

Central Queensland University

Colleen Ryan, Penny Heidke, Nicole Blunt, Moira Williamson and Donna Lee Brien

Using blogging to engage nursing students in reflective practice

Abstract:

Blogging is a practice that educators in creative and professional writing, journalism, communication and a variety of other writing-based programs utilise to enhance their students' reflective writing, alongside other skills. This article suggests that this practice may be useful in other non-writing based disciplines, in this case the discipline of nursing, where reflective practice has been identified as a framework to assist in developing personal growth, problem solving and the identification of innate strengths, allowing professional maturation in difficult environments. It describes the use of blogging in an assessment item in a final year undergraduate nursing unit. Analysis of students' blogs revealed blogging was cathartic and triggered reflection and transformation.

Biographical notes:

Colleen Ryan is a Lecturer in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Sciences at Central Queensland University. Her current research includes exploring registered nurses' experiences in the clinical teaching environment

Penny Heidke is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Sciences at Central Queensland University. Penny is completing a Masters of Health (research) and was lead investigator in an OLT grant featuring stories from culturally diverse health care consumers.

Nicole Blunt is a Lecturer in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Sciences at Central Queensland University. Nicole has completed her Masters in Nursing Science (Nurse Practitioner) and continues to work in the clinical environment.

Moira Williamson is Dean, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Sciences at Central Queensland University. As Deputy Dean, Learning and Teaching for the School, she often was privy to the kinds of experiences students have shared in their blogs.

Professor Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University and has been working collaboratively across the fields of creative writing and nursing research since 2011.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Online writing – Blogging – Reflective practice – Nursing education

Introduction

Blogging, which is often described as a contemporary, socialized extension of the handwritten diary or journal (Bruns 2008), provides an immediate outlet for expression on the part of the writer (Blood 2000). Highfield notes that although in the contemporary world of online communication blogs and blogging have been eclipsed by social media in terms of both public awareness and the size of the user base globally, the two forms of communication exist together in the mediasphere, each offering their special strengths to their writers and readers (2017). Despite the ascendancy of social media, the blog remains a vibrant online media form and platform, and a 'key practice in multiple contexts' (Highfield 2017), including in professional and educational contexts, where blogging can assist in both reflective practice and attract helpful social commentary that may improve self-awareness and performance (Yang 2009). This is especially useful for those working in health and social arenas, where honest reflection on one's effectiveness and areas for improvement when delivering therapeutic interventions are important for improving practice and performance (Maag 2005, Pinilla 2013). The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of blogs as an assessment activity in nursing education, in particular by encouraging reflection on work integrated learning activities. It begins by briefly examining the origins of blogs, and their use in writing and other fields of education.

According to McCullagh and Broache (2007), the blog was created by Jorn Barger in 1997 as a webpage summarising interesting musings and web links he came across during his daily searches of the Internet. Barger called his webpage a 'weblog'. Shortly after, another weblog user, Peter Merholz, shortened this to 'blog' and in 1999 the term appeared in print and the lexicon has continued to grow. Bloggers, blogging, and the blogosphere have all become familiar terms, while studies of blogging as a form of cultural production proliferated almost as soon as blogs started to be written (see for instance, Blood 2000, Bruns 2008).

In the context of writing education, Johnson reports her use of blogs to improve creative writing students' creativity and collaboration (2010). She finds the main benefit of blogs the immediate opportunity they provide to bloggers to explore and share their ideas and enter into dialogue with readers. More recently, Suchy found blogging increased communication and contact between creative writing students, peers and educators, and allowed for learning to move beyond the classroom (2013). Interestingly, in writing about pre-service teaching training, Miller and Williams found that the material expressed in student teachers' blogs were more authentic and sincere when this was compared to their journal entries (2013). Students' journals were also observed to be less reflective than their blogs, while their blogs demonstrated more analysis and synthesis than their journals (Miller and Williams 2013).

In terms of a sub-genre of writing, Brien found in 2008 that the sophisticated use of the blog by food writers and publishers was then growing. In the health-care setting, Miller and Pole argue that health professionals tend to be prolific bloggers (2010). They suggest that blogs provide an outlet for creative expression that relieves stress and leads to support from like-minded empathic peers. They also propose that patients as health consumers may derive specific benefit from reading the blogs of health professionals,

because the information is likely to be accurate and the language used is informal and, therefore, this information is more accessible to the lay person than other sources as, for instance, the articles in medical journals. This benefit resonates with findings around the therapeutic effects of blogging (Baker and Moore, 2011; Minian et al. 2016).

Blogging to enhance work integrated learning for nursing students

All tertiary-level students of nursing in Australia undertake unpaid clinical placements as a key component of their studies. In an Australian national review of such work integrated learning, it was found that workplace stress and inadequate support negatively affects nursing students' learning in such placements, and results in a perception of unsatisfying experiences (Patrick et al. 2008). Other studies have shown that nursing students can feel alienated, ignored and unsupported in the clinical environment (Broadbent et al. 2014; Jackson et al. 2011; Levett-Jones et al. 2009; Newton et al. 2015; Skaalvik, Normann and Henriksen 2012; Tee et al. 2016). This is exacerbated as, during their clinical placements, nursing students are not able to regularly access their peers and university teachers who could provide vital support in terms of assisting such students to reflect on their experiences and make sense of them.

Schön's seminal work on reflective practice (1991) and the many subsequent studies building on his work have concluded that reflective learning activities builds skills in problem solving, critical thinking and self-expression, promotes stress reduction and supports personal growth (Brown et al. 2008; Epp 2008; Hartwig 2015; Horton-Deutsch and McNelis 2012; Okuda and Fukada 2014; Reed and Edmunds 2015; Schmidt and Brown 2016). Gustafsson and Fagerberg relate that when nurses were asked to reflect on negative situations, they often saw circumstances differently and were able to consider alternate perspectives on their experiences (2004). This allowed them to develop and mature professionally.

Although blogs have been used to prompt reflective learning in the discipline areas of education and creative writing as discussed above, no examples have been found reporting their use in nursing assessments (Miller and Williams 2013; Suchy 2013). Based on a recognition of the benefits outlined above, we set out to explore whether providing nursing students with access to a blog in which to explore their daily experiences in the clinical setting could offer such students the opportunity to express and offload any stress experienced, and gain empathic support. We were also interested in investigating whether this form of expression would allow such students – who are not 'natural' writers – to reflect more deeply on their experiences.

In 2015, therefore, we set an assessment task involving blogging for our final year students undertaking their clinical placements. The assignment comprised three parts. The first offered students an opportunity to reflect on clinical placements undertaken in their studies, the second encouraged them to reflect on experiences they perceived as challenges, while the third allowed them to identify individual strengths and weaknesses. In this way, it was hoped students would be better prepared as graduates by having a deeper understanding of themselves they could utilise in future professional development plans (Hartwig, 2015) and in making the transition from student to professional. In their reflections, students were asked to adopt one of two reflective

frameworks they had previously been introduced to in their studies: Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) and Kolb's experiential learning model (1984).

Gibbs' reflective cycle is a six step framework for reflection: describing the incident; recalling and exploring ones' thoughts and feelings about the incident; evaluating the experience; analysing the incident that is often guided by questions such as 'what went well?', 'what did I do well?', and 'what did others do well?'; a conclusion incorporating insight into behaviours because of the in-depth analysis; and an action plan for the future guided by such questions as 'what will I do differently next time?'. Kolb's four step model for experiential learning similarly begins with learners engaging in an experience, and then involves them in reflecting on the experience, identifying knowledge or skills acquisition from the experience and, finally, experimenting with the skills or knowledge gained.

This study

In order to evaluate the utility and benefit of the blogging activity, a qualitative exploratory study was designed and implemented in 2015. This was designed to explore two aspects of the activity. These were, firstly, whether blogging assists final year nursing students to reflect on any challenges they experienced in the clinical setting. Secondly, we were interested in how students responded to the approach. The study accessed the assignments submitted for the blogging assessment task, from the 255 undergraduate nursing students enrolled in the course. Of these, 236 were female learners and 19 were male. Their ages ranged between 20 and 60 years old. The settings for their individual work placements were varied, ranging from community health settings in mental health, aged care and diabetic services to clinical placements in hospitals in regional and urban locations across Australia.

Initially, all the blog posts were read and categorised using the process below. To begin, 55 blog posts were randomly selected and examined using the six step method recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). That is, three authors of this article (Ryan, Heidke and Blunt) each read all these 55 posts, and categorised them, in the process identifying any patterns. They made notes and then discussed their findings with another author of this article (Williamson). This process was repeated until the group agreed three themes had been identified. During this process, Derrida's approach to deconstruction (1978) was used to dig deeper into the students' written stories to uncover meanings which may well have been hidden from them at the time of writing.

The second part of the analysis comprised collating the students' evaluation of the assessment item from the university course experience feedback database. This was undertaken by the first author, after the analysis of the blogs had been completed.

Findings: themes

The students' blog posts grouped around a number of categories and three main themes, each of which will be discussed below. The below table captures these.

Categories	Themes
Channelling feelings Reflecting on situations Reflective journaling Preceptors and facilitators Role confusion Placement expectations not met	Responding to disappointment
Emotional intelligence Fear of not knowing Adaptability Cultural differences I'm only a student nurse	Shaking off stigma
Overcoming obstacles Building rapport Building resilience Feelings Lacking in courage I'm nearly a real nurse	Triumph over adversity

Table 1. Categories and themes identified in student blogs

Responding to disappointment

The student blogs often contained narratives about reflecting on responding to disappointment. This is demonstrated in the narrative below.

One challenge I faced in a third year placement was preceptors' attitudes. On one placement, staff refused to answer our questions and ignored myself and three other students. They talked amongst themselves about how students were a "pain" and what "menial tasks they could allocate us "to get us out of their hair" and "off their backs". / Sitting there on day one of placement with the other students I felt inferior and alienated from the nursing team. / The behaviours of the nurses continued the next day. One of the other students approached our facilitator. Yes the word 'bullying' was used. The facilitator decided to move all of us to another ward. I found this equally upsetting as whilst it may not be our responsibility to change behaviours it is our responsibility to communicate to others how upsetting their behaviour is. I know as a responsible adult we must not avoid these situations. / I have spent a lot of time reflecting on this incident and how disappointed I felt for not talking to the staff about how they made me feel. I realise now this was conflict and next time this happens I will implement the conflict resolution skills I have learnt and approach the nurse who I perceived to be the instigator. Conflict can be resolved by acting early, before people get really hurt, personally and professionally. I will ask my facilitator to support me but in this instance the facilitator did not appear to want to approach these staff. / If that happens again I know I have the strength and knowledge to initiate a conversation on my own, and I will do just that!

Shaking off stigma

The second theme identified was shaking off stigma and explains participants' experiences of reflecting supervising registered nurses' negative behaviours.

On my first placement the RN [Registered Nurse] I worked with was very vocal about several things: University is not the place to train nursing students! Students need to learn the craft by starting at the bottom and cleaning! I cleaned everything on that placement. Beds, office desks, rubbish bins, equipment ... everything. / I had noticed she spoke very slowly to me all the time. I didn't understand why until one day she questioned me about my ethnicity. She accused me of not understanding English and implied I could not be trusted to follow instructions, let alone be a nurse. / Thankfully there was Friday RN. Friday RN knew what sort of experience I was having. She instructed me on the first day we worked together, "every Friday I work, we will have to catch you up on things". I was so grateful. / Why didn't I do something about my situation with the other preceptor you ask? I felt I couldn't. She was the manager and this was my first nursing placement. Friday RN never brought the situation up again and this led me to believe the situation was hopeless! / I don't know how but I did persevere with that placement and I have been told I should be proud of myself for being resilient. I do congratulate myself for not giving up and proving this preceptor wrong. If I had withdrawn from the course, as I wanted to at the time, I would have missed out on so many valuable learning experiences and fantastic facilitators who I met along the way and who have helped me achieve my goal of being a RN.

Triumph over adversity

Many blogs also contained narratives that displayed resilience, and reflection on bouncing back after adverse experiences.

It was the 5th week of my final 6-week clinical placement in my undergraduate nursing degree when I found the courage to ask for feedback from my supervising registered nurse. Her response "You need to work on your communication skills, non-verbal in particular"! /She went on to tell me, I don't smile. I present as if disinterested. I often stand with my arms crossed and look away when people are talking to me. I don't ask questions. Preceptors were nervous around me. My buddy nurse told me staff concluded they were very dubious about my knowledge level and apparent lack of interest, most did not want to work with me. This explained why I had felt judged and alienated. I had felt like this on other placements too. I was devastated and burst into tears. I never told her how alienated I felt! / My buddy not only took the time to ask me why I don't ask questions but also listened to and accepted my reasons. I was brought up in a military family where orders were given and jobs expected to be executed, precisely and with no error, no time wasted, and few questions were permitted. This communication style wasn't going to cut it as an RN. In truth I admitted to my buddy I was often unsure of what I was doing but rather than clarifying I was driven to achieve my duties first. I was not practising safely. I withdrew from my course the following week. / I did return a year later and now I am on track to a triumphant graduation.

Findings: student engagement

The second component of the research sought to investigate the students' satisfaction with this blog-based activity. Participating students were asked to comment on the usefulness or otherwise of blogging. Typical comments included:

I enjoyed doing the blogs as it forced me to reflect on some very important issues
the blogs helped me reflect on the three years that I have studied, highlighting how far I have come

Without reflection, challenges faced in the workplace may not be used as valuable lessons to contribute to improved nursing practice.

A minority response was negative:

I don't feel [blogs] supported my learning. I would have preferred maybe a reflection on the entire degree.

As these excerpts demonstrate, for most students blogging provided a welcome outlet to reflect on experiences from clinical placement, to allow them to identify personal strengths and weaknesses, and to develop strategies to assist in their imminent transition from student to the workplace.

This approach had limitations. Data from blogs was analysed by three researchers. Ideally, one researcher analysing data offers more consistency, however, given the copious blogs produced from a student class size of over 200, it was the most feasible way of analysing the data. Another limitation is that students knew that they were being assessed on this blog, and may have provided comments they thought would be pleasing to the assessors. Although this may be the case, findings in this study were consistent with the published literature about nursing students' clinical placement experiences.

Discussion

Many students used the blogs to disclose stressful experiences, particularly regarding feeling alienated in the clinical workplace. Research has reported that this is not an uncommon experience with reports that the frequently experienced sense of not belonging and feeling alienated on clinical placements impacts negatively on these students and their learning (Levett-Jones et al. 2009; Patrick et al. 2008). Themes that were identified in this study – 'Shaking off stigma' and 'Responding to disappointment' – clearly identified that students experienced alienation, but that the experience of working with just one supportive mentor enabled positive learning to occur in this situation. In this case, we found that students required support with the difficult and unfamiliar experiences they were undergoing, but blogging provided an opportunity for them to reflect and learn from their experiences in the clinical setting. Other researchers have also noted this benefit of blogging. Schön has long argued that reflection on practice leads to self-awareness about triggers for stress and ways to avoid them (1991), while Miller and Williams explain the benefits of catharsis in writing a blog (2013). Our study found that blogs provided an effective outlet for the discussion of stressful

situations, and the reflective framework allowed students to learn from their ordeals, thus creating a positive learning experience from a difficult situation. Many participants' blogs included comments about the positive value of reflection.

Utilising the blogs to reflect also provided the students with an avenue for identifying personal strengths and weaknesses. Hartwig found that although identifying strengths and weaknesses is an essential tool for professional development, it is a skill lacking in new graduates (2015). The way in which the blogging task was structured within the assessment item meant that students had to identify challenges they had experienced whilst on clinical placement, and then relate these to potential challenges they foresaw in their impending transition into the profession. Blogging may have assisted participants towards developing critical self-awareness and certainly an acknowledgement of their strengths and weaknesses was to the forefront in the blogs assessed in this project.

Conclusion

Clinical placement experiences are designed to offer nursing students essential real world learning experiences outside the classroom (Patrick et al. 2008) and blogging has been recommended as another strategy to promote learning beyond the classroom (Suchy 2013). These students' stories of admitting experiencing failure, being disappointed in their decision making of how they felt in sub-optimal situations like being discriminated against were common. Blogging assisted such students to reflect on ways in which they might overcome the challenges they experienced during these clinical placement experiences. The experience of blogging about challenges they had encountered was also cathartic for these students. Many reported that reflecting through blogging assisted them to identify individual strengths and weaknesses they were previously unaware of. Students indicated they welcomed and appreciated the opportunity to explore and identify these personal qualities prior to graduating as professional nurses. Even more encouraging was their ability to be accountable for their weaknesses and postulate strategies for future professional development that will assist them in transitioning into professional practice.

The idea of using blogs to prompt reflection is not new and is not always considered a scholarly activity, however utilising blogging for such assessment in nursing education in relation to the clinical placement does appear to be a fresh approach in higher education. We hope that the findings of this study might resonate with others and assist them to achieve optimal learning in less than ideal work integrated learning environments.

Endnote

1. Ethics approval was obtained from the university Human Research Ethics Committee, H15/09-219

Works cited

- Baker, JR and SM Moore 2011 'Creation and validation of the personal blogging style scale', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking*, 14(6): 379–985
- Blood, R 2000 'Weblogs: a history and perspective', *Rebecca's Pocket*, 7 September: at <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html> (accessed 7 February 2017)
- Braun, V and V Clarke 2006 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77–101
- Brien, DL 2008 'More than just a good nosh up: women and Australian food writing' *TEXT Journal of Writers and Writing Courses*, 12(1): at http://www.textjournal.com.au/ap_Brown_ril08/brien.htm (accessed 17 August 2016)
- Broadbent, M, L Moxham, T Sander, S Walker and T Dwyer 2014 'Supporting Bachelor of Nursing Students within the Clinical Environment: Perceptions of Preceptors', *Nurse Education in Practice*, 14(4): 403–9
- Derrida, ST, MK Kirkpatrick, D Mangum and J Avery 2008 'A review of narrative pedagogy strategies to transform traditional nursing education' *Journal of Nursing Education*, 47(6): 283–86
- Bruns, A 2008 *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: from production to produsage*, Peter Lang, New York
- Derrida, J and A Bass 1978 *Writing and difference*, U of Chicago P, Chicago
- Epp, S 2008 'The value of reflective journaling in undergraduate nursing education: a literature review' *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 45 (9):1379–88
- Gibbs, G 1988 *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*, Geography Discipline Network, Cheltenham
- Gustafsson, C and I Fagerberg 2004 'Reflection, the way to professional development?', *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 13(3): 271–80
- Hartwig, J 2015 'Our transition toolbox: using transition theory, learning styles and personality types as tools to assist the growth and development of transitioning nurses', conference presentation, *Australasian Nurse Educators Conference*, November, Auckland
- Highfield, T 2017 'Histories of blogging', *The Routledge companion to global internet histories*, (eds.) G Goggin and M McLelland, *Routledge*, Abingdon UK: at <<https://books.google.com.au/books?isbn=1317607643>> (accessed 17 March 2017)
- Horton-Deutsch, S, AM McNelis and PO Day 2012 'Developing a reflection-centered curriculum for graduate psychiatric nursing education' *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 26(5): 341–49
- Jackson, D, M Hutchinson, B Everett, J Mannix, K Peters, R Weaver and Y Salamonsen 2011 'Struggling for legitimacy: nursing students' stories of organisational aggression, resilience and resistance' *Nursing Inquiry*, 18(2): 102–10
- Johnson, D 2010 'Teaching with authors' blogs: connections, collaboration, creativity' *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(3):172–80
- Kolb, DA 1984 *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice-Hall, New York
- Levett-Jones, T, J Lathlean, I Higgins and M McMillan 2009 'Staff-student relationships and their impact on nursing students' belongingness and learning' *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(2): 316–24
- Maag, M 2005 'The potential use of blogs in nursing education', *CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 23(1): 16–24
- McCullagh, D and A Broache 2007 'Blogs turn 10: who's the father?', at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20070328171608/>> (accessed 19 May 2016)
- Miller, EA and A Pole 2010 'Diagnosis blog: checking up on health blogs in the blogosphere' *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(8): 1514–19

- Miller, W and RM Williams 2013 'Preservice teachers and blogs: an invitation to extended reflection and conversation' *Art Education*, 66(3): 47–52
- Minian, N, A Noormohamed, R Dragonetti, J Maher, C Lessels, and P Selby 2016 'Blogging to quit smoking: sharing stories from women of childbearing years in Ontario', *Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment* 21 at: <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i>> (accessed March 20, 2017).
- Newton, JM, A Henderson, B Jolly and J Greaves 2015 'A contemporary examination of workplace learning culture: an ethnomethodology study', *Nurse Education Today*, 35(1): 91–6
- Okuda, R and M Fukada 2014 'Changes resulting from reflection dialogues on nursing practice', *Yonago Acta Medica*, 57(1): 15–22
- Patrick, C, D Peach, C Pocknee, F Webb, M Fletcher and G Pretto 2008 *The WIL Report: A National Scoping Study*, QUT, Brisbane: at <<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/44065/1/WIL-Report-grants-project-jan09.pdf>> (accessed 19 May 2016)
- Pinilla S, LT Weckbach, SK Alig, H Bauer, D Noerenberg, K Singer and S Tiedt 2013 'Blogging medical students: a qualitative analysis', *GMS Journal for medical education*, 30(1): at <<http://www.egms.de/static/en/journals/zma/2013-30/zma000852.shtml>>(accessed 17 February 2017)
- Reed, SJ and D Edmunds 2015 'Use of a blog in an undergraduate nursing leadership course', *Nurse Education in Practice*, 15(6): 537–42
- Schmidt, NA and JM Brown 2016 'Service learning in undergraduate nursing education: strategies to facilitate meaningful reflection', *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 32(2): 100–6
- Schön, DA 1991 *The reflective turn: case studies in and on educational practice*, Teachers College P, New York
- Skaalvik, MW, K Normann and N Henriksen 2012 'Nursing homes as learning environments: the impact of professional dialogue', *Nurse Education Today*, 32(4): 412–16
- Suchy, ST 2013 'The social media marketplace in the 'quaint' creative writing classroom: our terms for engagement', *TEXT: Journal of Writers and Writing Courses*, 17(2): at <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct13/suchy.htm#may>> (accessed May 19 2016)
- Tee, S YS Üzar Özçetin and M Russell-Westhead 2016 'Workplace violence experienced by nursing students: a UK survey', *Nurse Education Today*, 41: 30–5
- Yang, Shih-Hsien 2009 'Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice', *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 12(2): 11–21