module revealed a number of broad themes, which were helpful for categorising the distinct topics of discussion promoted by learners in this class. Please see Figures 3 and 4 for examples of student content from this group. Firstly, given the profile of these students, it was not surprising at all to note that the majority of the learners in this group exploited many additional blog features available: RSS feeds, multimedia postings, word counters, subscribed followers and the comment function. Indeed, some students linked up the blog to their own personal website on multimedia games, reflecting the high degree of interest in this area for gaming students. Individuals in this group also cited a number of external resources on the web such as gaming industry websites and related content located on video sharing sites. Additionally, students posted quite frequently during the 12-week semester with an average of 20 postings per person of roughly 258 words per posting (Table 3). The content was predominantly descriptive in nature, taking the form of reporting on particular events or activities as noted by the students.

Looking at these broad areas of discussion, we can identify five main representative topics: the production of essay content for assessment, study activities, classroom

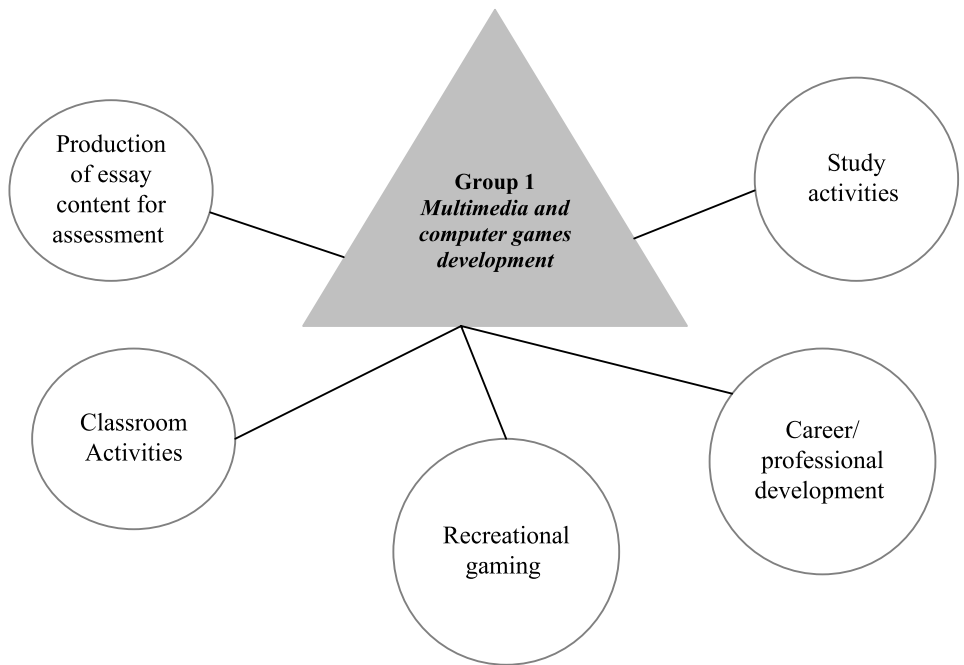


Figure 3. Broad representation of issues in student blogs from Group 1.

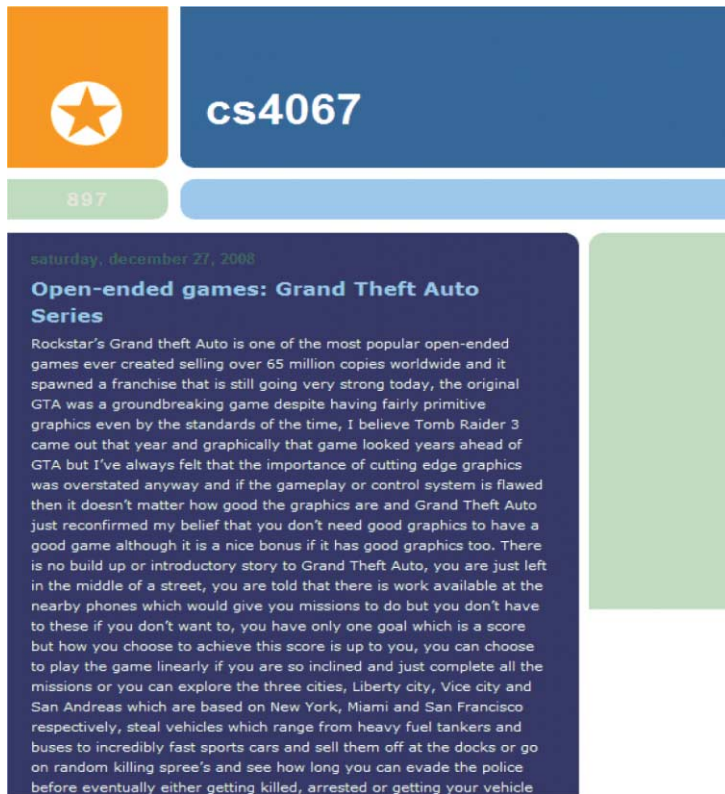


Figure 4. Example of student blog from Group 1.

Table 3. Summary of average number of blog entries and word count per group.

Class groupings	Module	Average number of entries	Average word count per posting
Group 1	Writing Games Analysis	20	258
Group 2	Language and Technology	14.6	179
Group 3	French Literature	16.4	176

activities, recreational gaming and lastly career development. Interestingly, the original content aims of the blog were by and large respected by the students with little evidence of the space being used to relay trivial content unrelated to a computer gaming context. Instead, the relevance of the task as a learning support tool was validated by the students in their attempts to practise their generic writing skills. For example, many students frequently blogged about their upcoming Writing Games Analysis module essay revealing various aspects of their work as it unfolded, such as: planning, updates on preparation, time management and finding a suitable angle for the topic in question. Indeed, in such postings examples of problem solving and self-doubt were clearly evident among some learners identifying specific challenges such as writer's block or lack of information search strategies. For instance, one student blogged the following:

Ok I am getting on alright with my essay. I am quite happy with what I have wrote [sic], my only problem being that I don't want to write much more. I think maybe I am suffering from tunnel vision here or maybe some writing block.

What is important to note here is the potential for learners to become more aware of the demands of particular writing exercises and the challenges in developing such a specific communicative skill. Hence, the transferability of the blog here in relation to the end-of-semester essay emerges as potentially useful in this context, allowing the student to reflect upon their progress in the task and identifying problems that need to be addressed. Indeed, we can also identify the benefits of reflecting on one's learning development amongst the students in Group 2.

In this group, comprising MFL students taking the Language and Technology course, the initial objectives of the programme which were outlined in Week 1 of the semester also played an important role in shaping the types of entries written. In this particular cohort, students made an average of 14.6 postings over the course of the semester, with entries of approximately 179 words (Table 3). Learners in this group focused predominantly on textual output, with occasional use of digital images. The level of interactivity was non-existent in this environment with no formal evidence of learners following other classmates or commenting on their efforts. The emerging environment was essentially focused on the individual learner with many students opting to make their blog accounts private and inviting only the teacher to read their efforts. Similarly to students in Group 1, a number of broad general themes can be identified that best represent the features of the students' blogging efforts. The dominance of descriptive content characterises students' approaches to the task with many using the blog space as a journal to record topics and events that occurred during the day. The content was centred on the language acquisition process with students detailing their various experiences with this task. Reading through these entries, learners generally presented a good overview of the many difficulties and frustrations they were facing in their attempts to deal with the amount of work prescribed on their respective courses. Please refer to Figures 5 and 6, which outline the efforts produced by this cohort. Examples of such include summarising their experience with software for learning; noting down their individual preparation for essays and oral exams; recounting language exchange meetings; describing homework and study activities. Additionally, we can see students also exploiting the blog as a tool bank with links and/or descriptions to useful tools that they had recently found. Similarly to students in the Writing Games Analysis module, efforts were made by students to track their learning development, often leading to expressions of frustration:

I feel as the semester continues my communication in my second language is weakening. I have not held a conversation in my second language in weeks and this has made it difficult to speak german when i want to as i cannot speak freely in my second language.[sic]

An important aspect of this approach is the fact that learners have the opportunity to reflect on their overall performance in their degree, and not just on one specific area. In above example the student refers to a German language module, emphasising how the flexible nature of this specific blogging task may raise awareness regarding the students' progress in other learning contexts. This again is thanks to the learner-centred objectives of the blogging task and the potential transferability of the knowledge

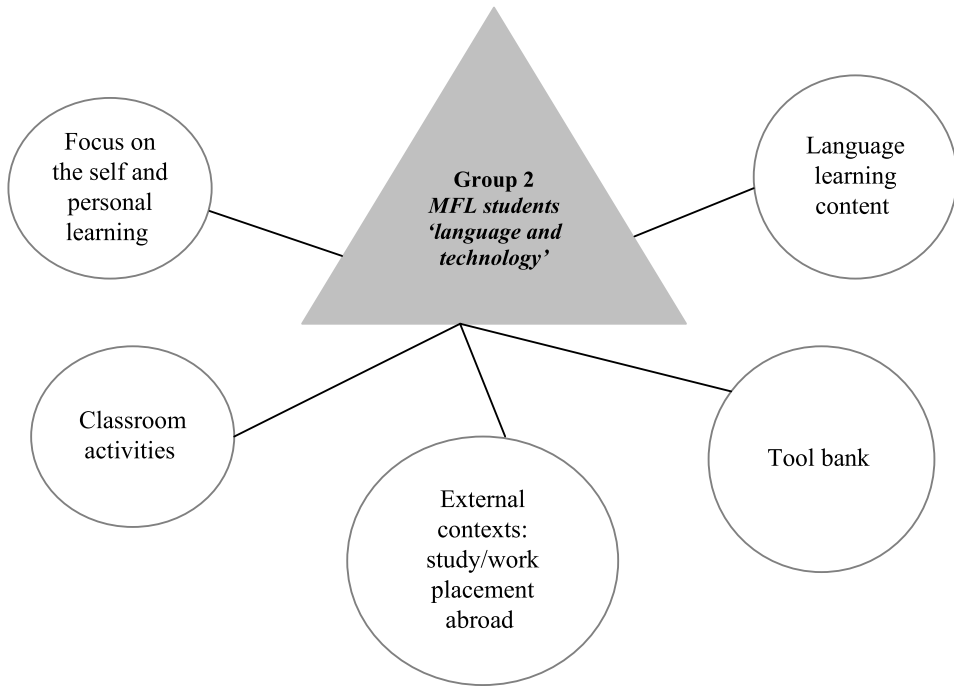


Figure 5. Broad representation of issues in student blogs from Group 2.

generated to other contexts. Interestingly, while students in both Group 1 and 2 displayed evidence of developing their range of themes in their individual blogs, the experiences of the learners in Group 3 were quite different in nature, as we shall presently discuss.

The group of MFL students in Group 3 produced slightly less in terms of content variety when compared to the other blogging groups. Please refer to Figure 7, which summarises the emerging themes, and to Figure 8, which presents an example of one student's blogging efforts. As aforementioned, this fourth-year group was studying a specific post-colonial novel in French as part of the final-year programme at the university. In terms of writing frequency, there was little or no difference between this group and their fellow MFL students in Group 2. Their efforts on average resulted in approximately 16.4 postings over the course of the semester consisting of an average of 176 words per entry (Table 3). Interestingly, this MFL group published predominantly text-based postings with the occasional digital image of the book's cover posted on some blogs. Additionally, the possibility of following other people's blogs and leaving comments was not exploited by learners in this group even though they were encouraged to do so in class by the teacher. Instead, the focus on the task was dealing primarily with the theme of the novel. Similarly to both Groups 1 and 2, the predominance of descriptive content is an important feature of the material produced in this environment. Students, posting in the French language, used the blog to write chapter summaries of the novel. Additionally, some efforts were also made to analyse particular aspects of the book including characterisation, investigation of literary symbols and discussion of the role of the main protagonist. Similarly to the other groups, learners also took the opportunity to record classroom based activities,

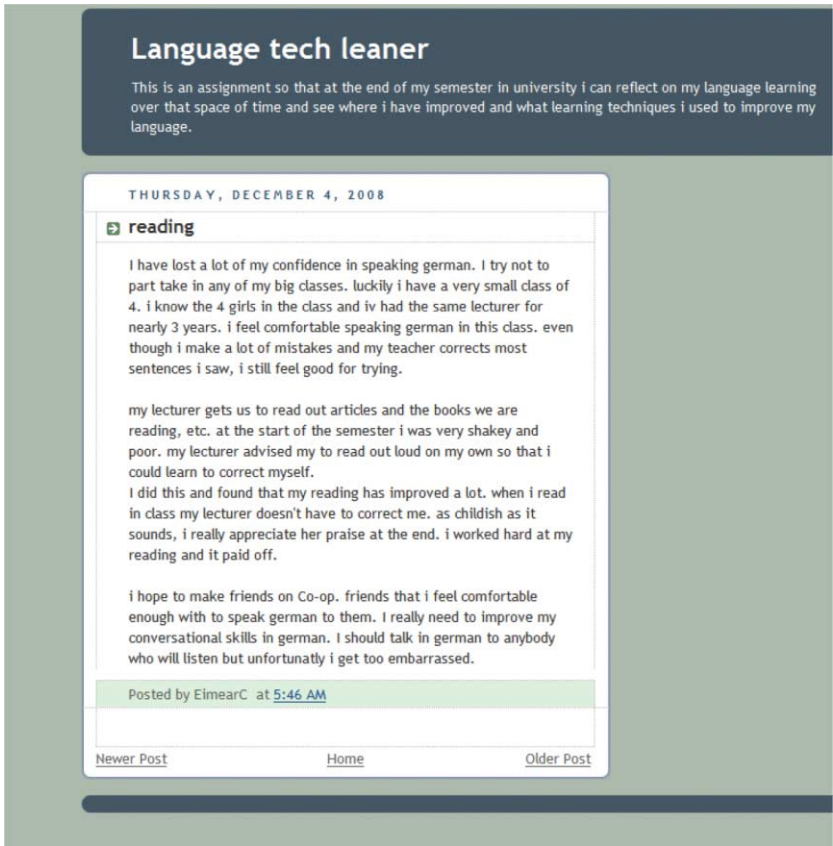


Figure 6. Example of student blog from Group 2.

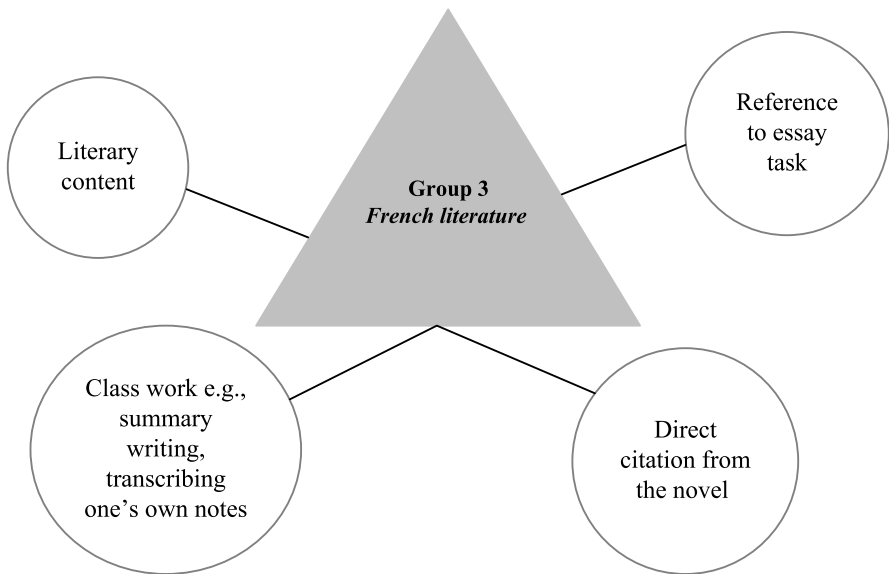


Figure 7. Broad representation of issues in student blogs from Group 3.



Figure 8. Example of student blog from Group 3.

recounting particular discussions that occurred in class on the novel. There were also references to preparing for the end-of-term essay, with one particular student blogging at one stage in English as her language skills in French were not sufficient to “rant” about the difficulty of the novel. Unsurprisingly, the issue of writing in one’s second language certainly emerged as an influential factor in assessing the impact of the blogs for this particular group. Certain students reproduced rather frequently extracts from the novel followed by insufficient original content of their own. This particular strategy impacted negatively during the evaluation of their blogs at the end of the semester. Indeed, in a later feedback session it became apparent that the level of difficulty of the prescribed novel did to a large degree affect the content of the learners’ postings. With many students struggling to understand the complex prose of the source text, it was reported that posting analytical content was simply too demanding. Thus, learners in this situation felt that chapter summaries were sufficiently challenging in order to complete this task.

Taking into consideration the different ways in which the blog was exploited from learners from these three groups, we shall now discuss the impact of these results in the following section.

Discussion of results and concluding remarks

As we consider the range of themes emerging from the three groups of learners, it is clear that the generic blog medium has the potential to support writing skills in different types of educational contexts. As mentioned earlier, blogs offer users a wide

variety of supplementary features in addition to the standard posting of text-based content. While none of the three groups was under any obligation to exploit these, it is still striking to note the difference in uptake between the Multimedia Games Development students in Group 1 and the language students in both Groups 2 and 3. Unsurprisingly students in Group 1 had been integrating technology into their studies consistently for the past three years of their studies and thus displayed a more confident approach in personalising their blog spaces. Their willingness to invite followers onto their blog as well as leave occasional comments contrasts greatly with the dominance of a more restricted single authored environment visible in the other learner groups. This readiness to interact may have also been facilitated by the smaller group size and the fact that students had established working relationships within this single degree cohort. In contrast, a more hesitant approach is noted in other groups with no previous experience with ICT-related tasks in their degree studies. The larger class sizes in Groups 2 and 3 comprising learners from diverse degree specialisations may also have decreased the willingness to initiate interaction in this intimate learning space. However, as the assignment itself is not collaborative in nature the idea of enforcing such interactivity could indeed compromise the creative and expressivist objectives of the original task. More importantly, it is vital not to lose sight of the primary aims of the exercise: to develop learners' language writing skills. Thus, rather than see this as indicative of under usage of the blog, it merely reflects that learners in Groups 2 and 3 simply did not identify a clear context for adding followers or comments. This may require future changes to the task depending on our evolving learning outcomes and objectives. Moreover, the presence of some strategic learners in Group 3 was also quite apparent over the course of the semester. It was pointed out later by students that the actual percentage weighting as well as additional module assignments influenced their participation in the task. This seemed to be most evident amongst our literature students in Group 3, who believed that 10% was not enough in terms of the overall effort made to complete the task. The demands of continuous assessment in other areas such as translation and essay writing were also seen as impacting negatively on their performance. This more strategic outlook of certain learners is certainly an additional feature, which shall be considered in the design of future blogging assignments.

Looking at our experiences with these three groups, it is clear that measuring success in the chosen task is dependent on achieving balance between: (1) the type of content that the teacher demands from the students and (2) the capacity of the learners to deliver this required material adequately. In our case, it is clear that the more highly specific the subject matter that is required, the more difficult it may become to exploit particular features offered by the blog. We noticed a marked difference between the text-centric literary efforts of Group 3 and their counterparts from Groups 1 and 2 who in comparison, incorporated more Web 2.0 functionality into the blog space. The limitations of the specific literary task can be identified as influential in this regard. As well as coping with the complex narrative of the literary text in question and blogging in the target language, students were also restricted by a lack of obvious Web 2.0 resources relating specifically to the novel that they were studying. This was simply because the typical resource banks such as YouTube and Daily Motion did not have any apparent material that learners could have used. On the other hand, students from Groups 1 and 2 were less constrained by the rules of their respective tasks because of the more flexible theme of detailing their own personal learning experiences. Unsurprisingly, this in turn made it easier to integrate relevant clips and

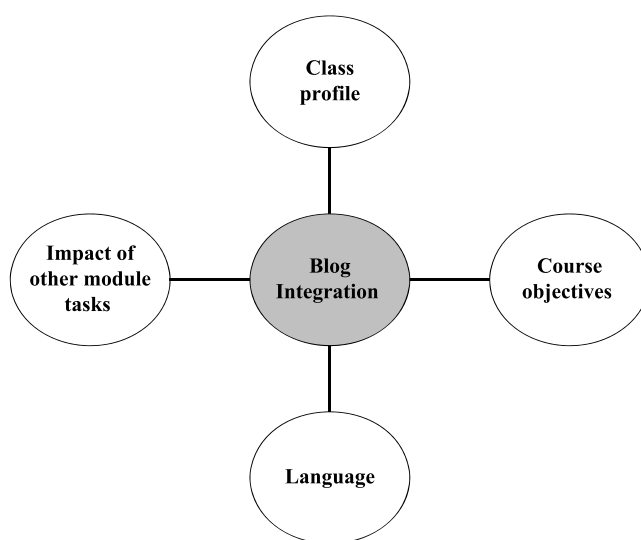


Figure 9. Influential factors regarding the integration of blogs for writing purposes.

images if so required by the individual learner. Hence, for students in Group 3, the twin challenges of blogging in their second language as well as lacking easy access to relevant online resources resulted in students producing mostly textual and descriptive postings. While on the one hand these efforts represented the students' personal reactions to the text, the content was in fact too limited in structure because of the production of short analytical sentences (Figure 8). As a means to address this particular issue, steps shall be taken in future to provide more guidance to learners in finding suitable resources that can easily be adapted to their blogs. While the textual descriptions are welcome, it is clear that learners require more explicit guidance relating to enhancing and personalising their particular blog spaces.

In sum, using blogs in the higher education classroom is certainly possible but it is crucial that teachers recognise the challenges of introducing such innovation into the established curriculum. Evidence from these three discrete groups suggests that generic features, such as the profile of the learners, the course objectives, the target language of the blog, and the overall module workload, are certainly instrumental factors (Figure 9). Furthermore, where strategic learning is a common approach of students, it is crucial to acknowledge any potential resistance to such a task whereby consistent work over the course of a semester is required. Even if a meaningful context for the blog exercise is created, teachers should still remain aware of rewarding an acceptable percentage for learner effort. Such an inevitable compromise could be potentially helpful for maximising students' output in the assessment procedure. A better understanding of the impact of these main variables on writing and learning may make blogs more pedagogically appealing and effective across other disciplines.

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