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A Year in the Blogosphere

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The course I lead is entitled 'Religion, Philosophy & Ethics', and as such, might not seem immediately the most amenable to the implementation of e-learning. After all, is this not a set of disciplines whose teaching and learning is predicated, at least primarily, on a face-to-face, discursive, argumentative (if not combative) experience? Alongside this, students are imagined to undergo periods of either intense concentration on the interaction of complex ideas, or introspective reflection on serious and troubling notions of ethical urgency. It may be hard to see initially how such a process matches the tick-box, summary-sheet nature of much early e-learning.

That was before Web 2.0 technology transformed the use of the web so far as almost to make the technology transparent. The millions of young people on Myspace and Facebook are not 'geeks' – they see the interaction with their peers, the social self-construction and the chance to flirt/be stupid; that it is via a computer clearly impacts upon the mode of interaction, but most users note this only in an incidental manner. As these technologies gained rapid take-up amongst the age range we teach, it became clear that perhaps the new social networking and interactive tools emerging online were an ideal way to do something supplementary to our face-to-face teaching sessions. The best way to start out seemed to be via a course blog.

To this end, I set up <www.r-p-e.blogspot.com> using the popular 'blogger' system. A 'blog' (a web-log) is a kind of online journal with the substantial benefit of hyperlinking: you mention an idea, or person, and make their name a live link to more detail about them. I am in the process of reviewing a year in the operation of this blog, which has been visited over 32,000 times since it launched, but can make some initial comments that may prove useful to those looking at the viability of blogging as a higher education tool.

Who is the blog for/used by? The initial use of the blog was to point students to online resources, and allow us to carry on our discussions and arguments after a class had finished in an online environment. Students now send me news stories they think would interest other students on the course, so that I can 'blog' them. We use it to arrange (and dissect) staff-student social events, and to – of course – argue,

both about matters under study and issues in the news. Because we use a public blogging system, anyone can find the blog (via Google for example), and can read or join in. This has another consequence – the blog is a profile-raising exercise for the course and the institution.

Who writes the blog? At first, it was teacher-led (i.e. I wrote the posts), and this remains the case for most of the pieces, but with two important qualifications. The first of these is that if students attend events or lectures pertinent to the course, I invite them to pen something for the blog – which they seem keen to do. Secondly, and more commonly, the comments feature allows anyone to comment on a post or another comment. Here we have seen interaction flourish between our current students, interested members of the public and academics in HE institutions across the world. Posts are announced to our students but also on international philosophy email lists (such as philosop-L, the key US-based philosophy list, which has 1000s of subscribers around the world). Posters can leave their comments with their full name, partial name, or anonymously. This of course means that someone (that would be me, thus far) has to moderate (i.e. check) the comments before they go live, but we are hoping this coming semester to ask final-year students to take turns as guest-moderators – both to involve them, and lessen my workload. In addition to this, two of my colleagues also post to the blog.

While I am delighted that students seem to feel more widely engaged in the course via the blog – to feel their engagement extends beyond the classroom, to a 'life of the course' sense of interaction – I would like to make students more active. Following discussions with those running a philosophy blog at the University of North Florida, I like the idea of adding students to the blog-authors (we have just added two more staff as authors this semester). I would also like the students to produce content other than just text for posting via the blog. As yet I have used the blog to link to a series of audio podcasts, but would like students to do more in terms of the authoring side. I hope we can have students interview academics at other universities over the telephone, record it, and post the interview to the blog, at some point this academic year (2007/08).

This brings me to a few quick comments regarding the use of podcasts. While the blog has been used to alert students to the podcasts I have made, what I think is noteworthy are those features that have proved most popular or successful. We did not try to replace lectures with podcasts. Rather they were intended as pre-lecture 'teasers', or as a supplement to pre-lecture reading. They were between 8 and 15 minutes in length and consisted of themes for the coming week or discussion of topics in the reading that may prove problematic. Students reported using them in a variety of ways – listening on the bus or in the car, playing them in the

kitchen while washing up or ironing, or while reading the set text. In this last case, I want to share the most appreciated podcast of the series, according to students.

The module I used podcasts for was one on Buddhism, and some of the material is both wholly new to the students and quite challenging. In one 15-minute podcast, I read through a whole (short) Buddhist Sutra (the Mahasatipatthana Sutta), stopping to explain ideas I felt would be unfamiliar to the student. I also sent them, by email, a copy of the text. They then read the sutra while listening to me reading it, stopping along the way with aural annotations to the text. This is something the students reported as really helping to allow them to engage with material they would otherwise have found intimidating, and then to arrive at class ready to make the most of our face-to-face time together as a group – discussing their interpretations with me and each other. We have also been using a wiki-project to collaborate on a class 'Indian Religion Glossary of Terms', but that is in its infancy and a story perhaps to return to on another occasion.

The development of these tools has been largely a process of trial and error, and e-learning cannot be a panacea for teaching all materials that students struggle with. Further, it is not (despite the dreams of some university managers) that cheap; to do it well is actually quite time-intensive, at least in the early phases. That said, it can be another useful and enlivening approach in the array of pedagogic strategies

we employ in helping students to engage with us, with ideas, and with each other.

About the author

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