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“The Paradoxical Position of Self-reflection in Teaching and Assessment in Higher Education: How the Application of Blogging Challenges Learning Habits”

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Abstract: The main aim of the paper is to observe how blogging affects self-reflection. The application of blogs is discussed, based on the case study from a Year One module. A process of implementing and delivering this method throughout a period of one semester is analysed from a practical and theoretical point of view (Burge, EJ & Haughey, M (2001) Using Learning Technologies, Routledge: Falmer). The quality of students' interaction online is evaluated alongside pedagogical effects of blogging employed as part of formative assessment. The main finding of the paper regards the independent approach of the students, which can be developed without direct instructions from the tutors. It has been observed that the students can take responsibility over their own learning, if the structure of the assessment permits flexibility and agility. It is argued that blogging enables the students to become self-reflective at a very early stage of the learning process and secondly, that assessments' structure determines the approach to learning. However, it has been indicated that even advanced bloggers can relapse to a non-reflective stage and that self-reflection is impossible to be structured without imposing power. In a constructivist environment of online interaction, the relation to others has appeared to be the most influential and liberating factor enhancing critical ability. Therefore, embedding interaction in a curriculum design becomes a pedagogical priority, but it has to be followed by integrating the formative assessment in the teaching mode. Otherwise, as this case study shows, the students detach from the interaction and the standards of teaching are not consistent across the cohort. Finally, the paradox of the 'structured freedom' becomes unavoidable, but reflecting on it brings about a change in thinking.

Keywords: Self-reflection, VLE, Constructivism, Blogging, Quality, Evaluation

Introduction

WE ARE ALL reflective beings, according to Antonio Gramsci (1971), and we can become “organic intellectuals” thinking critically even without professional qualifications. Essential for our intellectual potential, critical skills take part in assessing, making judgments, comparing, concluding, and interrelating different kinds of information and reacting to it (Weast 1996). These quite basic aspects of thinking can be deployed through training or education. However, as Gary G. Borich and Martini L. Tombari argue (1997), to become reflective the thinking has to surpass superficial elements and, as John Dewey confirmed in his classic work (1933), it has to expand to bigger mental schema where previous reflective processes meet and become enriched with the new ones. If, however, critical thinking is ‘natural’ for human beings, why is it so difficult for teachers to produce critically thinking students and teach critical skills? The next questions which arise are: can critical thinking be taught and if yes, in what manner, and finally, how to assess critical thinking in higher education which requires mathematical calculations of final results rather than descriptive interpretation of students' progress? These questions concern researchers from different disciplines, who try to devel-

op pedagogy of reflective thinking and adjust forms of assessment to this abstract skill (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Paul and Elder 2001; Pollard 2002, Davis and Klaes 2003). Today, self-reflection, alongside deep learning and critical skills are obligatory elements of any curriculum in Higher Education. Nevertheless, a prolific literature regarding mental, social, practical, philosophical and even political aspects of self-reflection rarely engages the question of class pedagogy and its pragmatic implications (Beattie 2000; Brooks and Brooks 1993). Some very fundamental doubts accompany the attempts of implementation of self-reflective assignments: do we need to explain the abstractness of self-reflection to the students and then require putting it into practice in an essay, presentation or a project, or should we rather do self-reflective teaching in the class and hope that students will follow our example? Or, perhaps, we should rely that they will learn how to self-reflect on their own? As some studies indicate it is the very latter mode of teaching self-reflection which dominates in the classroom (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Pollard 2002). My own experience as a tutor also confirms that tendency which relies on the students' intuition and ‘natural’ gift to self-reflect. It is a common complaint today among tutors that the students are not able to think critically and do not go beyond



mechanical correlations of facts. However, there is also a very strong pressure on the students to complete assignments and accumulate credit points which do not leave much space for creating an individual approach to learning and taking responsibility for self-development. Lamy and Hassen (2003) argue that such “space” is required in a learning design which students should produce for themselves and gain control of their tasks. In this study “space” has a twofold meaning: it refers to freedom of choice on how self-reflection should be performed and the personal “space” of the online blog allocated to the students within a virtual learning environment (VLE). Blogs were chosen as the most conducive tools for self-reflection outside the classroom on a blended module. As Blood (2002) argues, blogging enables communication which makes people more observant, sensitive and articulate participants of the world around them.

Context

An online type of formative assessment has become a challenge for both teachers and students on many different programmes in the last decade. An ongoing debate over the purposefulness of using ICT technology on blended modules (Burge & Haughey 2001) has revealed a whole range of problems, which derive mainly from the rooted manners of teaching and learning in a face-to-face mode, transplanted onto an online platform. Related research, engaging specialists from different disciplines, has stressed a need to redefine the basic aspects of the education process, such as: the role of the tutor, forms of support, student’s responsibility, assessment criteria and most of all the relationship between learning objectives and delivery. It is more commonly accepted now that e-elements can contribute to the enhancement of students’ learning skills, only if technology is adjusted to the specificity of knowledge, not the other way round. An emphasis on pedagogical results should be put before the attractiveness of e-learning tools or economy of scale which they generate. As e-learning literature devoted to the investigation of interaction between students shows the learning process online is determined by the nature of e-encounters, hence pedagogical objectives should consider their working as part of the content of the module. Among other major theories (see Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Govindasamy 2001), like behaviouralism and socio-culturalism, applied to research of online practices, it is constructivism which has been established as the most conducive philosophical platform for interpretation of the learning environment and the engagement of learners in the educational process. If knowledge is constructed by the individual through the interactions with others (Borich and Tombari 1997), the pedagogical status of e-learning

tools employed for communication in blended and distance learning must be embedded in module specifications. The use of a VLE for the material storage and passive retrieval of knowledge can defend itself only in very special cases (for example, support for the students with special needs, institutional savings on printing). If interaction is to enable critical thinking and consequently self-reflection, the communication tools have to be also applied critically while assessment has to involve pedagogy for e-learning.

Self-reflection as Critical Reflection

The aim of self-reflective activities is to surpass the agenda of the course itself and go beyond the borders of the learning process and its structure bestowed by the institution. In fact, self-reflection should not only encourage “stepping outside” the system, whether it be the cognitive system (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994; Mezirow 1990), the system of the social order (Probyn 1993, Skeggs 2004; Fook and Gardner 2007), or the system of behavioural (Dewey 1933; Vygotsky 1978) emotional processes (Tate and Sills 2004), but most of all it should involve a critique of the assumptions defining the self which is reflected upon. This would involve a critique of the structure within which self-reflection takes place, including the tools, such as a VLE, or any type of self-reflective assignment, channelling the whole process. The most popular type of self-reflection, widely adapted in education, derives from the idea of the transcendent researcher’s mind, introduced to the Western thinking through the Platonic idealism and Kantian self-examination in the era of Enlightenment. It is focused on the central idea of the self, detached from the processes of knowledge production and capable to observe itself from a distance. However, putting the “self” in the centre of reflection, turned solipsistically on the subject has become problematic for many critics (Lash 1994; Swan 2008; Garoian 1999), especially those from the area of social sciences (Boud and Walker 1998; Dyke 2006). The idealistic conception of identity does not explain the social aspects of becoming “the self” and all decisive social categories which affect it, such as class, gender, or ethnicity (McNay 2000; Adkins 2002). Another school of criticism, underpinned by interpretive theory (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), criticises that the ‘transcendent self’ does not embrace the impact of the researcher and her personal narratives or emotions on the process of interpretation (Denzin 1997; Clough 2000). In this paper it is agreed that the way self-reflection is encouraged by the institution and implemented in teaching does both: reflects the political intentions of the involved agents and shapes them at the same time. It cannot be denied that the model of self-reflection adapted in the curriculum,

and how it is taught and assessed, influences the final results. If personal confession is embedded in the model of self-reflective activity, for example through a personal journal encouraging reporting on one's feelings, or a reflective essay, asking for evoking personal experiences in regard to theory, the results will be descriptive and very much "self-orientated". In such narratives, as Elaine Swan indicates (2008), the personal is an area of the closed message which cannot be interpreted or questioned. Its value lies in the experience of the personal to be maintained in its original-essentialist form with which theory is confronted. However, as Baud and Walker (1998) argue, to understand the nature of what constitutes the personal and the nature of self-reflection, both need to be interpreted as a social practice. A question which needs to be asked before the implementation of any reflective activities is what type of 'self' is produced through critical reflection? (Swan 2008:390)

Rationale

While teaching media and advertising (involving vocational elements and creative skills) I have faced a requirement to produce self-reflective assignments which would enable the students to see the relationships between theory, practice, and their own position in the world and the current conditions of the market. By implementing various kinds of more traditional assessment, such as critical report, reflective essay, team presentation, individual project, I have achieved some positive results in students' deep learning, but I have not encountered sufficient reflective depth in their coursework. However, I have also realised that as a teaching team we were not coherent in regard to what the "reflective depth" should exactly involve. Particularly, marking has proved to be most problematic. Regardless of the fact that each year the assignment guidelines were produced as a result of the discussions of the whole team and in response to the end of the semester module evaluation, the understanding of the "reflective" value of the student's effort was very different. An online participation by the students and peer interaction is only one side of the communication system in the process of learning. What underpins it is the relation of the tutor and the learner, and the learner and the environment. On a blended course both the VLE and classroom activities should be integrated in the course design where all elements meet under the set of learning and pedagogical objectives. This pedagogical challenge made us seek new solutions, including online methods of teaching and learning on the institutional VLE and more flexible patterns of evaluation.

In this case study, self-reflection is understood as an action-aimed change in thinking which engulfs

the self and others, with the reservation that the change can bring unexpected results (Swan 2008) for which we have to be prepared. Therefore, in this implementation of self-reflection online, it has been decided that keeping a weekly blog by all participants of the teaching process, including the tutors, will be a 'free' activity devoid of content-specific instructions. Naturally, it has been accepted that the directions-free environment does not exist and the act of the blog implementation, bestowed on the students, is an act of power. However, to limit any further power-related implications (like explaining what self-reflection should be) it was decided that the blogging activity will not be structured or marked. The students received feedback in an indirect way: by getting engaged with the replies to their own blog entries. The amount of words or the style of writing was not predetermined; the only requirement imposed at the beginning was a weekly entry related to the module content and replying to at least two other bloggers. The aim of the activity lay in creating conducive conditions for interaction to be expressed from a personal point of view, but the content of the narratives was not guided. Designed as a personal diary, the blog format itself demands writing in the first singular person which shifts responsibility over the content and form onto the student.

Case Study

A Year One 20 credits core module, The Introduction to Consumption and Production, gathers media and creative industries students who are taught to relate a wide range of cultural theories to their practical research of different examples of media and non-media productions. A summative form of assessment on this module is twofold: a classical theoretical essay (65%) and a team presentation requiring a group-based written report (35%). To support students' self-reflection on the module content, especially the connection between theory and practice, a formative assessment was introduced on the VLE platform parallel to the more traditional teaching activities, such as seminar discussions, modelling, and role play, which enable an overview of the student's performance too. Each student was allocated a blogging space – also known as a personal journal, on the local VLE and linked with the appointed members of the presentation team. The implementation of the e-elements was preceded by a short technical training within the lecture slot and a discussion of the e-learning practical and ethical guidelines prepared by the tutor and placed in the module guide. There was no time given to the students for the ongoing negotiation of the format of e-delivery or web-etiquette. Due to the constraints of the module's weekly structure and a limited capacity of online

elements, the twofold form of e-communication was purposefully imposed on the students' cohort who were allocated to personal blogs and group discussions by the tutor. A personal blog by each student who activated the software was accessible to the whole cohort throughout the whole semester and open to commentary by others, while a group discussion forum was aimed only at those team members who were selected by the students themselves. The role of the tutors (e-moderators) was to keep their own blog and respond to the students' posts on a weekly basis. We also tried to encourage extra threads *ad hoc* in our own blogs around certain issues which were identified by the students as problematic in their posts, hoping that the exchange of posts would enable a deeper understanding of those problems. At the beginning of the module the students were informed that online interaction is part of assessment and the assessment criteria were explained. This was reiterated every week till the final quarter of the module (in Nisbet, week 9-12), especially to those who had encountered a VLE for the first time. Since online interaction was part of formative assessment, we could not apply marks as "buying-in" factors, instead addressing "sharing" as the overarching benefit from relational learning to which they were encouraged online. In this attempt of motivating self-reflection on the module we did not define the term or analyse its theoretical origin. It was the interaction *per se* which was intended to serve as both the means and the result of reflective thinking. This learning practice was determined by the "doing approach" to self-reflection rather than the "thinking approach" which requires the conceptualisation of the benefits from "the method" on the students' side. However, as part of evaluation of the use of the e-tools on the module we delivered a questionnaire in Week 8 which became the source of the new data to be analysed critically by the teaching team.

The integration of activities online with face-to-face teaching was not pre-planned but the students appreciated it when their personal "case" from the blog was mentioned. This was, however, a delicate area since lots of posts were very personal and referring to them in the classroom needed the student's permission. Although personal blogs were designed as a channel of open communication, accessible to the whole cohort, the reapplication of the post in a classroom might be perceived as the infringement of privacy. Group discussions, on the other hand, were closed to the cohort and protected by the privacy code agreed with the students at the beginning of the module. The tutors had the access to them but tried not to interfere without being asked, although if the group had practical problems (technology, organisation) they could suggest some solutions upfront. Due to the minimal use of this tool for concep-

tual discussions, content analysis of the posts was not undertaken and the effectiveness of the group discussion had to be measured only afterwards by comparing the final marks and the online presence of the group in a quantitative manner. Personal blogs acquire their own 'life' inspired by the seminars and lectures, but the lectures were not responsive enough to the blog posts. This lack of the mutual influence was identified by the teaching team very quickly but was difficult to repair due to the classical module design, based on a list of lectures which could not be changed in the middle of the semester. This finding was crucial for the teaching team and served as a motivation for changing the module design into an 'open curriculum' for which students have an equal responsibility in the following year. We have realised that encouraging students to self-reflection has its practical consequences which cannot be predicted in advance.

Aims and Methodology

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the quality of interaction online and how it affects self-reflection. A type of online formative assessment, namely using online blogs will be analysed and pedagogical implications will be discussed. A corresponding group activity: team discussion forum will be mentioned in the analysis for comparing some fundamental differences between a personal platform of online interaction and the group forum. Both tools were employed for the expansion of students' interaction outside of the classroom. The expected objectives from applying blogs and discussion groups were: developing critical habits in Year One as a base for their self-reflection to be drawn upon during the whole degree and subsequently, improving the results of team work. In alignment with constructivist theory, the applied e-tools, by encouraging knowledge production through the relations with others, have allowed that knowledge to be seen "in a larger, more lifelike context that stimulates learners to reflect, organise, analyse and problem solve" (Borich and Tombari, 1997:80). An experimental model of introducing the blog function to all students from the cohort without any extra training and without any structured determinants of the blog design was adopted alongside the explorative study of students' feedback delivered through the survey. A combination of qualitative and quantitative measures of online interaction follows Douglas Nisbet's (2004) comparative approach in which the output is observed throughout a period of time in response to varied enabling factors from different groups, in this case the first factor was the students' initial belief that blogging was part of assessment, which was compared to the next factor which was their realization

that blogging was an independent learning activity. The main types of effectiveness of learning achieved through blogging are identified by the author in five simultaneous streams as complementary to the five-step model by Salmon (2000) and opposite to a traditional model of knowledge acquisition, which emphasise a hierarchy from the lowest to the highest level (Ramsden 1992; Prosser and Trigwell 1999). The attitudes of the students to the online platform, especially to blogging, are analysed on the basis of a survey designed by the author and presented below in diagrams 1, 2 and 3. Quantitative evaluation is applied in parallel to descriptive statistics measuring the number of posts to one's individual blog and to the blogs of others. Output parameters were regarded to measure quantity and quality of blogging during one semester, whereas input parameters were not structured.

Evaluation of e-Assessment: Choice of Approach

Measuring quality of interaction is the biggest challenge for tutors. As in any type of analytical research two main approaches can be identified: qualitative or quantitative, depending on the aims of evaluation, the form and the content of interaction (May 2002; Blair 2008; Delahaye 2007). Douglas Nisbet (2004) provides an overview of the most popular methods of measuring online assessments which he discusses in relation to the online discussion groups and their pedagogical effectiveness. In this case study a quantitative method is applied as the basis for the qualitative interpretation and the content analysis of the students' entries. A questionnaire with multiple choice questions, and closed and opened questions delivered among the students in Week 8 of the module (the module operating on the 12 weeks teaching and 3 weeks assessment basis) has provided data for both quantitative and qualitative measurement. A software-based quantitative analysis of the amount of online entries per student has been first acknowledged and subsequently abandoned in this analysis. Nisbet's qualitative approach is supported instead (informed by Brace-Govan 2003; Blignaut and Trollip 2003), since it emphasises the importance of the classification of the quality of interaction over the destination and linkage (2004:124).

Research

The interactive mechanism of personal blogs lies in the ability to produce individual comments and replying to responses coming from others (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht & Swartz 2004; Ramos 2006; Fichter 2001). In this way every student has a chance to participate in those blogging "threads" which in-

terest them and make their own point at a pace which suits them best. This open approach was the motivation behind our adaptation of blogs as a type of formative rather than summative assessment. Blogs were established as an opportunity for 'free' self-reflection, hence we did not wish to use it as tool of control over the regularity of participation. That is why no marks were awarded for "being online" and sending first messages, as suggested by Macdonald (2003), and no "fines" were implemented either for not using the VLE at all. There was no direct connection between the summative assessment and this 'open' activity, but the students were informed that they could refer to the blogs in their final summative coursework (essay and team presentation). Our intention was to let the students decide how they want to use the blog and take their own responsibility in a pragmatic sense for the effects of self-reflection. Blog comments were never locked or summed up critically by the tutor. They accumulated their own life depending on interest from the peers. Regardless of the time passage and the "theme of the week" dictated by the lecture schedule, blogs could be browsed to and from and commented on from a new angle implemented in the face-to-face mode. The weekly duties which all students had to complete were: posting one comment to one's own blog, reading the posted comments from others, and replying to at least one of them. If the students wanted to do more than that, it was due to their own initiative. Although the formative assessment was based on the compulsory weekly activities, not all the students complied to them. The amplitude of their engagement was the highest when they believed the assessment had the credit value. Once they were informed how the formative assessment differs from a summative one, their interest in online blogging declined dramatically. However, it was interesting to observe how a group of students kept on blogging entries till the end of the module while engaging with the comments from others.

In the process of adaptation to this activity from Week 1, it was noticed that the five stages of the online engagement, identified by Salmon (2000), were not followed in the consecutive order. In fact, what Salmon established as a 5-step model: from 1.basic access, 2.socialisation and 3.information exchange, to 4.knowledge construction and 5.autonomous development, in our case appeared to be applied very flexibly and in different orders. It must be acknowledged that some students, despite the continuous support from the teaching and administrative staff, have never moved beyond the stage of "basic assess" centred on learning how to use our VLE. The reasons for their 'disconnection' need to be researched separately and alongside the factors affecting the digital divide in a multicultural student

population. However, there were other students who had moved from stage 1 to stage 5 without any extra support in a short period of the first two weeks. Interestingly, two of them, who were overseas students, had never used a VLE before, but it did not impede their immediate move to interaction on a deep level. The socialisation stage was skipped by most of the students, even though they did not know each other well from face-to-face interaction and many of them were Semester B starters who just joined the University when the module was launched. As e-literature indicates, the socialisation phase is important for an online community who need to build their common identity of learners and thus become more confident and personally engaged. However, what my research shows is that the learners are able to respond to the task without completing the socialisation phase, articulating more interest in the content what they have to say than in each other. Being equal bloggers, the tutors did not interfere in the model of communication which the students have adapted, and did not encourage them to 'socialise'. Quite surprisingly, in Week 4, a stream of personalised comments and deep questions emerged, typical for the levels defined by Salmon as 4. knowledge construction and 5. autonomous development. This early engagement was inspired by the thematic threads which the students had produced themselves. In contrast to Salmon's study, such proactive approach shows that the students have the ability to use the e-tool in an independent way, but if the structure of the activity is imposed on them and the levels of interaction are presupposed on their behalf, they fall into the expected type of practice without questioning it. An advanced level of critical responsiveness was also reflected in the length of the posts, in some cases going up to 1000 words and even sent as attachments.

Moving up and down the Salmon scale depending on the kind of the problem (technical, administrative or thematic) was the main characteristic of the tools' application. Yet it was rarely used for the exchange of practical information (e.g how to open this link, how to find a source) or questions about assessment, which instead were very frequently posted in group discussions opened to the whole cohort. Without any moderated training, the blog was understood by all participants as a subject-based tool, operated individually, where messages were posted in relation to a level of the student's engagement with the subject or its certain content. Knowledge on the blog was produced in the following streams¹: 1.evocative (students repeat what happened in the lecture/seminar using the tutor's language), 2.descriptive (student report on the lecture/seminar using their own language and emotions), 3.selective (students select a fragment of the lecture/seminar and relate to their

previous knowledge from another area), 4.interpretative (students express their own point of view on the lecture/seminar), critical (students express their view on the lecture/seminar through the angle of the learnt theory), 5.analytical (students locate the lecture/seminar in a wider social and political context within which they examine their own experience). These modes of knowledge production were mainly applied in separation from each other in different messages, but in some cases they appeared together in the same message. The analysis of the particular replies did not indicate that there was a relationship between the mode of knowledge production and the student's ability to use the blog application. Neither was it confirmed that the knowledge was produced in a progressive order from the stream 1 to 5, where passive repetition is the lowest level and analysis is the highest aim (Brockbank 2007).

In terms of the degree of self-reflection it was much more intense in streams 4 to 5, although the language of the personal was interwoven in the posts in streams 1 to 3. The posts within streams 3 to 5 were supported with personal examples and reflected the students' interest in the subject. Nevertheless, as Swan admits, "[T]he personal is not simply there to be described or confessed" (2008:390). Critical reflection should "enable all students to develop analytical frameworks within which to examine and interrogate experience" (Brah and Hoy 1989:72 in Swan 390). Yet this research implies that "analytical frameworks" do not necessarily develop according to some pre-designed, progressive order, but may just *happen* in relation to the other "frameworks" (as those ones articulated above in the streams) by peers, tutors, and even the owner of a given blog herself in her other posts. A relational, and quite often illogical and unpredictable mode of reflection proves to be available to the students regardless of the 'level' of their progression on the module and it may be even present in the basic, recognised as non-critical modes of knowledge production (streams 1-3). Interestingly, all types of syntactic structures within online interactions from Fahy's classification have appeared in the students' blogs at different stages identified by Salmon (2000) (access, socialisation, information exchange, knowledge construction, development). Therefore, it is not possible to confirm that the stages from Salmon determine the advancement of self-reflective thinking. Moreover, they were also intermingled like the patterns of knowledge acquisition (named above as streams). For example, "citation" from the source (category 5B) was linked with "reflections" (category 3) at the stage 3 of information exchange, whereas "quotations and paraphrases" (category 5A) were enriched by "vertical questions" (category 1A) and "horizontal questions" at the stage

¹ The word "stream", chosen by the author, is applied to avoid a reverberation of the word "level" which implies a progressive order.

4 (knowledge construction) and 5 (development). “Non-referential statements (category 2A) showing no connections with others’ comments and referential statements” (category 2B), which made direct responses to others, were complementing each other at all stages from Salmon. They also contributed to “scaffolding and engaging” (category 4) aimed at personalised interaction, which were manifest at stage 4 (knowledge construction) and 5 (development) from Salmon. A combination of categories and stages was unpredictable on a chronological line, but generally using citations and quotations was manifested much later (week 5) than using references to other students’ blogs which started almost immediately (week 2).

In contrast to the theory of gradual acquisition of knowledge (Biggs 2003; Ramsden 1992), the blog opened new possibilities of synchronic learning on different levels at the same time. If we agree that the lowest level of knowledge acquisition is equal to the passive evocation of the material (Brockbank 2007), in this case the lower levels have been enacted interchangeably with higher levels or they were even intermingled in the same blog entry. Some of the students operated within one stream only until the end of the module, but most of them adapted multiple streams and different syntactic structures at various times. The turning point at the chronological curve of this activity was the third quarter of the teaching period (week 6-8) when the students realised that they would not be marked formally for sending blog entries. Although they had known from the beginning of the module that the activity was part of formative assessment and they received written guidelines stating that: “as part of formative assessment the online interaction will be assessed but will not be marked”, it appeared that it was not fully understood by all students and even misinterpreted by some of them. Through the common interaction and the explanation from the tutors, it became transparent to the whole cohort between week 6 and 8 that the activity is ‘free’ and no ‘real’ consequences will be met by those who opt out. As a result of this finding the interaction on blogs decreased from 95% to 45% and stayed at this level almost till the end of the module, only to drop to 30% in the last two weeks. This decline did not regard the team discussion fora which became more active in the last quarter of the teaching period (week 10-12) and achieved its peak in the assessment period (week 13-15), while in the first quarter of the module (week 1-3) it was almost devoid of interaction. The messages sent to the team discussions were mainly practical, referring to the management and administration of the team presentation. However, those students who continued individual blogging after the turning point of 45%-30%, have maintained their engagement with the

subject and their posts became even more self-reflective. The lack of presumed formal consequences and taken for granted control from the staff, opened a new gate to personal communication between the students. This “opening to freedom” was a positive turning towards pedagogy which enhanced critical reflection, but on the other hand it hindered participation and diminished interaction between other students.

For the analysis of the existing interaction, however, the blogs of the whole cohort were taken into consideration from the whole semester. Although the absence of the power element after Week 8 disturbed visibly the rigour of the activity, it did not considerably affect the quality of the posts which were still very diverse: from very basic to very advanced critically. There were posts from the same students throughout the whole module whose style did not change and whose messages were purely descriptive with no self-reflection (eight per cent of the whole interaction traffic). From eight types of online interaction categories defined by Fahy (2003), those basic messages included “vertical questions” which seek correct answer from other participants. In my classification of knowledge acquisition they were confined in stream 1 and 2. According to Salmon’s model of 5 stages of online interaction they could be classified within the three first types: access, socialisation, and information exchange. Those students who have never moved beyond these basic levels have not shown much interest in online interaction and they did not change their attitude throughout the whole module. Although they were detached from online collaboration and even complained about the application of VLE-based teaching to face-to-face teaching, their knowledge of the subject and their final grades were not affected detrimentally. But none of them has achieved the highest grades (firsts and second first), which have occurred in significant numbers in the group of students who continued blogging till the end of the module. It has been observed that those students who were most actively engaged with blogging were also frequent users of other VLE-based tools, such as glossary, Internet links, Power Point slides, and discussion groups. They have become a group of learners who were most skilled in adapting the VLE for their own needs and who were also apt at criticising the weakness of the e-learning system. Yet they have learnt how to use the VLE to their own benefit and their self-reflective posts confirmed their confidence and critical advancement.

The survey delivered in week 8 among sixty four students (seventy one per cent of the cohort) has indicated that sixty per cent of them would recommend the VLE to others and twenty five per cent would not (Fig.1). However, in the group of students who

were satisfied with the VLE there was sixty three per cent who were actually using the blog (Fig.2), and only this sample can be considered when analys-

ing the type of engagement with the blogging tool (see: Fig.3)

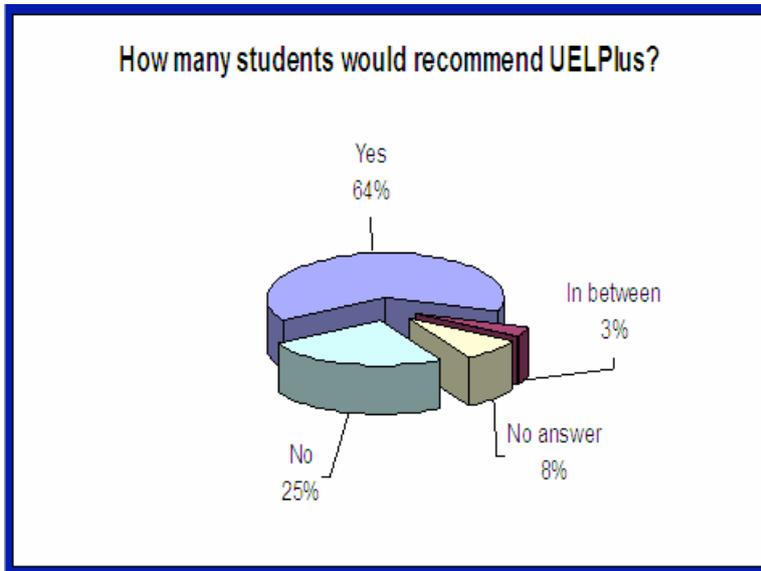


Figure 1: Satisfaction with the VLE

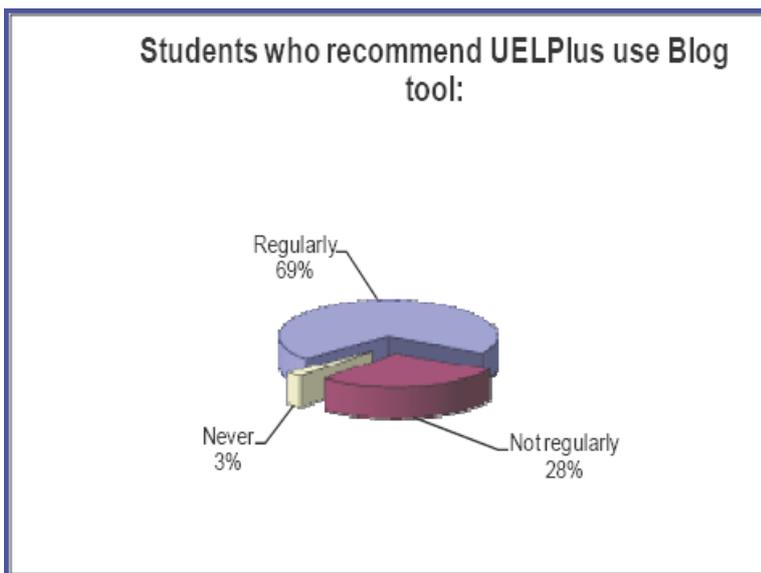


Figure 2: Feedback from Blog Users among the VLE Satisfied Participants

When asked to reflect on the activity, most of the bloggers from the cohort identified themselves with the University structure in the first place (32%), but interestingly enough, the second identification was with creativity (23%) and the third one (14%) with journalistic writing (Fig.3). Some students have chosen multiple identifications, but seven per cent of the survey participants did not choose any of them, which shows a quantitative similarity to the eight per cent of those students who have never become engaged with blogging. The five per cent of the sample have felt like "lone riders" which reveals the lack of emotional connection with the online community, but nine per cent appreciated being part of

the blogging team. Unfortunately, eleven per cent considered themselves to be the material for an academic experiment which is not a positive recognition. When added to the seven per cent of the "non-classified" learners and five per cent of the detached, lonely learners, this produces a figure of twenty three per cent of the non-engaged and dissatisfied cohort. Although it was not possible to measure the quality of blogging among this exact group (due to the anonymous nature of the survey), it can be assumed that self-reflection was not highly developed among them and interaction with others was low. Generally, a negative attitude to the tool does not produce positive results (Burge & Haughey 2001). Those factors

which may increase students' engagement and those which are detrimental to their motivation have be-

come an object of a separate study undertaken by the teaching team (Rabikowska and Newlands 2008).

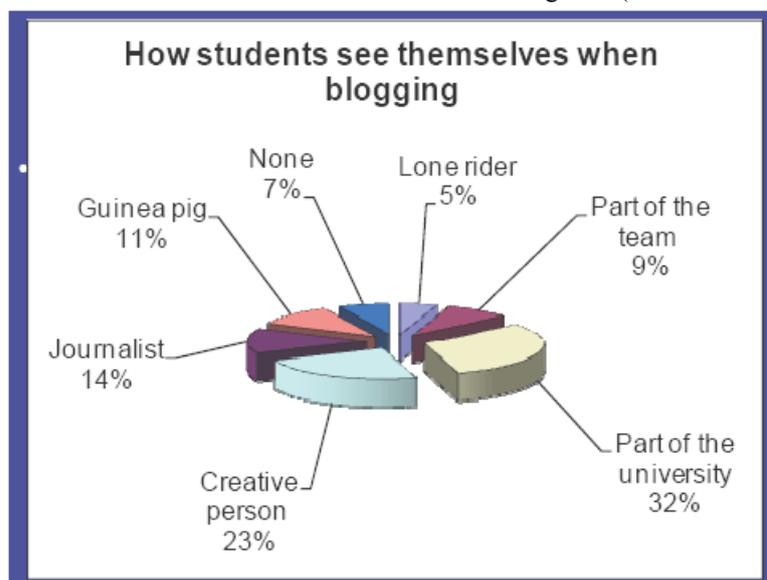


Figure 3: Types of Engagement with the Blog

Conclusion

Self-reflection is an ability with which all students are equipped and which can occur at all levels of the learning process. The lack of a formal structure to the blogging activity has shown that the students are able to take responsibility for their own learning and can use the new tool in a “deep” way without being instructed by the tutor. In contrast to other e-learning theories of online interaction (Salomon 2000; Fahy 2003), this research indicates that the quality of interaction does not have a progressive trajectory. Self-reflection (regarded as the most advanced skill in the learning process) may be enhanced by unstructured and accidental communication with others even at the very early stage of online interaction. In regard to the content, the genuine interest in the subject and personal examples provided by peers were recognised as the most motivating factors in blogging. Finally, it can be concluded that it was the unconstrained form of this learning activity that has enabled students' responses, while proving the non-linear nature of online interaction and its challenging pedagogical potential. The uncontrolled model of self-reflection has resulted in the ‘free’ output on the students' side to be used ‘back’ in the individual learning process. In that sense the consensus between the methods of teaching and the effects of learning

has been confirmed (Swan 2008), but the unpredictability of the latter did not help to produce consistency in pedagogy. At this level of research, however, Nisbet's argument that introducing the critical underpinnings of the activity would bring forward better pedagogical results and appreciation of the students (2004:133) cannot be entirely approved. In activities aimed at self-reflection a rigid intellectual framework may constrain ‘free’ thinking, which was appreciated by the students as signified in their choice of “creative” and “journalistic” identification with the tool.

The next step to the improvement of pedagogical results should be a change in the course design on a face-to-face level. The online activities should be integrated in the module structure and linked with summative assessment. The “buying-in” factors play an important motivating role in teaching and they should underpin the use of personal blogs. If we want the students to be more engaged in the activity, we need to provide some concrete benefits from using the e-tool. For example, extra points could be given for references to blogs in essays or presentations. An award to those students who continued blogging despite the lack of control could be an additional motivating factor. A more consistent use of the e-tools across the cohort would allow the teaching standards to be enhanced and very importantly, meet the expectations derived from equality and diversity.

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