An exploration into the educational benefits and challenges of a student-led blog for part-time higher education students.

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Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives of part-time students and academics on the uses of blogs within Higher Education. It examines blogging within a socio-cultural framework through the theoretical lens of connectivism (Siemens, 2009, 2018; Downes, 2012). Qualitative methodologies are utilised in the interpretivist paradigm to understand the challenges and benefits of using a blog. This research reports Academic and student views regarding the usefulness of blogging for educational purposes, describes how and why blogs are used and reveals why uptake for some students is limited.

A small-scale research project, using thematic analysis to investigate samples of student blogs and examine interview data, involved the analysis of the contents of 12 students' blogs, followed by interviews with students (n=8) and academics (n=4). This research took place at two universities in the East Midlands, and focussed on two professional education courses during the first term of the first year of study.
The findings identified benefits for students, both in their academic and reflective writing and in synthesising theory with their professional practice. However, the need for appropriate training to combine pedagogical design with collaborative technologies, accessible to both staff and students, emerges as an essential priority. Moreover, it was important to understand the broader context of multiple online platforms and face-to-face communication that students are already accessing. Finally, traditional delivery models within practices and concepts of academic and student roles, i.e., expert and novice, limit the role of the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) to the academic alone, which influences how the blog was viewed, used and valued within student groups.

The findings further developed Garcia et al. (2013) model of connectivism and supports that learning occurs within a fluid and dynamic context online. In this evolved model, the various students can be centrally

active or more passive at different times but still engaged. All the actors have agency in this sense, even when they choose to behave as 'lurkers'. The findings suggest that this new model recognises the vital importance of the expert within the system and argues that, for blogs to achieve maximum benefit, the academic needs to play a central role (at least initially).

Recommendations are contextualised as part of a set of potential responses to the current COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic climate, as blogging could play an important role in a range of online teaching scenarios in higher education (HE).

1 Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Chapter

This thesis is the culmination of the findings of Casserley-Williams (2017; 2018; 2019). These findings indicate student and academic perceptions of using a blog in an educational context. Blogs are one of the most popular forms of social media used in Higher Education (HE) (Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2011; Flanigan and Babchuk, 2015; Al-Qallaf and Al-Mutairi, 2016; Garcia et al. 2019). Whilst some studies have investigated the value of blogs in education (Halic et al. 2010; Hew and Cheung, 2013; Hramiak and Boulton, 2013; Yuan and Powell, 2013; Kennelly and McCormack, 2015; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016; Bonk and Wiley, 2020) this issue is still relatively under-researched in the UK (Garcia et al. 2019).

Distinct from earlier work regarding blogging in HE (Hammond et al. 2009; Albaugh, 2013; Kivunja, 2014; Stoszkowski et al. 2017), the focus of this inquiry is expressly on a part-time professional programme. My study, based on research in two UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI), addresses the uptake and use of blogs for educational purposes for part-time students.

1.2 Researcher's Background

As a Further Education (FE) and HE academic, I have conducted pilot studies over nine years examining the nature of online learning in both published and unpublished studies (Casserley, 2012). I investigated methodological tools and, by placing various interventions online such as blogs, Wikis, and discussion platforms, found improvements in retention, confidence, emotional security, and working with others (ibid, 2012). From my experience, in research and practice, the acceptance of a learning tool is dependent on how it is perceived, understood, and valued for pedagogical purposes. For example, in Casserley (2012) software was available to the practitioners to create student-led groups but were minimally used for this purpose due to their perceived limited value in teaching.

From my vantage point as an academic and a researcher in pedagogy and technology, I have witnessed rapid growth in computers and other technical devices, networks and infrastructure. Increased choice of technologies for learning has precipitated a change in attitudes towards, and hopes for, their potential use in education.

Research into, and experience of, education and pedagogical online strategies have brought me to this topic of investigation. This current research is not necessarily concerned with the online educational tool per se, i.e. the blog, but rather the pedagogical possibilities it offers. For the part-time student, the depth and complexities of student-student, and academic-student online connections, and co-constructed ways of learning, are significant.

1.3 Context: Why Blogs, and Why Part-time Students?

There has been a long line of theoretical perspectives that have revolutionised notions of how learning takes place in education. Constructivist theories, for example, in the 20th century (the 1980s and 1990s) embraced learning as an active process (rather than a passive activity) and highlighted notions of knowledge building and sharing tools to exemplify key concepts and principles (Richardson,1997).

Moving into the 21st century, interests began to shift as technologies evolved, whereby podcasts, wikis, blogging tools, and other forms of social media quickly became popular. These were termed Web 2.0 or collaborative technologies with which the user could now create, exchange, share, evaluate, and add content, not just locate and passively consume it.

As experiences of Web 2.0 technology are more interactive, collaborative and dynamic, so users' interest in online tools for educational purposes have started to be realised (Andersen, 2007). Interactive information sharing and collaboration are characteristics of blogs in education (Hew and Cheung, 2013; Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis, 2017). They can mediate learning opportunities that are collaborative, social, and communicative whilst also providing personalised learning spaces for individual curation (Strong and Hutchinson, 2009; Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013). The blog as a tool has been selected in this study because it can bring an unparalleled amount of pedagogical possibility to an education environment (Siemens, 2005; Halic et al. 2010; Downes, 2012; Yuan and Powell, 2013; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016; Bonk and Wiley, 2020), and, therefore, blogs continue to be a leading platform for scholarly discussion in this context (Hramiak and Boulton, 2013: Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Kuo et al. 2017; Garcia et al. 2019).

This research addresses the educational opportunities of blog use for part-time professional students. Few studies investigate part-time students; for instance, Armstrong (2014) reported on adult returners, while Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) and Kuo et al. (2017) reported on minority and part-time students. Part-time students may not spend time on the university campus. There is a need to look beyond the classroom and physical environment in considering the part-time students' distinct experiences; this is an important debate. As outlined in Howard and Davies (2013) and Butcher (2015), creating flexibility may come from using both a physical and a virtual environment and allowing connections with other peers and university life. In this way, blogging may evolve in purposeful and meaningful ways. However, as also outlined in Reeves and Lin (2020), it is essential to address the problems arising from this use to improve educational opportunities (for any type of student or learning design) with online resources. Therefore, for blogs to be considered a viable tool for educational purposes, it is important to elicit and explore the challenges of their use in pedagogical practices.

The overarching research aim evolved and coalesced thus:

An exploration into the educational benefits and challenges of a student-led blog for part-time higher education students.

1.4 The Challenges in the Implementation of a Blog

> ‘It is extremely difficult for educators and researchers to keep up with all the technological advancements’ (Bonk and Wiley, 2020, p.166).

The use of new technology within HE pedagogic practices do not always align with the ideology behind it (Bruner, 1996; 2004), which can result in superficial use in practice**.** If academics are exposed to new technologies, for example, without adequate understanding of how they can be used in pedagogical practices then the use will be superficial. The potential of social and collaborative technology may not always be realised due to factors such as academics and students’ personally held theories regarding pedagogic practices in HE (Bruner, 1973; 1996; 2004; Shiau and Chau, 2012); individual attitudes and perceptions regarding the usefulness and ease of use (Kim, 2012; Prensky, 2012; Shiau and Chau, 2012); and institutional cultures within the educational establishment (Smidt et al. 2018). Therefore, teaching and learning with online collaborative resources, such as a blog, are not always practised or thought about as a primary method for pedagogical purposes.

There is a sense that educational practices have moved from passive learning paradigms towards more active and constructive processes (Jonassen and Land, 2012). From an institutional perspective, before the global pandemic in 2020, the two participating universities were re-imagining pedagogical strategies with elements of online learning.

Therefore, new pedagogical patterns were emerging that included online resources. However, the traditional lecture format is still widely adopted in HE and this may reduce the amount and value of active online interaction, collaboration and co-constructed learning platforms (Blau et al., 2013).

Despite the recognition of many in the existing literature reporting the positive educational reasons for students to blog (Halic et al. 2010; Boulton and Hramiak, 2012; Hramiak and Boulton, 2013; Hew and Cheung, 2013; Yuan and Powell, 2013; Kennelly and McCormack, 2015; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016; Bonk and Wiley, 2020; Reeves and Lin, 2020), there appears to be a slow uptake of the inclusion across all courses in HEI.

Sim and Hew suggested, as long ago as 2010, that many HE academics were using blogging in the USA and UK alike. However, this has not been exemplified in European conferences such as 'Implications for Higher Education' (2013) and 'The State of Digital Education' (2017), which evidenced that HE institutions are still not moving towards digital education, regardless of the reported benefits of its use.

Acknowledging the professional context, specifically those ideological values and interests surrounding the provision in which this research is undertaken, is an essential part of my conclusions and recommendations. This inquiry may also provide additional support for the current new developments regarding online and distant courses occurring within the two institutions, specifically for the part-time student.

1.5 Finding the Gap; Positioning My Research

This thesis aimed to address two critical gaps in the existing research. That is; part-time students' perceptions, and the underrepresentation of UK-based studies found in the current literature. Despite claims made by Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis (2017) that students' experiences of using a blog are the most investigated topics, Dabbagh and Fake (2017) are among others who claim that, within HE, there is not enough knowledge about how the students perceive digital tools to support learning. Students are very much part of the teaching environment; therefore, students' attitudes and perceptions of digital technology and pedagogical practices might determine their blog use (Kim, 2012: Shiau and Chau, 2012). Therefore, this study intends to generate findings focusing on the views both of students and academics to understand better how to move forward practically using collaborative technologies.

Alongside establishing students' perceptions, my research focused specifically on the part-time student as there is a gap in the literature with regard to part-time students: Although there is extensive research in the use of blogs in HE, researchers such as Deng and Yuen (2013), Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) and more recently Kuo et al. (2017), maintain that too often the voices of part-time students, and their perceptions of learning experiences, are being lost. To date, relatively few studies have focussed on the experience of part-time students.

Not only are part-time students under-represented in blog research but, according to Gonzalez (2009), Callender and Thompson (2018), and Hobble and Bolton (2020), they have needs that differ significantly from their full-time counterparts. Therefore, assuming that the implications of practice are the same for both part-time and full-time students could be problematic. For example, Callender and Thompson found that part-time students have less time on the university campus to interact, collaborate, and co-construct with fellow students and academics. Hobble and Bolton report that part-time students more often have other family commitments to attend alongside their studies.

These studies show that it is not sensible to cluster the part-time and full-time student as they are likely to respond differently to the introduction of collaborative technologies for learning. There is a need to address this gap in the current literature.

My research contributes to this endeavour by focusing specifically on how part-time students use blogging to engage and communicate, beyond the classroom, with other students attending the same course of study. This study adds to the research undertaken in the UK.

It is clear from the existing literature that the subject of blogging in HE draws researchers worldwide. Crucially however, Garcia et al. (2019) assert that UK-based studies are under-represented in publications compared to the USA and other European countries. More work is needed in the UK to represent the unique educational systems and national cultural differences that might influence the research findings.

The study also attends to another gap in current research as identified in the work of Friesen and Lowe (2012), Bonk and Wiley (2020) and Reeves and Lin (2020). Exploring and reporting on the barriers and challenges to blogging, as distinct from the benefits in an educational context, will support ways to deliver teaching in HE by indicating areas to avoid or be mindful of when including a collaborative blog.

1.6 Introduction to Theory

The theoretical model selected for this inquiry is Connectivism. It is through this lens that the educational benefits of blogging for academic ends are examined. Additionally, conceptual ideas consistent with socio-culturalism illuminate the possible challenges of including a blog and specifically present a critical discourse regarding the implementation of collaborative blogs in higher educational practices.

Connectivism, attributed to Siemens (2005) and Downes (2010), initiated a global discussion in response to their assertion that educators required a new theoretical framework for understanding learning in a digital age. Connectivism integrates principles explored by chaos, network, complexity and self-organisation theories (Siemens, 2018). Conceptually this theory consists of two central ideas: first, personal learning environments should be created and linked to other social networks; secondly, technological environments should support meaningful communications, dialogue and collaboration. From this position, Siemens and Downes provide a lens to consider (or re-consider) the roles and contributions of academics and students in the learning process. This theory offers a contemporary view of learning, takes social and collaborative technology into account and reflects student experiences beyond the classroom walls. Several possibilities of educational benefits from collaborative technologies are presented hereafter.

Socio-cultural conceptual ideas forwarded originally by Vygotsky (1978) help explain the importance of the learning environment and pedagogical practices. However, this inquiry does not draw similarities and differences between connectivism and Vygotskian approaches in how learners internalise the outcomes activated by working together. Instead, this work seeks to explore socio-cultural ideas specific to the environment in which learning takes place, particularly the powerful interplay in the relationship between expert and novice, the more knowledgeable other (MKO), the mediation and acceptance of cultural tools and enculturation (Palincsar, 1998; Hung, 2001; Parks et al. 2013).

Twenty-first century technologies, particularly social technologies, represents a paradigm shift in pedagogical practices (Senjov-Makohon, 2014). This thesis identifies the blog as a cultural tool that can mediate higher-order processes such as reasoning and problem solving. Cultural tools include psychological tools such as language and writing as well as technical tools such as books, media and social software (Vygotsky, 1978). However, critical to this inquiry is how the cultural tools are embraced to represent these realities and make the student's learning relevant, social and personal.

Additionally, enculturation in a socio-cultural framework, and this inquiry, is examined to understand how the acquisition of the norms for behaving in a group, demonstrated in a classroom or teaching environment, may influence whether a cultural tool is accepted for teaching purposes. In other words, socio-cultural perspectives will be employed to focus on questions that connectivists have not addressed. Firstly, how important is the learning environment? Secondly, can established and traditional ways of thinking and behaving within shared communities affect whether blogging will become an integral part of pedagogical HE practices?

1.7 Research Design

A small-scale case-study approach was adopted to answer the research questions (Table 1, page 10). Firstly, I explored student use of blogs by applying qualitative methodologies to their content and audio-record data from semi-structured interviews about student interpretations of blog use. From these, I described and interpreted recurring patterns and variations. Secondly, I explored the views of academics regarding blog use for educational purposes and analysed the differences and similarities compared with students' experiences. Finally, I examined how different roles, co-constructed by the academic and student, influence how the blog is perceived, understood, and utilised in provision and practice.

To address the overarching aim: *"an exploration into the educational benefits and challenges of a student-led blog for part-time higher education students."* four research questions evolved (Table 1, page 10). From this starting position, the inquiry takes a relativist ontological position as outlined by Snape and Spencer (2003), in which social reality does not exist independently of human understanding and interpretations. The research's ontological underpinnings require an interpretivist framework and draw on social constructivism, as outlined by Creswell (2014), creating a study that reflects the complexity of the researched phenomena.

The research does not attempt to atomise phenomena into variables, which can be restrictive in finding the dynamic relationships between the many parts (Cohen et al. 2013). Instead, this inquiry seeks to understand the social world in terms of meanings formed by participants through their interactions with it. Creswell (2014) urges researchers to 'look for the complexities of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas' (p.9). Social constructivism holds that:

> 'Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences.' (Creswell, 2014, p.9)

Analysing how students conceptualise blogging and construct meanings through their experiences has shaped the research.

Table 1 Research Questions

What kind of activity (if any) takes place on student blogs: What is shared, how, and why, within a collaborative online environment?
What are the reported educational benefits of a student blog for part-time courses: student and academic perspectives?
What are the reported challenges in the implementation of a blog for educational purposes in higher education provision and practices: student and academic perspectives?
How are students and academics understanding their roles within a collaborative online environment.

1.8 Summary

This study highlights the complexities of student blog use in HE. Within the existing literature the part-time student is under-represented when compared to their full-time counterparts and therefore this inquiry aims to address this gap. Understanding how blogging can take place within existing ideologies and practices may inform whether or not blogs can deliver on the optimistic claims reported in the literature.

The value of my research derives from the intention to explore students' use of, and meanings formed from, their blogs. The research is situated explicitly within part-time professional courses. Therefore, my findings can contribute to developing appropriate and effective pedagogical practices and raise awareness of why and how blogs can function in HE practices for these specific courses.

This inquiry draws on the philosophies of both connectivism and social culturalism to provide a theoretical base from which to consider both the social and cultural impact of the use of blogs in HE provision, and the benefits that collaborative technologies have for co-created, part-time student-led learning opportunities.

Finally, due to the global pandemic in 2020, we have entered a new age of education that no can no longer rely on face-face connections and communication between academics and students (Bonk and Wiley, 2020). Blogs can offer unique opportunities for connecting in this new era of online instruction (Kamenetz, 2020) therefore, the results from this study could be further reaching than was initially envisaged. This research could illuminate practices for a broader platform of courses involving the full-time students and adult-returning to education, particularly in the ways student-student and student-academic communicate and collaborate online.

2 Chapter Two – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter presents a synthesis of the literature reviewed on topics relevant to the core aim of the inquiry: an exploration of the educational benefits and challenges encountered when embedding a student-led blog in part-time HE courses. It is important to note that not all literature in the field of collaborative technology in education is relevant to this inquiry, such as research in schools. Although there is a limited research base both in the UK (Garcia et al. 2019) and with part-time students (Kuo et al. 2017), this inquiry draws upon the wider cross-cultural research in higher educational practices. It is, therefore, imperative to start this chapter with a rationale regarding the inclusion and exclusion of literature used. This chapter then draws attention to part-time students to provide a context for all other conceptual discussions.

Two key theoretical frameworks relevant to the inquiry are then reviewed. The principles of connectivism (Siemens, 2008a; 2008b; 2009; Downes, 2010) which provided context (and possibilities) for learning using social and collaborative technologies. Juxtaposed with this was an exploration of the challenges and barriers that could surface when embedding collaborative technologies with HE practice, which is explored primarily through the socio-cultural framework originally put forth by Vygotsky (1978). Building on the theoretical discussions, this review turns to empirical research to further examine the appropriateness of blog types and the educational benefits and challenges of blog use in higher educational part-time courses.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion of Literature

Hart (2001) identifies the need to read research systematically and without prejudice. However, this can be difficult in practice as previous social constructs influence all individuals. For example, academics internalise philosophies and therefore construct ideas about pedagogical practices, which may lead to bias in the literature searches. Therefore, cognizant of this, and to reduce bias and improve transparency, it is important to clarify the scope of the included literature and demonstrate rigour in selecting empirical sources.

It is important to acknowledge that researchers from different subject disciplines may also frame their views of the world differently. Hart (2001) cautions us to ensure that we, as researchers, respect and acknowledge that our approach to research is not universally shared, so before starting a literature review, it is valuable to reflect that all research originates from some view of reality and can add value to an inquiry. Therefore, the literature search concerns both interpretive and positivist studies in relation to the aim of my inquiry and does not select based on methodological position.

As there are fewer UK studies on the use of collaborative technologies in HE (Kop and Hill 2008), much of the existing literature is international. However, UK work will be used where relevant to emphasise global similarities.

As blogs are the focus of this inquiry no direct analysis is made of more instant social media (Web 2.0 technology) such as Facebook™ or Yammer™. However, some of the research reviewed includes students' observations about differences between blogs and Facebook™ (Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Deng and Yuen, 2012; Garcia et al. 2015). Therefore, other social networking activities will feature indirectly.

The sources used include books, Locate, ERIC, the British Library, PyschInfo, Ed Abstract, Google Scholar, Blackwell Synergy, Athens, professional and theoretical blog posts, and websites with online repositories of journals. As technology is constantly advancing, the literature included is, as far as possible, up-to-date and, if appropriate, more recent reports are favoured. For instance, theoretical papers are essential to provide a conceptual base when reviewing connectivist frameworks or socio-cultural perspectives. Earlier research, such as Hramiak (2007), offer some insight into the development of views and concepts about technologies in education and provide further context regarding collaborative technologies in part-time HE courses in the UK.

When using the repositories mentioned above, the availability of sources that specifically consider part-time students is limited. Therefore, evidence is drawn from the larger body of research that examines blogging with full-time HE students and academics. In order to present a more reliable view of the literature, differences between full-time and part-time students, where appropriate, are identified to the reader if relevant to the context and research questions.

2.3 Part-time Students

Part-time students appear to face different challenges with matters of engagement from those of their full-time equivalents. For example, one idea discussed in 2009 by Gonzalez was that educational institutions need to close the connection gap and find ways to facilitate part-time members in both instructional support and professional development in the same ways as their full-time peers. This debate is still current in UK Further Education (FE) and HE institutions, as seen in the more recent publication of Callender and Thompson (2018), who conclude that reform to the British education systems is needed. Using student records, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, and Education and Skills

Funding Agency Individualised Learning Records (ILR), Callender and Thompson 2018, p.2 assert:

> '… (HE) too often focuses on young, full-time undergraduates, and another sector of British higher education is frequently forgotten; part-time study.'

Following this discussion, Butcher (2015) reported on FE and HE part-time students studying in the UK, using a survey design (n=443) and a telephone interview (n=22), and made two main recommendations for part-time provision: policymakers need to prioritise part-time HE as an attractive choice, and institutions need to be aware of the flexibility that part-time students require and to;

> '... adopt a customer focus to ensure engagement with learners who currently feel isolated and disengaged from a student community.' (p.8)

Butcher claimed that many students reported not having a student identity which was elaborated by them not 'feeling part of a student community' (p.8). Similar reports by Howard and Davies (2013) suggest this is particularly important for the returning part-time students, claiming that social identity is not as strong as for those taking a traditional route. Therefore, exploring what effect the introduction of blogs has on part-time students building a community could provide valuable insight into engagement and reducing isolation.

Similar research regarding the limited attention given to the part-time student is found in Laird and Cruce in 2009, reporting in the United States of America (USA). Their large-scale survey of part-time students (n= 55,915) from 224HE institutions found that classroom practices for part-time students can and need to shift (response rates among students ranged from 10% to 65%, with a mean response rate of 34%).

Students need a platform to meet and come together as a community to build relationships with one another 'whether a physical one or a technology-mediated one' (pg. 309). More recently, Zahl, (2015) used a case study design to report on ten part-time PhD (research-based) students, in the USA, from two departments (four from Nursing and six from Education), on the impact of community. In this study, connection with their peers was considered an extremely important aspect of the program and concluded that academic departments should improve peer mentoring programs, foster community development, and draw on both the physical and online platforms available. These studies indicate that the part-time student has a significant presence in HE at all levels. However, the shortage of empirical research relating to part-time students and the institutions they attend is problematic Laird and Cruce, 2009; Howard and Davies, 2013; Butcher, 2015; Zahl, 2015).

Certainly, the literature regarding blog use and part-time students in the UK (Garcia et al. 2019) and worldwide (Kuo et al. 2017) is limited. However, the literature on this area has reported that having a virtual learning environment (VLE), with discussion tools, provides many beneficial qualities that include the student's emotional needs. Hramiak (2010), for instance, reported how the VLE reduced isolation for trainee teachers whilst away from the university.

Armstrong’s (2014) study of part-time students found that engagement amongst students did occur more outside of teaching hours, predominantly for personal, emotional concerns, or on the difficulties they faced as students. In addition, blogs and online discussion have been identified as particularly important to minority students, as well as part-time students, to improve communication skills and relationship building with fellow students (Sullivan and Freishtat 2013; Kuo et al. 2017).

These studies indicate that a certain level of peer-peer support occurred and that connecting with one another is important when they undertake study periods away from the university. However, the literature concerning part-time students using a blog platform to connect is small compared to the literature for full-time students. Therefore, my thesis will add to the existing sources within the UK and, by doing so, will address this gap

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This inquiry focussed on the potential for blogging in the context of the learning experience. I wanted to understand how and why students responded to a student-led blog, and to investigate the benefits and challenges to blog use in education.

A number of theoretical perspectives were revised as potential theoretical frameworks for this inquiry. These included the seminal theories of Wenger and Piaget. The principles of Wenger's typology of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998a) were reviewed, specifically in terms of collaboration and forming a sense of community which may evolve using a blog. Piaget's theory of constructivism (Bodner, 1986), the notion of operational stages, and the construction of knowledge were initially interesting to examine for this inquiry, specifically how online learning can move students from concrete to formal operational stages. However, both were eventually excluded as traditional learning theories have limitations in reflecting on learning in the current digital environment (Siemens, 2006).

The theory of connectivism was the central theoretical perspective selected. Connectivism offers a contemporary view of learning, takes social and collaborative technology into account and reflects student experiences beyond the classroom walls. This inquiry was interested in how blogs relate to the realities set out by connectivism and make the student's learning relevant, social and personal.

Connectivism (Siemens, 2018; Downes, 2010) theorised learning with an explicit focus on the use of Web 2.0 technology. Siemens (2018) not only refers to blogs as a tool to contribute to new avenues of learning but emphasises how other internet technologies such as web browsers, search engines, wikis, social networks and online discussion forums can assist in the acquisition of knowledge and learning. Consequently, learning does not simply happen within the individual but is co-created through connectivity within and across networks (Downes, 2010). Unlike the principles of the traditional learning theories, the driving force of connectivism is the understanding that decisions regarding learning provisions are contingent on the rapidly altering foundations of knowledge (due to internet technology) and that new information is continually acquired (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2014). Therefore, one of the benefits of using collaborative technology, adopting a connectivist framework, is that individuals can learn (from various sources) to distinguish between important and unimportant information (Siemens, 2005). This positioning on how knowledge is shared suggests that a change to the academic and student roles in pedagogical practices is needed.

Socio-cultural perspectives were selected to focus on questions that connectivists have not addressed, which pertain to the importance of the learning environment and traditional ways of thinking within pedagogical HE practices (Vygotsky, 1978). This is a traditional theory (similar to Wenger and Piaget), developed without the notion of technology, so it does have limitations in reflecting on learning that occurs in today's digital age (Siemens, 2006). Nonetheless, Vygotsky's (1978) (when used appropriately) can lead to a culture of social learning by empowering students through collaboration and the role of the 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO).

2.4.1 Connectivism

According to Downes (2010), teaching and learning through Web 2.0 technologies have been affected in two ways: Firstly, a larger portion of resources can be shared and distributed; therefore, learning with collaborative technologies is less linear than didactic, physical traditional learning spaces more commonly offered in educational institutions (Marhan, 2006). Secondly, there has been growth in the availability of resources found in the networks that provide information, knowledge and understanding (Siemens, 2005). Therefore, knowledge sharing is not the responsibility of a selected elite few such as academics.

According to both Siemens (2006; 2009; 2018) and Downes (2010), it is natural that with the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies, new roles for academics and students will evolve. For example, an academic, in connectivism, is viewed (although not in isolation) more like a facilitator (Siemens, 2018; Garcia et al. 2013; Kizito, 2016) who sustains the online group and provides guidance but is not the sole provider of subject-specific content:

> 'Each learner should be assisted by a facilitator, peers, experts, and non-human support mechanisms.' (Kizito, 2016, p.23)

Within connectivism, it is thought that limiting the direction from academics will allow for co-created learning, whereby students are required to practise skills such as decision-making, self-management and critical reflection (Siemens, 2014).

Siemens (2005) therefore asserts that, as knowledge is distributed by many individuals and 'can reside outside of ourselves' (p.8), the sharing of this is no longer the sole responsibility of the academic. The concepts of 'nodes' and 'networks' further add to this key discussion. Siemens (2005), Strong and Hutchinson (2009) and Downes (2010) define a 'network' as anything through which knowledge flows. Thus, knowledge and cognition circulate across networks of people and 'learning' is seen as a process of connecting, growing, and navigating those networks (Siemens, 2014).

A 'node' is anything connected to another node (which creates the network), and these can be non-human or human resources, such as individuals, organisations, data, feelings, groups, resources, or communities (Downes, 2010; Armatas et al. 2014; Siemens, 2014). Academics, like students, are nodes in their network but should exercise only minimal force on the overall direction of a student learning path. As a result, students benefit as they gain skills in making decisions and judgements regarding which nodes are important and when a network may no longer be useful, for example when building their networks. Therefore, according to connectivists (Brown, 2006; Downes, 2010; Seimens, 2015), knowledge is distributed across the networks.

Thus, learning involves the ability to construct and manage these networks instead of gaining content-specific knowledge per se. Siemens (2006, p. 31) describes learning and knowledge-building using the following fundamental principles:

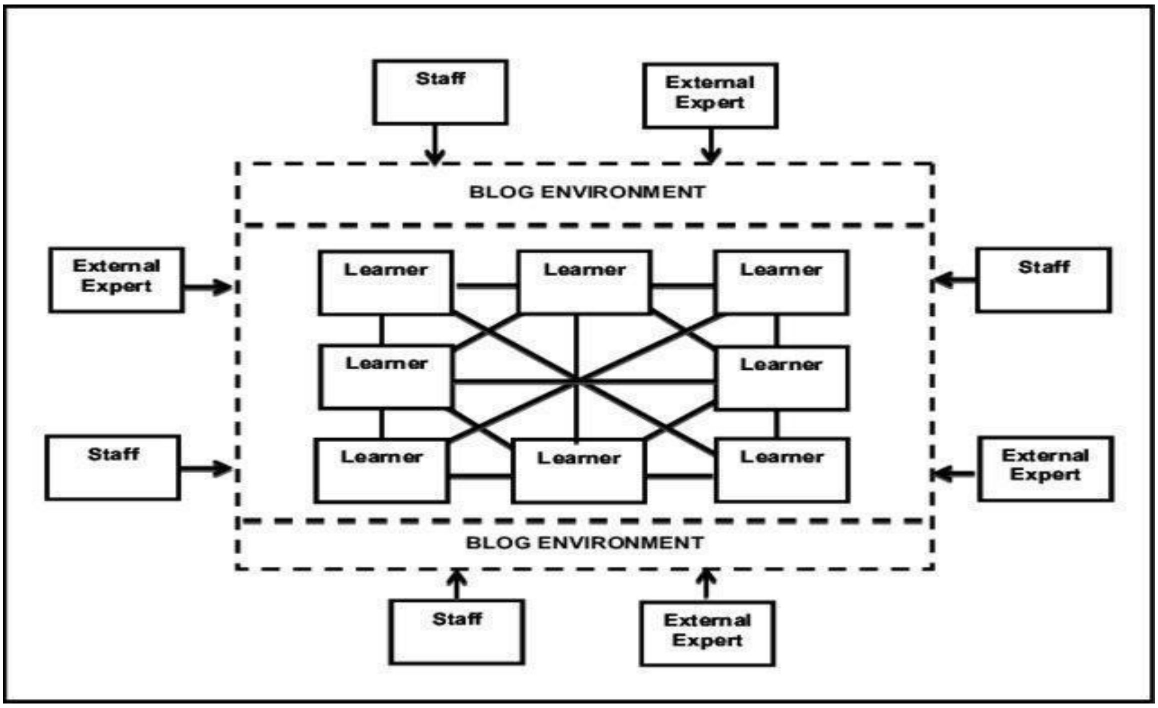
- Learning and knowledge requires diversity of opinions
- Learning is a network-formation process of connecting specialised nodes or information sources
- Learning resides in the networks
- Knowledge may reside in non-human appliances, and learning is enabled by technology
- The capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known
- Learning and knowledge are constant, ongoing processes (not a product or end-state)
- Ability to see connections and recognise patterns and make sense between fields, ideas and concepts is the core skill for individuals today
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities
- Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may

be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision

Through these key principles, Siemens (2009) asserts that connectivism mirrors the reality of the present technological era, specifically Web 2.0 technology, whereby users' experiences are more interactive and dynamic. Thus, individuals can rapidly share information, collaborate and create beyond the classroom without geographical or hierarchical boundaries or constraints.

In Figure 1 (più sotto) Garcia et al. (2013, p. 256) illustrate how a connectivist approach might be seen in HE practices, whereby staff and experts may have input to the community but are not automatically involved in the learning environment.

Figure 1 Connectivist Educational Blog Model



Garcia et al., amongst others (Garcia et al. 2014; Kumi-Yeboah, 2019; Bonk and Wiley, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020), view blogs as providing possibilities for student-student and student-academic collaboration whilst additionally illustrating how the learning environment in HE can be extended to include further expert support. When relating this to part-time professional courses, blogs can offer unique opportunities for contacting special guests and experts globally, (Figure 1, page 21). However, this may require a change in roles and changes to pedagogical practices. According to Bruner (1996; 2004), a cognitive learning theorist, this modification is not simple, especially if ingrained pedagogical practices are deeply embedded, as often seen in HE.

Indeed, from a Vygotskian perspective, students and academics must perceive this learning tool (blog) as an integral part of their course, and enculture a value for student-led practices, before reaching any suggested educational benefit.

In traditional learning environments, as in HE, where lecture-based (didactic) instructional practices prevail, questions arise regarding how to implement connectivist models. Yusof et al. (2013) reviewed studies of Web 2.0 tools, practices, and technologies that support student learning within educational environments and institutional practices, concluding that Web-based learning requires a technological shift in practice and a conceptual change in all stakeholders. Yusof et al. found that if institutions manage this conceptual shift and integrate the use of Web 2.0 tools, they will not only foster the idea that learning belongs in the centre of a more social learning process but will, in most cases, have learning benefits for students which are transferable to the actual work task. Similarly, Shrivastava (2018), in a cross-cultural study comprising two universities in two different countries, found that using a connectivist framework provided a rich source of nodes for students to connect to. However, in Shrivastava's study, traditional teaching methods were continued alongside students using connectivity online.

It can be challenging to shift existing teaching and learning ideologies held in formal educational establishments (Bruner, 1996; 2004), especially when dealing with large numbers of students. Guder (2010) and Armstrong (2014) proposed that, even if academics take a connectivist perspective, the role of the academic (teacher) in the network will be determined by students. Therefore, the traditional role of rewarding, measuring and teaching may return to the academic, even if they do not want it.

The difficulties of implementing connectivist frameworks are sometimes seen in studies that have attempted to use them in HE. Garcia et al. (2013) (Figure 1, page 21) found that some student groups (n=33) did not naturally evolve, and staff (n=2) maintained an authoritative role within the learning process. However, Garcia et al. (2014), using a survey and interview method (n= 33 students and n=2 staff), concluded that, although academics still maintained an authoritative role within the learning process, a willingness to adopt blogging within the teaching process was important and different roles taken using a connectivist model might need to be further practised by teaching staff. Therefore, although conceptually connectivism highlights the benefits and overall importance of using online social and collaborative resources for learning in the networks, fully utilising a connectivist model for HE practices may be difficult, as traditional structures, practices and philosophies (student and academic) persist.

With or without the use of connectivist frameworks, engaging with collaborative technology is still being reported (Bonk and Wiley, 2020) as having limited application in HE practices. Bonk and Wiley have conducted a meta-analysis, systematically reviewing articles in the field of emerging technologies in HE and highlight concerns over the limited application of technologies in pedagogical practices. Bonk and Wiley conclude that changes in HE practices are needed to de-emphasise instructional strategies for content delivery and to promote online experiential and community-based learning. To achieve this, we may look to other models and frameworks that have evolved over the years, with the intention to offer design support with the use of Web 2.0 technologies; for instance, Moore’s (1989) and Anderson’s (2003) models of learner interactions in distant learning environments, and Chen’s (2004) hierarchical models of instructions interaction.

Wang et al.’s (2014) framework for creating and analysing interaction and cognitive engagement in a connectivist learning context, as shown in Figure 2 (below), is considered here to be the most recent model consistent with the concepts of connectivism. In this framework, learning takes form:

> ‘Between other humans and network resources and is critical for connection building and network formation.’ (Wang et al. 2014, p.122)

Figure 2 Four Levels of Interaction

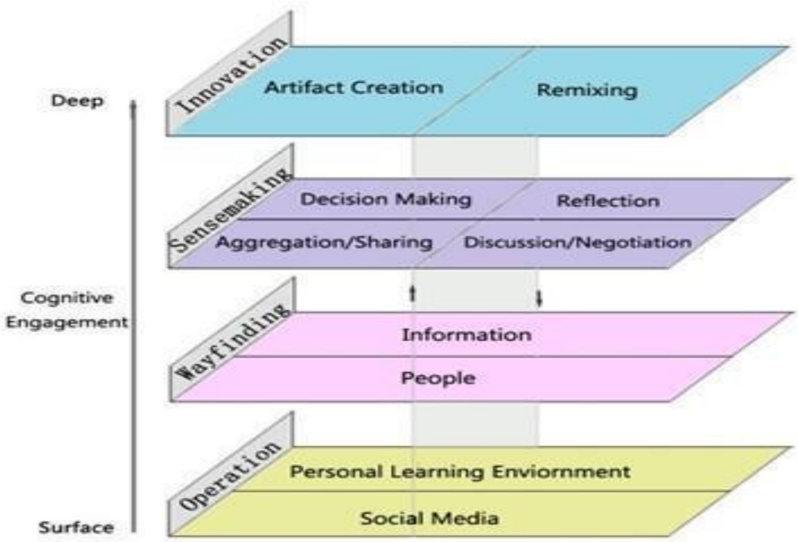


Figure 4. Framework for interaction and cognitive engagement in connectivist learning.

(Wang et al. 2014, p. 131)

It is clear that the operation phase is the surface learning that may build interactive spaces or a personal learning environment (network) with:

> ‘Different technologies for connecting with different knowledge and opportunities. Compared to traditional online learning in learning management systems, personal learning environments’ construction is much more open, interactive, controlled by individual learners, and has widespread social and networking connection capabilities.’ (Wang et al. 2014, p. 131)

The wayfinding phase involves students learning to navigate the networking landscape by sorting and identifying the right resources. This is perhaps most relevant to the connectivists' learning context as, according to Wang et al., this is where the interactions start to develop. Students, in this stage, make choices and decisions in their own personalised learning environment. Personal choices and self-management begin to develop further in the third phase, sensemaking, whereby student-group interactions occur at a deeper level. This is followed by the highest level, the innovation phase, in which interaction and engagement occur, and students can create and modify artefacts and engage more deeply with others.

Using frameworks such as that provided by Wang et al. (2014) can promote the use of Web 2.0 technologies through offering educational design support for technology-supported environments (Siemens, 2018; Kizito, 2016). However, upon entry to an HEI, students may be at different stages in terms of existing knowledge, specifically in their competencies in using technology.

Concepts that are important for consideration in any design with the inclusion of Web 2.0 technology include those regarding self-efficacy put forth by Bandura (2004) in his social learning theory, online presence as highlighted by Armstrong (2014), and competencies in using Web 2.0 technologies for educational purposes as outlined by Waldeck and Dougherty (2012) (see discussion later in this chapter). In addition, socio-economic differences may also have some impact in that not all students have internet access. According to Yapici (2016), this is an important factor for applications of blended learning. Such differences and diversities found amongst student groups can be extensive. They would need careful consideration when using pedagogical frameworks, including Web 2.0 technologies and, specifically, connectivist models, which rely on online learning environments and design.

At the very least, frameworks (Wang et al. 2014) and models of practices (Garcia et al. 2013; 2014) offer learning situations that support interaction and cognitive engagement online. Simply providing personal learning environments and networks seems a starting point in applying blogs to HE practices and provision, which Wang et al. identify as the operation phase. According to the stages illustrated in Figure 2 (page 24), pedagogical strategies and provisions that move students to higher levels of online engagement can evolve over a period. In HE this could be lines of study that provide a foundation for learning, whereby assessment is based purely on how students make connections, self-manage, and self-reflect in an online community; the objective being to improve the foundations for learning, that is, study skills. Lines of study positioned during the beginning stages of a degree programme may be especially important for students that have been away from academia for an extended period of time, often seen in part-time professional courses delivered in HEI (Kuo et al. 2017). Although Duarte's (2015) study was based on full-time marketing students (undergraduate n=127 and graduate n=8), their blogs were reported as beneficial to support traditional teaching activities and to foster a sense of community.

This research indicates that blogging can be successful alongside conventional teaching methods and strategies and does not necessarily rely upon the full implementation of connectivist frameworks. In this respect, Wang et al.'s model can be used flexibly to support online learning alongside other more formal traditional pedagogical arrangements.

Using such models for online spaces allows for further outside connections with experts and professionals in a specific field of study; this is particularly important for part-time professional courses (Kuo et al. 2017). Therefore, Wang et al.'s model may serve to transition institutions away from reliance on traditional online platforms, such as course and learning management systems, that do not capitalise on the pedagogical benefits of social media. Wang et al.'s framework might provide a starting point for part-time students to manage and maintain a learning space that facilitates their learning activities and connections to peers.

Prensky (2005), who supports the effective use of technology and connectivism, agrees that models for learning should represent the multi-layered reality of the social world which now includes Web 2.0 technology. Prensky, an advocate of revitalising education through the effective use of technology and connectivist practices, explains that students are equipped with technologies such as cell phones, laptops, and iPods that are constantly in touch with change in a technological world, and spontaneous exchanges of knowledge.

Prensky (2001; 2005) claims that academics who teach with an old-fashioned 'chalk and talk' approach will have difficulty reaching these students. He questions existing political ideas of learning that rely on traditional ways of delivering a knowledge-based curriculum, specifically in schools. Environments that do not reflect real-world experiences will not meet the needs of today's students and will have difficulties engaging students in learning.

Students (of all ages) might demonstrate excellent ordinary use of technology, but this may not be easily transferred, wanted or realised in an educational context. However, although this might be the case for the younger students, not everyone studying (or teaching) in HE is born into the digital world and socialised into collaborative technologies. Moreover, from a Vygotskian (1978) perspective, learning is situated and culturally driven.

Siemens (2018), like Downes (2014), nonetheless claims that learning is a networked phenomenon, moulded and sustained by technology and socialisation. In other words, connectivism highlights that social software tools, such as blogs, have become more than simply a conduit for sense-making. It is the online connections formed with others and the acquisition of skills such as online navigation, decision-making, and self-management, which benefit students. Connection itself may be more valuable than the specific information flowing through the network (Siemens and Tittenberger, 2009).

In light of connectivist principles as outlined by Siemens (2006), academics are strongly positioned to assist each student in building relevant connections in learning networks whilst directing students to appropriate resources and other experts in their field, nationally and internationally.

In their evidence-based review, Reeves and Lin (2020) complain the research we need is not being undertaken. Future research must represent not only the benefits of using collaborative technologies but also highlight the challenges and difficulties of this. Accepting one theoretical perspective to guide pedagogical practices may no longer be efficient, especially in 2020 in this current 'stay at home' climate. Although the work of Siemens (2009) and Downes (2010) offers a perspective of learning with the inclusion of emerging learning technologies, there is little discussion regarding engagement and participation or the social and cultural factors that may influence whether students will, in the first instance, manage the network and interact and collaborate.

The challenges of using only this theory to guide practices were highlighted in 2006 by Verhagen, who challenged Siemens' (2009) original article asserting that there are not sufficient links to how this theory might function in practice with existing ingrained practices. These arguments persist, as seen in more recent papers (AlDahdouh, 2017; Ament and Edwards, 2018), which question how this theory can work in practice, specifically the changes to the role of the instructor and management of learning networks.

Bell (2011), Clarà and Barberà (2014), and Homanova et al. (2018) in elementary schools, argue that connectivism should be seen as an extension of existing theories, as there are insufficient qualitative studies completed to inform its development as a theory, specifically for practical use. Although there are now studies that have attempted to use connectivist models in HE design (Garcia et al. 2013; 2014; Armatas et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2014; Kizito, 2016), the implementation of this learning theory is still problematic.

2.4.2 Socio-cultural perspective

In order to explore the practicalities and challenges of blogging in a formal educational environment, this literature review now turns to the theoretical learning perspective of socio-culturalism, set out initially by Vygotsky (1978). Others have adapted the basic tenet of Vygotsky's (1978) original framework for socio-culturalism, such as Cole and Wertsch (2001), Engeström (2001) and Demiraslan and Usluel (2008), in their discussions regarding activity theory. However, this research starts from a key commitment of Vygotskian theory which attempts to explain how motivational goals, values, standards, and interests are socially constructed.

All learning takes place in a socio-cultural context and is mediated through adults and by cultural tools. This means that, to build a pedagogical framework with which to enhance online collaborative learning experiences through the use of a blog tool, there is a need to view pedagogical practices and values that already exist.

Connectivism and socio-culturalism appear similar in that both conceptually frame learning as situated and co-constructed or created. As such, they require the empowerment of students to actively participate in their own learning process. Furthermore, ideas originally presented by Vygotsky (1978) regarding the '*more knowledgeable other'* (similar to ideas underpinning connectivism) questions the acquisition of new knowledge:

How is knowledge shared?

Where is knowledge situated?

Who holds the knowledge?

The MKO can present as a more experienced peer (Murphy et al. 2015), attending the same or a different course, thus proposing, like connectivists Downes (2010) and Siemens (2009), that gaining knowledge is a multi-dimensional activity and is co-constructed by novice and expert. Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) asserts, like connectivism (Siemens, 2018; Downes, 2010), that learning is not an individualistic activity but an actionable process of gaining knowledge through connecting with others.

Socio-cultural theory place the social environment at the centre of learning. Cole and Wertsch, (2001, p 4) claim that, because learning is mediated, the 'development of the mind without attending to the social environment is impossible'. Vygotsky proposed that, in the learning process, experts use tools to mediate learning. However, learning is not a direct result of activity, but it is indirect; other people must interact with the learner and use mediatory tools to facilitate the learning process (Hung, 2001). Development occurs in collaborative dialogues situated within the framework of the more knowledgeable other (expert and novice), whereby the less knowledgeable member learns the ways of thinking and behaviour in the shared community. Knowledge is individually constructed and socially mediated; in other words, students internalise the outcomes activated by working together (Verenikina, 2010). This inquiry employs a Vygotskian framework and posits that educational benefits are derived from, and are situated in, the teaching environment as mediated by cultural tools.

Unlike connectivism, the work of Vygotsky (1978) further explains how an individual's mental functioning relates to cultural and institutional contexts. According to socio-cultural perspectives, the role of social interactions and activities are culturally organised and play an important role in influencing psychological development and cognition (Hung, 2001; Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Murphy et al. 2015).

Cultural tools (artefacts), such as language used in a teaching environment, matter because they have the potential to aid future independent problem-solving. However, mediated tools are only meaningful in the context of situation; the use of a tool is jointly constructed by the individuals (students and academics) and by the culture in which the individual sits.

Vygotskian perspectives assert that teaching institutions are fundamentally identifiable by their activities, practices and tools used (Murphy et al. 2015). Any attempts to use cultural tools arguably depend on how these tools are valued, perceived and understood in the context of learning (Hung, 2001). What may be considered real and authentic stems from socially constructed beliefs and ways of thinking (Rowlands, 2000).

The importance of students' and academics' perceptions and beliefs regarding the use of blogs for educational purposes is identified in Casserley (2012). Casserley, using a mixed-method case study approach, reported on academic (n=429) uses of technology in further education (FE) provision and practices. This latter study highlights the importance of perceived value for successfully using a cultural tool in practice concluding that the uses of technology by academics depended on their existing beliefs regarding pedagogical practices. Casserley asserts that academics facilitated technology only if this supported their existing teaching paradigm; for example, the white board was the most frequently used by all academics as a conduit to disseminate information and not as an interactive tool (which was also a known function of the whiteboard).

Therefore, when looking at this research, the ideology surrounding teaching practices focuses on the online tool for teaching rather than the pedagogical practices for collaboration and co-constructed learning. Thus, the inclusion of a blog in provision depends on how this is perceived and then interpreted as being helpful or not. This perception is itself dependent upon existing beliefs held regarding how learning happens. The use of a blog (a cultural tool) to facilitate the learning environment, with the aim of improving learning experiences, may be influenced by the academics and students' own interpretations of the social world.

From this position, the reasons for participation and engagement in blogging, or not blogging, can be understood, in part, through socio-culturalism. For a blog to fully take form and evolve as an educational tool, it may be necessary to consider during the implementation stages how a classroom (virtual or physical) is already encultured, that is, the existing collective beliefs and values held by all members of that community.

Socio-culturalists, such as Sivan (1986), Liu and Matthews (2005) and Murphy et al. (2015), assert that students and academics play an important part in creating a classroom culture. If a high value is placed on the outcome of a course, the 'product', such as the summative assessment, may create a belief that this is the only important platform by which knowledge can be shared and measured. Armstrong (2014) asserts this notion of the assessment 'product' being perceived as more important than the process, i.e. that continuous writing, self-managing and collaborating may limit the use of a blog. Again, technology implementation is not a simple matter of providing new instructional resources to be added to traditional methods. The existing socio-cultural environment may affect uptake and may need some consideration if blog use is successful.

From a socio-cultural perspective, knowledge and learning are contextual phenomena, and this contextuality refers to how individuals interpret their social world. This social world is dependent on societal factors and values, historical traditions, organisation and institutional characteristics; what is known as situational cultural norms (Wertsch et al. 1995). Thus, communities of knowledge and practice appear differently in different human contexts.

Using technology for educational purposes is relevant to explore specifically, as HE practices using online resources differ from those undertaken outside HE. Thus, to assume that all students will take on the technology based on the fact they are adept technology users in their everyday life is, according to socio-cultural theory, an insufficient assumption (Murphy et al. 2015).

Although connectivism clearly outlines a set of principles for learning, in order for these to be fully realised, the existing institutional environment and the values held within this regarding knowledge acquisition and learning will need addressing. As Guder (2010) highlights, the assumption that all students have digital technologies for educational purposes and are proficient in engaging with social networking technology, and thus know how to manage their own networks, is an inadequate assumption.

This literature review will now look to the empirical literature in order to explore these theoretical concepts further in a professional context and will offer critical commentary regarding the utilisation of a blog tool for HE practices.

2.5 Instructional and Non-instructional Blog Type

Regarding the educational benefits of a blog, there is consensus among researchers about the importance of having a clear purpose and direction when using a blog in HE (Hramiak 2010; Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Stoszkowski et al. 2017; Smidt et al. 2018). Consequently, debates have arisen around the most appropriate design for maximising the educational benefits of incorporating a blog - specifically the choice between an instructional (academic-led and usually based around set tasks or summative assessments) or non-instructional (student-led without the directive of a summative assessment) blog.

A non-instructional blog is more congruent with connectivist frameworks and offers a level of autonomy to students (Garcia et al. 2013; 2014). In these studies, Garcia et al., assert that although assessment can be part of the blogging experience, it is the process of co-constructing and creating, rather than the product, that is of importance for learning. Stoszkowski and Collins (2014) found in their data analysis of 24 undergraduate Sports Coaching students that, with little technical knowledge, the students expressed ideas and shared opinions in the form of authorised 'posts' and received multiple responses from other students and experts. Similarly, Deed and Edwards (2011) surveyed 400 full-time undergraduate Education students and, through sampling (n=19) blog transcripts, concluded that the student learning community evolved with limited instruction given by the academic.

Blau et al. (2013) report on the educational benefits of a non-instructional blog-type arising from students forming emotional and social connections. Blau et al., observing 56 graduate students studying in a blended learning environment in America, concluded that giving students autonomy over their writing, and their shared learning experiences, encouraged emotional bonds among peers who have an essential role in enhancing their overall achievement.

Similarly, Kuo et al. (2017) used a mixed-methods approach to research adult students returning to education (somewhat analogous to part-time students), suggesting that having fewer prescribed content-driven structures directed by the academic improved the ongoing student dialogue in the networks and assisted some to overcome barriers to learning. However, in the Blau et al. study, one could argue that these students are already well established in blended learning environments and thus are familiar with independent ways of studying with technology.

Connections both on and offline have already formed and may not be solely attributable to the blog. Nonetheless, these studies highlight the importance of student-led communities and conversations. Therefore, blogs can provide social structures that are important to support student interaction and social communities where academics and experts remain outside the blogging environment with minimal direction or prescribed content-driven activities.

On the other hand, although the work of Deed and Edwards (2011), Blau et al. (2013), Stoszkowski and Collins (2014), and Garcia et al. (2013;2014) demonstrate the benefits of non-instructional blogs with little direction, student motivation to use them may decrease. Deng and Yuen (2012) concluded that if blogs do not have some form of assessment gains, guided by the academic, students will not blog.

However, the instructional-type blog does not always rely on a summative assessment but rather direction from the academic on a regular basis. Sullivan and Freishtat's (2013) study of part-time graduate students studying on a hybrid course claims that, for a blog to hold any educational benefit and maintain frequent usage, students need a purpose and reason for using it, such as assessment.

Although this type of instructional blog is not as conceptually consistent with connectivist models for learning, it may offer some gains in practice as outlined by Kilic and Gokdas (2014), whereby academics have more scope to organise and prompt and manage the process of learning for students. Kilic and Gokdas (2014) surveyed 75 pre-service teachers in Turkey to measure the effectiveness of an instructional blog in both building communities and perceived learning. Students were instructed to complete a series of set tasks on the blog in small group communities; however, 78% of the participants stated that they visited the blogs more than was required by the academic, and 68% said that the blog had led them to do additional reading.

Similarly, Shana and Abulibdeh (2015) reported that students' blog usage assisted their understanding of course outcomes and increased their motivation to learn by viewing and reading the continuous commentary made by their peers and the academic. This indicates that a level of peer and academic interaction and collaboration was helpful in this context (based on their mixed-method research study on 199 full-time graduate and undergraduate students' use of a compulsory accredited blog).

Adding more structure to a blog type may not offer as much autonomy but instead provides clear direction and may assist students in achieving course outcomes. However, in their survey of 600 full-time HE students across two countries, UK (n=300) and USA (n=300), Garcia et al. (2019) reported that students' frequent blogging is not dependent upon whether a summative assessment is attached but has more to do with pedagogical positioning. For example, the perceived usefulness of the blog and the students' previous experiences in blog use had a greater impact on the students' overall use.

These findings indicate that the environment in which the blog is placed, and how the tool is valued, will influence the learning process. The purpose (for blogging) articulated to the students might define the tool and therefore affect students' use from the start. Therefore, research such as that of Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) and Garcia et al., (2013; 2019), show that whether purposeful engagement leads to educational benefits depends on how the blog is situated within the students' current learning practices.

Finally, regarding the connections with educational benefits and blog types, Li et al. (2013) reported that there was not much commentary or discussion by the participant and that blog use did not depend on an audience, therefore, the task could have been achieved independently of others. Garcia et al. (2013) further highlighted this point, based on their case study with n=33 full-time HE students and n=2 academic staff, reporting that self-initiated collaboration (amongst the students) was limited and cautioned that student groups might not grow organically. Gracia et al. conclude that students might find collaborative practices challenging because they still view academics as authoritative and so may prefer spaces with a reduced audience.

2.6 Educational Benefits

Using a connectivist paradigm, this inquiry regards educational benefits as skills for learning embedded in students' ability to find current information, filter it and then make decisions based on that information (Siemens, 2008b). Reflection, self-management and decision-making are frequently referred to as having a key role in facilitating the connections necessary for learning to occur (Dunaway, 2011; Siemens, 2008a), thus, in this case, constituting an educational benefit.

This inquiry intends not to measure learning outcomes (the product) that may occur from using a blog but rather to present a critical discussion regarding the benefits of the blogging process in HE practices with part-time students. Therefore, the main areas discussed now regarding the educational benefits are; reflective thinking and writing, and the benefits of forming student communities and collaborative practices.

2.6.1 Reflective thinking

The concept of reflective thinking put forth by Dewey (1939) considers that reflection is a way of thinking about learning that assists individual students in understanding what, how, and why they learn. Reflection in blogging is an active, persistent and constructive process through which students interact with others and critically assess the content, the process and the outcome of their learning (Mewburn and Thomson, 2013; Kennelly and McCormack, 2015; Park, 2015). Therefore, this type of thinking is a key concept in the field of blogging for academic purposes and has important educational benefits for students (Boulton and

Hramiak, 2012; Armstrong, 2014; Duarte, 2015; Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis, 2017).

Two types of reflective thinking generally expected to emerge in a blog are frequently referred to in published sources: reflection on peer contributions and self-reflection (Tang and Lam, 2014). Reflection on student blogging is a form of thinking that can help students access peer ideas and be challenged by them in order to achieve an anticipated outcome (Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis, 2017). In addition, as online communities are built through this type of reflection (Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016), it is considered to promote the social construction of knowledge (Hatzipanagos and Warburton, 2009).

Students can exchange ideas and insights through reflective action by reading and commenting on peer posts (Tang and Lam, 2014). Self-reflection, on the other hand, is an aspect of thinking that can assist students in monitoring and assessing their own learning presence and progression within the blogging community and, in addition, to take on responsibility and make decisions regarding their learning journey and performance (Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis, 2017). These two types of reflective processes are discussed together because, in the case of blogging, each depends on and will influence the other. For example, through peer review on the blog, Armstrong (2014) suggests students may be encouraged to self-reflect on their written work.

When considering how peer review can support individual reflective thinking, Harrison (2011) found that university students in the USA felt the most beneficial quality of this was classroom learning reinforced by extending communication outside of the classroom. Students perceived blogging as an outlet for reflective thought around class topics beyond the weekly classroom meetings. Additionally, through viewing the work of other peers in their group, their own understanding of course-specific topics improved.

More recently, Kennelly and McCormack (2015) found that blogging can be a space for HE students to share ideas, claiming that conversation occurred amongst the student participants and led to deep, meaningful discussions regarding practice. However, Garcia et al. (2012) reported on students' (n=32) effective use of a collaborative group blog for reflection and experiential learning. They found that although the blog encouraged students to reflect on their work, there was limited engagement in reflective dialogue with each other. Interestingly, all the students in this latter study discussed their work through different media, such as Facebook™ and face-to-face meetings. Garcia et al. concluded that the absence of an assessment element may have resulted in this lack of engagement.

However, Olofsson, Lindberg and Hauge (2011) reported on 23 HE students and, similarly to Kennelly and McCormack, found blogs can enhance peer-peer reflections and formative assessment processes, but suggest that academics giving too much support disturbed the self-directed learning strategies among the students, and they caution against over-scaffolding. Furthermore, Dabbagh and Fake (2017) found that the engagement of international HE students with reflective practices depended on how skilled they were in reflective writing, thinking and knowledge management, as this will not naturally and automatically occur simply through using online spaces.

Regarding professional courses and reflective practices, Duarte (2015), reporting on a survey of 135 full-time undergraduate students in Business Sciences, stated the blog was helpful for students to share information regarding their course, which assisted in individual reflective thinking. Duarte concluded that peer-peer reading of the blogs was high; therefore, levels of reflective thinking, through peer review, were said to be encouraged. In this latter study, the blog was useful to students' overall performance; they could compare their work and research with that of others through peer reflection whilst remaining up to date on course topics and with class members.

Similarly, but using qualitative methodology, Boulton and Hramiak (2012) reported on two sets of trainee teachers, thirty-two in total, at different institutions on similar training courses. Findings suggest the blog gave students a community space to reflect on their experiences with others in the group, thus enabling the development of a learning community. However, Hramiak's (2007) initial evaluation and analysis from a longitudinal action research project with full-time Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students revealed five pre-preparatory steps important to take before the separation of placement:

> 'Ensure that trainees have access to the site and are familiar with it.
>
> Building confidences of trainees through collaborative exercises and creating face to face learning community prior to the geographical separation of placement, including the use of peer-to-peer assessment.
>
> Make the site the focus of communications on the course – give them a need for it.
>
> Provide online peer to peer collaboration exercises that can only be done via the VLE.
>
> A critical mass of active participants – pivotal to the success of this type of online learning and participation'. (p. 109).

These earlier findings from Hramiak indicate that the online collaborative learning space has the potential to positively influence students' experience of the course, especially when they feel isolated from each other during school placements. However, the blog will have a low priority, and limited collaboration will take place if the purpose and rationale for blogging are not expressed clearly to the students.

On the aspect of reflective writing, the earlier work of McCormack and Kennelly (2011) on HE students reports that written reflection is more than providing description or regurgitation of the lesson content. They concluded that critical reflection requires the ability to; make sense of emotions, to develop a capacity to view things from another's perspective, to think divergently, and to wrestle with complex or difficult questions. Furthermore, Killeavy and Moloney (2010) analysed the blogs of 28 new professional schoolteachers who shared their blogs with peers and researchers alike, finding that most blogs were descriptive and presented in a diary fashion; the use of blogs for reflection was seen infrequently during the blog period. Therefore, although students can further understand course-specific topics by uploading and sharing ideas, this does not always lead to them practising reflective writing skills (Deng and Yuen, 2013).

From a socio-cultural perspective, when introducing mediated tools for learning into a classroom (in this case, the virtual tool being a blog), an expert or the *more knowledgeable other* (MKO) will need to teach the novice how to use that tool for practice. When learners begin to use the blog in performing activities, it will start to modify and transform the learners' thought processes as they use this new tool to express thinking (Cole & Wertsch, 2001; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Although the academic may not be the sole MKO about blogging, since a more knowledgeable student may take this role, the academic may need guidance and/or prompt reflective practice. For example, successful cases of reflective writing may need to be highlighted and exemplified for all students. Nonetheless, as Moon (2006) points out, reflective writing is a highly specialised skill that needs teaching in academia. Although Moon does not directly discuss blogging or online resources to achieve or encourage the skill of reflection, there is a sense that universities and educational establishments need to focus on this as an important part of academic practice.

Therefore, a blog may have the potential to provide a platform for students to practise such skills, not just in preparation for specific content-driven and assessment-bound learning activities.

In her mixed-method longitudinal study, Armstrong (2014) reported that the undergraduate students, with some variation, used the blog to improve their work by observing the work of others. Armstrong emphasises the benefits of peer-review, asserting that even when students do not comment and remain an observer, this activity still enables levels of self-reflection. For instance, Armstrong reported that the blog was a personal journey for some. Although they never commented or shared on the blog, they were still observing and gaining an understanding of particular topic areas relevant to their course from seeing the work of their peers. Armstrong named these students 'lurkers' who prefer to look at the posts of others without comment. For Armstrong, lurking is still a helpful form of participation as the lurker can still position their understanding with that of others. Consequently, these students can improve their reflective thinking.

Inactive online learners were also positively highlighted in Deng and Yuen's (2010) research regarding blog affordances for self-expression and self-reflection. Using questionnaires and interviews, Deng and Yuen reported on students (n=37) across two classes, studying a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in the English language at a university in Hong Kong and found that the inactive learner was still active in the learning process. This latter research claims that reading another blog is the equivalent of listening and, therefore, a viable form of course participation, thus concluding that it is necessary to acknowledge 'blog-reading' as an important dimension of academic blogs.

The lurker, or inactive learner role, is not always acknowledged as beneficial in a learning process. According to Jayaron and Abidin (2016), based on a quasi-experiment in Malaysia with 56 student participants, for the control group (n=28) involved in asynchronous blog writing, the interaction of all students is important in the acquisition of knowledge, with peer-peer interaction and discussion playing a significant role in their learning. Similarly, Siemens (2018) regards using a connectivist paradigm, being connected without creating and contributing, as a self-focused and self-centred state. Siemens' assertions indicate that all individuals must take part and be of equal value in the process, each part (node) influencing each other.

However, this notion dismisses any reflective gains through taking an observer role and questions the concept of legitimate peripheral participation put forward by some of the leading figures in community building and practices, such as Lave and Wenger (1991). In the context of a community of practice, students can observe the way members of a community interact before fully participating themselves. Lave and Wenger's (1991) examples were based on the apprenticeship model, where a newcomer (the apprentice) was allowed to watch before fully participating. In connectivism, however, it is thought that students should create and share their growing understanding even when members are newcomers in a network or community (Siemens, 2014).

For a blog to be considered in professional HE practices, a clear vision of the purpose for their use is required and an understanding of the differentiated group or cohort. Some, like Siemens, might suggest that for a blog to be a private space is dysfunctional to a learning process. However, others, such as Armstrong (2014), recognise that all students will have different perspectives of how a blog may function in their individual learning practices. Moreover, when considering part-time students, gauging how the blog might function in provision and practice may depend on how confidently the group uses the technology and shares their reflective commentary.

Siemens' (2014) view of lurking also draws attention to the relationships between social presence and personal agency. Hramiak et al. (2009), Deng and Yuen (2012), and Deng et al. (2017b) recognise that some students prefer private, informal spaces to share. For example, Hramiak et al. found that some trainee students would limit access to their blog to only the academic. Hramiak et al. further reveal the need for some student blogs to be made private, recommending that blogs should have a reduced audience, in some cases restricted to just students and academics. However, through providing private blog spaces, opportunities to reflect on a broader cross-section of academics, professionals and students may be missed. Armstrong (2014) proposed that, for some, the fear of someone reading the blog was as acute as the fear of no one reading it and recognised that audience size and status should be accounted for when considering the reflections gained through looking at posts by others.

Deng and Yuen (2013) proposed that for students to feel safe while sharing their reflective accounts and thoughts on a blog, 'flexible blogging' should be provided, which allows for a range of security settings that give students the freedom to select a private or public setting. However, Deed and Edwards (2011), through their analysis of 19 blog scripts from two undergraduate cohorts, stressed the importance of providing the right task for the students; one that encourages not only reflective writing and thinking but also engagement in a community of practice and a sense of belonging in this community. Therefore, the ability of students to project themselves to others emotionally and socially is not as simple for some.

Students might still be interested in the subject as a lurker, or when using a private space, but may never blog. In this context, the reflective thinking student using a private space with a limited audience may still use the information to modify their understanding and decide which networks to follow, with or without engaging in commentary. Nonetheless, taking this latter position, according to connectivists (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2018), students are not fully engaging in the learning process and not adding to the network or forming connections and focusing on connecting specialised information sets. Therefore, a large part of decision making is lost; specifically the decisions regarding what to add to the network and how that connects to the other knowledge, which is important to the learning process.

This review now turns to the educational benefits that might be realised by forming inquiry communities in HE.

2.6.2 Communities of Inquiry

The notion of forming Communities of Inquiry (CoI) and collaborative learning in an educational context has been debated for many years. Dewey (1997), and then later Lipman (2003), describe learning that can be acquired through CoI, with a focus on the two independent concepts of 'inquiry' and 'community', yielding the single transformative concept of CoI (Lipman, 2003). Lipman asserted that through assembling a CoI, participants can question, reason, connect, deliberate, challenge and develop problem-solving techniques.

From this position, Garrison (2011; 2012) developed a CoI theoretical framework directly related to online resources and learning. However, unlike connectivists, Garrison places an emphasis on the importance of teacher (academic) presence in the instructional design of online learning. In addition, to form CoI, and for students to gain further learning opportunities, participants must be willing to commit to taking part (Garrison, 2011; 2012; Trespalacios and Perkins 2016). Garrison's framework for a CoI online demonstrates that a shared online repository of practical knowledge can be helpful whether you are a producer or consumer of knowledge. It is upon that basis that online communities will be discussed in this thesis.

When implementing CoIs online, Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) based their research on n=15 students enrolled in Master's studies in technology. They reported that the ubiquity of online programmes in HE requires an emphasis on a learning environment designed to create online communities. Although Trespalacios and Perkins study involved a small sample size, and instructors on the course were also involved in the data collection points of the research, a sense of community perceived by the students was reported as having no correlation to achievement measures, but that having a sense of community assisted in the students' overall learning experiences. Therefore, according to Trespalacios and Perkins (2016), Huang (2014), and Hannaford (2017), both social and cognitive dimensions occur most effectively in social environments which have a strong sense of community, where students can share, collaborate and interact. Interestingly, Hannaford (2017) found that, even though students were studying a Master's in technology, using online resources for collaboration and idea-sharing in education was not a common practice among the students. This type of collaborative online practice was reported as beneficial by these students for enhancing their learning.

Being able to connect outside using social networking, Kuo et al. (2017) found that adult minority students (African American) began to develop a student identity. As Howard and Davies (2013) and Butcher (2015) suggested, this is particularly important for part-time students, claiming that their social identity is not as strong as those taking a full-time route. Therefore, exploring what effects the introduction of blogs has on part-time students may help discover if blog-based online communities could provide a valuable resource to redress this imbalance.

However, to create a CoI and sense of community, one must see students as active participants within their own learning experiences, acknowledging and respecting the learner's autonomy (Albaugh, 2013). Co-constructed learning in a CoI is more than subject-specific knowledge gain; since learning experiences that build confidence, self-efficacy and autonomy in social communities are equally important on a learning journey (Garrison, 2011).

Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) suggest that a sense of community in online educational environments can improve students' overall satisfaction in specific taught modules. Moreover, forming communities online can positively influence other variables, such as perceived learning, satisfaction, engagement, and achievement (Top, 2012). Thus, focusing on online communities of inquiry to improve the learning opportunities of part-time students could prove advantageous. However, according to Smidt et al. (2018), encouraging student engagement is not straightforward and requires attention at both the planning and delivery stages of blog use. Corresponding to Smidt et al., Deng and Yuen (2010) concluded that although the blogs offered students a space for free and spontaneous writing, the scope and depth of interaction between students remained limited. Therefore, blogs are ineffectual at supporting dynamic and interactive online discussions.

In a small-scale action research study, Smidt et al. (2018) found that students and academic staff (n=4) struggled to participate and contribute to blogs regularly. This lack of participation lowered the extent of the posting, and comments made on others' posts, by staff and students, ultimately challenged the building of communities. In addition, Sullivan and Freishtat (2013), in their content analysis of part-time graduate students (n=12), found that not all students engaged with the process of blogging or enjoyed learner-centred activities. The students wanted more guidance from the instructor across the blogging period. Although this latter study interviewed only two students from the 12, and one of the researchers was an academic on the students' course, the results show that students engaged more when the group of 12 was split into smaller groups (of four) and when online discussion was combined with face-to-face meetings. Perhaps indicating that, at least for these part-time students, there is a need for smaller and more intimate groups, whereby pedagogical strategy involves a combination of face-to-face and online communications.

Stoszkowski and Collins (2014), in their analysis of 24 undergraduate sports students whilst in placements, also split students into smaller online groups of four. Their findings are similar; a smaller group size can assist in students sharing on the blog, which supports the students' continued use. These studies show that students may blog more and benefit more from smaller group sizes when blogging.

The importance of community learning, not necessarily online, has been theorised extensively for many years. Perhaps the most prominent theory in this area stems from the ethnographic research of Lave and Wenger (1991), where they argue that learning is situated. Lave and Wenger did not rely on technology to formulate their initial concepts of a community of practice to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge. Park (2015) found that nearly half of the participant students expressed strong preferences for face-to-face communication and more independent study. Certainly, there are arguments for both written and dialogic forms of communication being beneficial for academic development (McCormack and Kennelly, 2011). For instance, Smidt et al. (2018) found that face-to-face meetings would have supported a sense of community and shared purpose.

According to Ravenscroft (2011), dialogue and dialogic dimensions are important considerations in activity design, especially when deciding a provision for online learning in HE that encourages online collaborative communities. Ravenscroft suggests offering a multi-layered interactive platform for collaborative learning and reflective conversation while creating spaces for students to meet (Ravenscroft, 2011). Yapici (2016) and Tsiotakis and Jimoyiannis (2017) show that students still need areas to speak face-to-face and communicate online.

Achieving this balance between the two requires careful and strategic planning. Yapici (2016) also discusses the importance of combining online with face-to-face communication and claims that the achievement of both will improve the sense of classroom community and thus academic achievements. This latter study adopted quantitative and qualitative research methods using observations; experimental and control groups were also formed. Over the period of a year, students were examined (n=30 students 2012/2013 and n=31 students 2013/2014), and findings demonstrate that the experimental group's community sense was higher than those in the control group. In the experimental group, student classroom community sense developed because they worked cooperatively online in groups. Face-to-face discussions were seen as vital because they act as a catalyst for continued discussions online and build a sense of community.

Although different approaches have been put forward in the literature for creating online communities, there is consensus that social and cognitive dimensions should be considered together and that some level of academic presence is beneficial. For example, CoI may occur most effectively when an institution provides positive social environments with a strong sense of community, leading to better learning outcomes (Yapici, 2016). Nevertheless, Gordon (2010) suggests that the ontology of the students is important, such as how flexible they are with different learning approaches.

Andergassen et al. (2009) found that even very active student bloggers still favour other social software, such as Facebook™. Andergassen et al. concluded that whether students blogged or not depended, to some degree, on how intrinsically driven they were. Further, in a qualitative study, Deng et al. (2017b) found that students' (n=22) experiences with technology in informal settings might hinder their adoption and engagement of technologies for formal learning. This latter study suggests that students favoured their own private informal spaces (i.e., Facebook™) to share unfinished work with fellow student group members.

Other, more recent research argues that students may not blog without a summative assessment attached (Deng and Yuen, 2013) and that this instrumental attitude may detract from the quality of the online community. This has implications for forming a community. Garrison (2011) and others (Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016; Yapici, 2016) assert that building a sense of community, perceived and appreciated by students (and academics), is as valuable as the assessment. Students may use the blog, but they may never fully engage if they do not believe or understand the rationale for doing so.

The principal ideas presented in connectivist philosophy suggest a possible change in the academic’s role if HE students’ online communities are to flourish fully. Siemens (2008a), for instance, perceives social and collaborative technology to have the potential to change the nature of teaching and learning but cautions that if knowledge is seen as a commodity, the learning opportunities may never be fully realised. Therefore, it may not be straightforward that blogs alone foster a sense of community and provide collaborative properties.

Bandura (1977), who originally proposed the concept of self-efficacy, claims that how adept a student is at sharing in communities (on or offline) depends on the individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Bandura (1977; 2004), commonly known as a social learning theorist, defines this belief as self-efficacy: a process of learning which reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour, and social environment, something which is often variable in individual students. Fencl and Scheel (2005), reporting on students undertaking a physics course, measured the effects of different teaching methods on the classroom climate and self-efficacy. Their research found that pedagogies such as collaborative learning and inquiry-based activities strongly correlate with students’ self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy can be encouraged through social influences, as Bandura (1977; 2004) concludes that cooperative learning structures, in which students work together and help one another, tend to promote more positive evaluations of capability and higher academic attainment than individualistic or competitive ones. However, if self-efficacy can differ among students, then this can produce variations in blog use and student engagement (Anders, 2018). Therefore, although collaborative learning with electronic applications correlates positively with self-efficacy, the process of involvement may take more time for some students than others.

Based on the self-efficacy theory, student engagement with the blog crucially depends on building the relevant skills first, not only through vicarious experiences in observing one's peers but also with the support of the academic (through verbal persuasion or other methods) to motivate and assist students in mastering blog use.

One final consideration regarding communities of inquiry is put forth by Kitsantas and Dabbagh (2010; 2011), who report that blogs can offer opportunities for student collaboration and to direct their own behaviours on the blog. However, for this to occur, they must be intrinsically motivated or driven to attain goals in a blended learning environment, such as a blend of online and classroom sessions.

It may not come naturally to students to manage their learning spaces and facilitate their learning. According to Kitsantas and Dabbagh (2011) and Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012), blogs can offer students the opportunity for students to be more autonomous in their learning, but they must be motivated and willing to engage. Shana and Abulibdeh (2015), using a mixed-methods approach to research with 199 graduate and undergraduate students, reported that students perceived their motivation to learn had increased through using a blog as they felt better able to manage and reflect on their learning.

So far, this literature review, through an analysis of the theoretical and empirical evidence, has implicitly referred to the constraints and barriers of blogging in HE practices and provision. The following section extends these discussions further and begins to build a conceptual framework for using blogs in HE for part-time students.

2.7 The Challenges in the Implementation of a Blog

The existing literature reviewed in previous sections of this chapter has drawn attention to the many, in some cases interconnected, constraints on using a blog for educational purposes. However, these constraints have only been referred to implicitly, alongside other contextual ideas.

This section aims to summarise the potential restrictions associated with students' blogging participation (or lack thereof).

This section is organised under the following headings:

- Time pressures
- Attitudes towards blogging and skillset
- A blog versus other Web 2.0 technology

2.7.1 Time pressures

Hramiak (2007), Smidt et al. (2018), and Park (2015) comment on time restrictions felt by HE academics and students, leading to limited blog use. Smidt et al. (2018) reported that students and four academics struggled to find time to participate and contribute to blogging on a regular basis. Park's research, using questionnaires (n=238) and open discussion (n=34), suggests that student participation, specifically encouraging inactive ones, requires high levels of teacher presence or intervention for strong communities of practice to evolve. In this latter study, having time to blog is an issue that extends to the academics who need sufficient time to reflect on pedagogical practices with the inclusion of blogs. Deng et al. (2017a), using a case study, reported on the use of two online platforms (Moodle as a formal channel and Facebook™ as an informal channel) by students (n=75) attending a Hong Kong and Taiwan comprehensive university. Although students in the latter study reported the value of connecting with others from a foreign region, time limitation was a major obstacle.

Academics have no time available to explore innovative practices, specifically with the use of technology. As Park asserts, this lack of exploration of innovative practices by academics adversely affects students. Ylijoki (2013) similarly found time to be an issue for the students in reporting that, once summative workload increased, the blogging process reduced or, in many cases, stopped.

The level of instruction given to students seems an essential topic in both professional and theoretical contexts. The reduction of academic guidance found on a non-instructional blog relies on students to self-manage and collaborate with peers in the online learning spaces (networks), which can be challenging for some students. Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) highlight this as a barrier, reporting that students had too much information to decipher and, with little direction from the academic, felt overwhelmed with too many threads of work to follow, causing a decline in interest. They concluded that instruction by an authority figure (academic) is important for sustained blogging (ibid, 2013). However, Hou et al. (2009) assert that if blogs serve only as another channel to disseminate information (as seen in some instructional blog types), students' depth of understanding may not necessarily improve. Nevertheless, in a professional context and within a formal learning environment, it seems important to offer some guidance to students, particularly those studying part-time, and to consider group size, perhaps by reducing the potentially overwhelming number of threads on the blog, especially if the students have been away from education for long periods.

Another issue restricting the use of a blog in HE is outlined in Ylijoki (2013), Hemer (2014), and Park (2015), suggesting the lack of reflective blogging seen in the students' blogs is predominantly due to the increasing pressures on academics to work in a performance measured university. In other words, these reports suggest that universities have traditionally possessed, as their primary objectives, the pursuit and the transmission of knowledge. In addition, due to the increased financial pressures on British universities since the 1980s, emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency has naturally led to a thorough examination of performance measures. However, a focus on outputs places attention more towards the product (grade and classifications) rather than the process (practices and pedagogical procedures), which can often limit the use of any classroom apparatus deemed not essential for achieving the end product.

In connectivism, Siemens (2009) still asserts that for a blog to become an integral part of practice, specifically functional to learning, both academics and students need to understand the pedagogical benefits of using a blog. Therefore, a constraint to blogging seems to be the time available for pedagogical reflections by students and academics. The student needs time to work on the blog more reflectively, without their perceived distraction of summative work. In contrast, academics may need more time to create reflective spaces to discuss the use of blogs for pedagogical practices.

2.7.2 Attitudes towards blogging and skillset

Student and academic attitudes towards how the online tool is conducive to their needs are important considerations when implementing the blog. Cheung and Vogel (2013) defined attitudes as the degree to which a user is interested in using the system, and attitude toward the system determines behavioural intentions, which, in turn, lead to actual system usage. Past research indicates the importance of academic beliefs regarding pedagogical practices to the use of technology. For instance, Levin and Wadmany (2005) conducted research in schools and concluded that teachers’ beliefs regarding technology would affect its use in the classroom.

In 2006, Bain and McNaught's HE based investigation reported on the beliefs and practice of academics on a computer-assisted learning project in Australia. This small-scale qualitative study questions the compatibility of traditional teaching philosophy with social and collaborative technologies and reports didactic instructional teaching methods to be non-conducive. Teachers with a favourable attitude towards technology at the outset were more likely to embrace technological innovations. A belief that the blog is useful for educational outcomes (alongside time issues) appeared as an important factor affecting whether a blog is fully utilized. Furthermore, the enculturation of the classroom, the influence of the values and norms held by students and academics within that environment, may limit, direct, and shape pedagogical practices (Parks et al., 2013) and the use of educational tools such as the use of a blog. In other words, the social meanings students and academics place on blogging can influence their usage.

Students and academics may not blog if they see no educational value for this, which, coupled with the lack of technical ability, may induce feelings of not being able to negotiate their networks, thus reducing engagement (Garcia et al., 2019).

According to Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) and Johnson et al. (2016), academics may not have the skills to guide students and may have limited knowledge related to pedagogical best practices aligned with the identification and integration of technology to increase student engagement in online learning. Garcia et al. (2013; 2014) further assert it is necessary to consider the degree to which academic staff and students will accept the use of blogs. If the use of a collaborative blog led by the students is incompatible with the needs of both academics and students, it is unlikely the adoption will be successful (ibid, 2013; 2014).

Academic staff and students must be willing and able to use a blog and know how this tool can be used in course design. Cheung and Vogel (2013) studied pre-service teachers' acceptance of collaborative technologies. They found that these students were more likely to use technology in their practice when it is easy to use and has a specific purpose and when they are confident that they can use it and know that help is readily available.

However, Deed and Edwards (2011), Ylijoki (2013), Kennelly and McCormack (2015), and Smidt et al. (2018) claim it is inappropriate to assume that because students are part of the digital generation that they can immediately engage in academic blogs. From a Vygotskian perspective, learning is situated (Murphy et al., 2015); therefore, to assume that students will undertake blogging based on their frequent use of other technologies outside of the educational environment lacks foundation, in that it is dependent upon the transference of situated learning to a new context.

Deed and Edwards (2011) reported that some students perceived the blog as difficult to use and found other Web 2.0 technologies, such as Facebook™ and group chats on Instagram™, easier to use for instant forms of collaboration and communication. Therefore, how students and academics perceive the blog compared to other forms of Web 2.0 technologies (Facebook™ and Instagram™) with which they already may have some familiarity may present further barriers to the uptake of blogging for educational purposes.

2.7.3 A blog versus other Web 2.0 technology

Although Facebook™ has the potential to encourage communication, this discourse is casual and can promote insufficiently critical attitudes towards information in its users (Melville, 2009; Deed and Edwards, 2011). However, attitudes of both students and academics are important in the successful use of Facebook™ and other instant networking (Prescott et al., 2013). For instance, Deng and Tavares (2015) and Garcia et al. (2015) reported Facebook™ as a useful tool for informal learning and peer support to occur. Using social network analysis, Garcia et al., reported on students (n=86) studying on a Foundation Degree (Level 4). Levels of informal and peer support occurred with those that took a more central position in the network remaining on the course and achieving their qualification.

Additionally, Deng and Tavares, in their explorative research of pre-service teachers (n=42) studying at a Hong Kong university, found that Facebook™ and Google™ sites fulfilled the students' academic and socio-emotional needs during teaching practice. Conclusions from this latter study suggest that both educator and researcher often tend to focus on cognitive aspects tied to learning tasks and learning outcomes, therefore undermining the importance of the socio-emotional dimensions of informal learning. Thus, although Facebook™ may not encourage formal learning to take place, connections on an informal basis can support students' learning.

Concerns over the safety aspects of teacher-centred, student-centred, and private spaces for students are often at the forefront of the discussion when using this Web 2.0 technology (ibid, 2013). Furthermore, using Facebook™ or other such social networks, often set up by the students themselves, promotes the use of their own language, which can make the journey to meaningful academic exchange problematic (Deed and Edwards, 2011).

2.7.4 Motivation

Levels of student motivation to collaborate online can also further challenge their use of a blog. Deed and Edwards (2013) and Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) found that some students migrated to offline communities as they found this more personalised, revealing attitudes which may present a further barrier to developing collaboration through blog use. To the point, Hannaford (2017) points out that less attention has been paid to understanding the role of motivation in collaborative processes formed by students.

Cognitive theorists such as Atkinson (1964) and Weiner (1992) assert that motivation is the product of two main factors: the individual's expectation of reaching the goal and the value of the goal to the individual. If either factor is absent, this will result in limited motivation. Therefore, the lack of instruction and continued guidance from the academic can be problematic when combined with poor motivation and experience, specifically in formal educational environments, as Smidt et al. (2018) reported. Hramiak (2010) found some students did not see the purpose of duplicating the written assessment with the online writing and therefore lacked the motivation to blog regularly.

Similarly, Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) found that some students' low motivation was due to the lack of stimulating blog entries made by other students causing students to quickly dismiss blogging. In some respects, Hannaford (2017) points to the implications for assessment design and addresses issues regarding group set tasks for the students that involve a combination of online and offline discussions.

2.8 Summary of Chapter

This chapter has used the theoretical framework of connectivism to present the educational benefits of blogging and to explore the importance of using such technology in HE pedagogical practices. Beneficial properties that blogging can offer include; reflective thinking and writing, face-to-face discussions and sharing ideas in a community of inquiry. However, the challenges in the implementation of a blog are not superficial. From a socio-cultural position (Vygotsky, 1978), it is important to look at the enculturation of the environment in which the teaching is taking place. If students and academics see no value in the use of collaborative technology, and if the norms of the teaching environment (institution) value, for example, output over process, this may affect how much worth students and academics place on their connections and communications outside of the classroom environment.

Giving time and providing training can generate some solutions in the provisions for a blog. Still, it is important also to consider the encultured practices and ideologies surrounding HE practices, along with the students' use of other social media tools, which are larger problems to solve.

The existing literature highlights the benefits of, and challenges to, blogging in HE but focuses on full-time students and courses.

This inquiry addressed two main gaps in the research: Firstly, those participants attached to part-time courses. Secondly, findings generated from UK-based universities. As the literature in this area is under-represented, this work will extend the current literature in this field.

3 Chapter Three – Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter outlines the design and approach for this research. Qualitative methodologies within an interpretivist paradigm were utilised to seek an understanding of the educational possibilities and challenges in the implementation of a blog in HE, specifically within part-time professional courses. Although Bryman (2012) asserts a lack of generalizability in qualitative methodologies, this research is small-scale and does not intend to generalise findings to the wider population regarding how and why blogs are undertaken. The intention was to explore the educational properties of blogging in part-time courses.

Small-scale qualitative research conducted in similar ways to that seen as part of this study may present particular challenges regarding subjectivity as the researcher is value bound and part of what is being researched (Berg, 2009; Berg and Lune, 2012). Additionally, as Silverman (2015) claims, the researcher's own theoretical positions and values must be considered in research to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the data, and transparency is imperative. Therefore, this chapter presents a critical discussion regarding methodological decisions and choices to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

3.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is a way of analysing the world informed by particular philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of social reality (Bashir et al., 2008). It guides decisions made in research. Trochim and Donnelly (2006) hold that a research paradigm, or research approach, can be viewed as a collective set of beliefs, values, attitudes, procedures and techniques that create a framework of understanding and represent the researcher's worldview. My philosophical stance, thus world view, has evolved from being a researcher in the field of education and as an educator in HE. My ontological and epistemological views are multifaceted and have evolved from my interpretations and experiences of the social world.

3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

This research takes a relativist ontological position, as outlined by Snape and Spencer (2003), in that social reality does not exist independently of human understanding and interpretations. In this inquiry, the participants' interpretations (of their blog experiences) and perceptions (regarding blog use for educational purposes) are important in understanding the nature of blogging in this context. 'Reality', therefore, is context dependent. Although the research is focused on student experiences, it is important also to understand what prompted their experience, what the outcome or consequence might be, and what other factors are associated with the experience. Therefore, an epistemological approach has been adopted that allows for subjective measures to investigate reality (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Knowledge is perceived as a human construct, culturally situated and co-constructed, and therefore my research paradigm supports the philosophical viewpoint of social constructivism (also known as interpretivism), as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016). In this way, the work can reflect the complexity of the research phenomena. All individuals are a source of knowledge and it is only through gathering the interpretations of their worldview that one can understand reality. Additionally, this research has emphasised the importance of structures and institutional influences on human thinking and behaviours.

The research does not attempt to atomise phenomena into variables, which can be restrictive in finding the dynamic relationships between the many parts (Cohen et al., 2013). Instead, the inquiry seeks to understand the social world in terms of meanings formed by participants through their interactions with it. Creswell (2014) urges researchers to 'look for the complexities of views rather than narrowing meaning into a few categories or ideas' (p.9). Social constructivism holds that:

> ‘Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences’ (Creswell, 2014, p.9).

Thus, research participants should answer open-ended questions, as outlined by Creswell (2014), allowing for a more detailed and free descriptive account. Applying a strictly interpretivist paradigm was the most useful in gaining access to the views and nuances that influenced the individual (student and academic) worlds.

3.4 Qualitative Research

This research does not intend to directly inform change in policy or practices but rather draw attention, through a qualitative methodology, to social and collaborative technology; in this case, a blog and its use in HE, specifically for part-time students. While qualitative methodologies cannot easily be generalised to larger populations (Bryman 2012), they articulate important messages about individual and group experiences through rich narrative data (Finlay, 1999). However, searching for subjective meanings and interpretations in the data raises challenges that previous survey research could not solve (Silverman, 2015).

This research aligns with the idea that nothing is purely and simply 'given' and that every understanding is perspectival and rests on interpretations of both the researcher and the researched. For example, as a researcher and HE academic, I recognise the shared, familiar narrative construct with the participants and that my involvement in the research brings my own previous experiences. It became important to acknowledge and embrace, rather than exclude, my experiences and to observe how these might influence the investigation at every stage. Doing this ensured that the data was as trustworthy and reliable as possible.

This chapter will now consider the case study design, as outlined by Yin (2017), selected as the most appropriate approach in guiding my research and answering the research questions.

3.5 Case Study Design

The case study approach was used in many cases across literature sources to report on participants within their natural setting. In this research, the case study allowed for a broader scope regarding issues that pertain to the development of student experiences, what led students to use the blog, and why some students elected not to experience blogging. Unlike other research designs, whereby orientating to a particular timeframe or moment is considered important, the case study allowed for more flexibility in both timescale and data collection points (Bassey, 2002). The research could take place over an academic term, and data could be collected at different times during this period. Having no restrictions on the length of the research period meant that significant findings were not overlooked. Moreover, the case study approach captured perceptions of those academics and non-blogging students who have not 'lived' the experience of blogging but who were crucial to my research. Baxter and Jack (2008) assert that the case study can have important implications for professional practices as it allows the researcher to explore:

> '... through complex intervention, relationships, communities or programs and support the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena' (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p.545).

This research focused on answering 'how' and 'why' questions and covered contextual conditions relevant to the phenomenon, i.e., institutional cultures and blog use, which are essential considerations in using a case study approach (Yin, 2003; 2017). Yin's (2003) ontology is based on pluralism, accepting of dynamic tension between subjective and objective, and as such differs from my own ontological position of relativism. However, Yin's approach is also based on a constructivist paradigm where truth is considered to be relative and dependent upon one's perspective of the subjective human creation of meaning. My case study intends to:

> 'Investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context' (Yin, 2017, p.10).

There are two generally accepted approaches that have guided my case study research and come mainly from the work of Stake (1995), and Yin (2003; 2017). In endeavouring to ensure that the topic of blogging in education is well explored, it should be noted that both authors employ slightly different methods when discussing case study research. The main difference between Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) is their use of terms to describe a case study. For example, Yin categorises case studies as exploratory and descriptive, while Stake identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental and collective. Both have been influential in developing the use of case studies as a research tool. My study follows Yin as the exploratory case study has no clear single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003), and therefore real-life context can be explored; in this case, two universities and both academics' and students' views could be inductively captured.

This inquiry considers blog use as a collaborative experience in the context of HE with part-time students, with the notion that the context is as important as the participants. To answer the research questions, it was considered impossible to consider how students use the blog without the context in which it occurred. Therefore, careful attention was paid to both the participant and the situation in which they reside. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the case is 'in effect, your unit of analysis' (p. 25) and thus an important part of the research endeavour. In establishing what my case would be, I also needed to consider the vital question of what this would not be. In so doing, the objectives were produced with no broad topic areas that could not be considered part of the case. Creswell and Poth (2016) describe this procedure as binding a case that includes a timeframe and place.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

In order to address the ethical aspects of my thesis effectively, the following main areas were considered important and will now be discussed in detail:

- Voluntary participation of the respondents and rights to withdraw
- Informed consent
- Interview questions and procedure – language used
- Privacy and anonymity
- Acknowledgement of the works of other authors
- Maintaining as far as possible objectivity in the findings
- Adherence to data protection

The research has followed university regulations, specifically gaining ethical clearance in 2017 and being guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, cited in Portal, 2018).

Concerning respondents' voluntary participation, the sample groups are students, all attending a part-time undergraduate course, and their academic staff. All participants were over the age of eighteen. Informed consent was gained and, at the outset of the research, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw by informing their academic staff or course leader. Appropriate dates for withdrawal of data were given. In the event of a student withdrawal, any data gathered from the blog authored by the student would be disregarded. The principle of informed consent involves researchers providing sufficient information and assurances about taking part to allow individuals to understand the implications of participation and reach a fully informed, considered and freely given decision about whether or not to do so, without exercising any pressure or coercion.

Before commencing the research, a talk lasting one hour was given to the participating cohorts to inform them about the investigation, giving and withdrawing consent, and using the blog. This gave further transparency and allowed me to introduce myself both as a researcher and academic currently working in one of the case study universities (not attached to the participants' programme). Initially, there was no plan to include the academics in any data gathering. However, an emerging theme developed regarding academic involvement (offline) and the benefits this had on student engagement with the blogging process. Consent forms were distributed for interviews during the initial stages of the research (to the students) and then again at the end of the blogging period (to the academics).

All participants had the option to participate in the interview process (see Appendix Four – Consent Forms). The privacy and anonymity of all respondents are of paramount importance; to respect anonymity, the identity of students, academic staff, and universities are not disclosed (BERA, 2018). For transparency (BERA, 2018), participants have had an opportunity to read their own transcripts at a convenient time and have been allowed to comment so as to minimise mistakes or misinterpretations.

The research blog was private; only the individual class group, plus myself as the researcher, could view the posts of others in that group. The idea of private and public spaces is discussed in the research literature and often refers to allowing students to feel emotionally safe while sharing reflections or personal details (Hramiak, 2010). During analysis, the data were treated systematically (Watt, 2007). After the blogging phase, no further data was collected from the blog site. Any sensitive data were excluded from the study. As outlined by Cohen et al. (2013), only data of direct interest to my research aims were included.

Permission was sought from all participants to record interviews (BERA, 2018). Cohen et al. (2013) assert that visual recordings can better capture non-verbal communication. Still, audio recording was considered a more appropriate method as video could have been intrusive and would not directly help answer my research questions. All recordings were kept in a password-protected file, as outlined in Portal (2018), to follow current GDPR regulations and deleted after transcription.

The interview process should put participants at ease as much as possible (Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Cohen et al. (2013). The interview schedule and venues were considered carefully. Non-leading interview questions were devised to elicit important knowledge relevant to my research questions ((Brinkmann, 2012). The proposed interview questions were reviewed by professionals and academic colleagues to ensure they were appropriate and thus improve the reliability of the data. This piloting process additionally reviewed the language used to minimise the risk of questioning that might be considered offensive, exclusive or discriminatory (Brinkmann and Kvale. 2015).

Finally, a database was employed to assist in organising data from the interview transcripts effectively and efficiently. As discussed in previous sections, a systematic approach to analysing the data was adopted for transparency and to maintain the highest possible level of objectivity in the discussions and analysis.

Further explanation of this will now follow.

3.7 Role of the Researcher

There are some advantages of 'insider-research' (Unluer, 2012), such as my understanding of the organisation's politics and practices. However, as

Bryman (2012) points out, in being part of the infrastructure, there could be a possibility of respondent bias and misinterpretation.

My position as a researcher and professional may have been both advantageous and disadvantageous to the research. I was a lecturer carrying out part of my research within one of the case study universities where one participating course was situated. As such, I had knowledge of the teaching content across the school and had contact with students from several different degree programmes.

In addition, the issue of power relationships arising from my role as a professional conducting research in one of the case study universities required attention as, for example, participants may give untruthful responses in trying to deliver what they perceive as the researcher's 'hoped for' response, or the opposite (Harris and Brown, 2010).

This awareness of power and control was evaluated at both the blogging phase and the interview procedures. During the blogging phase, the distortion of the data under the Hawthorne effect (Holden, 2001; Cook, 1962; McCambridge et al., 2014) was an identifiable danger. Measures were taken to reduce observer effects; by selecting courses that I was not directly involved in and by limiting my involvement (and that of the academic) on the student blogs. No academic was online with the students. As a researcher, I was only online at the beginning for technical support and to offer guidance for the use of the blog, namely blog entries and posts.

I have no stake in the research outcome; nothing changes in my research or professional context if blogs are found to be useful or liked or the opposite of those. As an interviewer, my integrity, knowledge, experience, honesty and fairness are decisive factors.

To further ensure trustworthiness for this research, I selected three courses (within this case study university) with which I have no specific involvement and have had no prior input.

As BERA (2018) states, being transparent and open will ensure that the research and the researcher's role is explicit. Thus, all participants were offered opportunities to view the findings and reports throughout the investigation, to view the transcripts and to clarify the meaning behind their blog posts.

3.8 Recruitment

The research took place at two universities in the UK. Both universities are post-1992 or modern universities, granted university status after the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (cited in Gleeson, 1993). Both universities are similar in terms of their population and the demographics of the students in attendance.

The students needed to be first year students and therefore new to the university at the recruitment stage. This was an intentional decision as the student may not already have formed relationships and, therefore, may be more inclined towards relationship building using the online tool (blog) provided.

It was found that university A offered a total of ten part-time professional undergraduate courses and university B offered twelve.

All available course staff in both universities were contacted, initially via an introductory email sent to the course leaders, asking for the opportunity to further discuss the research details in person. This was followed by telephone contact two weeks later. From this initial contact with the course leaders, four academics teaching on four different courses agreed to meet and consequently commenced in the research; university A, three courses and university B, one course, as shown in Table 2 (below).

Table 2 The Number of Students and Academics Recruited in Universities A and B and the Courses which used Blogs

Course title	Number of students	Number of academics.
Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) (CELTA) **University A**	5	1
Certificate in Human Resource practice **University A**	10	1
Foundation degree (FdA) Educational Support **University A**	9	1
Foundation degree (FdA) in Childhood Studies **University B**	10	1
Totals	**34**	**4**

3.9 Sampling Strategies

The sampling strategy used is a factor that determines the reliability and trustworthiness of the data (Bachor, 2002; Baxter and Jack, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). A purposive and a convenience sampling strategy was adopted at different points in the research. A purposive strategy was used to select courses for the research and a convenience sampling strategy to decide on the blogs for analysis and participants for the interview procedures. There follows a review of these strategies.

3.9.1 Purposive sampling: Courses selection

The recruitment stage was crucial. Following Etikan (2016) and Cohen et al. (2013), a purposive sample was drawn from courses across the case study universities. As the research focused on part-time courses, this sampling method allowed me to select from a larger population (all course types across the university) and recruit participants with comparable characteristics. In this case, similarities in participants were as follows:

- Students and their academic staff were involved in a part-time course
- Students and their academic staff were attached to an undergraduate professional course
- Students were beginning the first year of their course

This sampling strategy requires no set number of participants, which is useful when the researcher has limited resources, time, and workforce (Bell, 2014). Etikan (2016) suggests the purposive samples are generally selected based on their likelihood of behaving in similar ways. In this case, part-time students share key similarities in their study context, particularly regarding how much time is spent at the university (or not) and having extended commitments, such as home and work (Hobble and Bolton, 2020).

This type of non-probability sampling has limitations, namely in the subjective nature of choosing the sample as it is, therefore, not representative of the whole population (Flick, 2014). However, due to the exploratory nature of the inquiry, there was no intention to generalise to the wider population. Therefore, as the purposive sample is especially useful in targeting a specific section of the student population of part-time students, and where randomisation is impossible (Etikan, 2016), it was considered the most appropriate strategy at this initial stage of the research.

3.9.2 Convenience sampling: Blog analysis and interview

There were two distinct stages of the research: stage one, blog analysis and stage two, interview procedures.

For stage one, a convenience sample strategy was applied due to the limited number of participating students who blogged (12 out of 34). Adopting this strategy, as outlined by Etikan (2016), allowed for all available blog data (n=12) to be analysed, which generated a data set across both universities, A (n=2) and B (n=10).

Stage two, the interview, again utilised a convenience sample strategy. Candidates were drawn from the wider population to maximise participant numbers for interviews, ensuring variation. At university A, all academics attached to the three courses (see Table 2, page 70) volunteered for an interview. However, only students attached to the Foundation degree (FdA) Educational Support agreed to an interview, which comprised four non-blogging and two blogging students. At university B, only one course was involved in the research (Foundation degree (FdA) in Childhood Studies), and it had the most blogging activity. Six student bloggers and one academic (teaching on the course) volunteered to participate in the interview process.

3.10 Methods

As in all research, but particularly important to qualitative research, the justification of methods or tools used for data collection is crucial to show the results to be trustworthy (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflections on this start at the first stages of any research endeavour. As stated above, in this case study, two distinct and important stages of the inquiry were carried out at different times during the research period.

Stage one: the blog and analysis – during this stage, data were collected over one academic term (September 2017 – December 2017) on how, if at all, knowledge was being shared and developed by the students within the online environment. Qualitative data was collated from students' online blogging in order to ascertain what was being blogged for what purpose with the main research questions in mind. As the students could still use the blog after the research period had finished, a date was decided upon (December 20th 2017) as a cut-off point for the blog analysis, and no data from the blog was collected after this point. From this position, the interview procedures, stage two, commenced, which took place seven or eight weeks after the students had finished blogging, during February and March 2018.

Stage two: Semi-structured interviews – these were carried out with all students and academics who had agreed to be interviewed. The research aims required me to capture the opinions of the non-blogging students and academics, alongside the views of the blogging participants, regarding the use of the blog throughout the term. This process yielded rich qualitative data concerning the participants' perceptions about the benefits and challenges of using a blog for educational purposes.

It is through both stages above that the overarching aim and research questions could be answered.

3.10.1 The blog

Justifications of the thematic analysis of the blog data will come later in this chapter. However, for transparency, it is important to provide the steps taken before the research commenced, that is, how the blog was presented to the students, and provide justifications for the type of blog used in this research.

Once all courses had been established, and prior to the research commencing, all groups of students and all four academics were introduced to the content and the blogs in a two-hour, face-to-face meeting (see appendix six introductory PowerPoint™). Matters of student and academic consent were attended to at this initial consultation. Permission to use the blogging data was also established at this time, although letters of consent for the interview procedure were also sought later. The research aims and intentions were also introduced alongside the possibilities of blog use in education. The blog platform for each student was generated with my support, and all technical questions were answered. For additional support, students were given contact details and a detailed information sheet outlining how to navigate the blog site (see appendix 7).

It was important to gain additional information about the student population to establish any barriers to participation - whether these be skills, access, or general attitude issues with using information technology (IT) (Casserley-Williams, 2017). No anticipated barriers that would influence or impact the results of the research were identified. During this initial period, I met with all four academics on a one-to-one basis to further explain the research aims and provide an opportunity for any questions they may have regarding the research. There were no identified questions or concerns at this point from the academics or the students.

In terms of the best way to present a blog to students, blog design has been a theorised area for many years (Halic et al., 2010; Hsu and Wang, 2010; de Andrés Martínez, 2012; Blau et al., 2013; Deng and Yuen, 2013; Li et al., 2013; Armstrong, 2014). To further address the research aims, students were provided with a non-instructional blog type but with the absence of summative assessment or instructional tasks.

It was thought that to explore how student communities would evolve, if at all, groups were better placed with the least amount of instruction from the academic. If individual students could freely share, collaborate, and create within their class group, this would provide more reliable data on how students naturally shared, formed student communities, collaborated, and created with limited instruction given by myself or their academics. Therefore, in line with the theory of connectivism (Siemens, 2005), the non-instructional blog type was used to offer a level of autonomy to students. For example, if students felt forced to blog due to an assessment or task, their perception of blogging may be focused on the task (assessment) rather than the blogging experience itself. However, throughout the research, especially at the start, I engaged with the students on the blog, sharing items of interest and prompting and reminding students that the blog existed. This input was mainly to avoid any student feelings of frustration or confusion regarding its use and to provide examples of blog practices (Deed and Edwards, 2011; Blau et al., 2013; Stoszkowski et al., 2017).

As the blog analysis took place first, this stage influenced the interview questions and created the initial themes for this inquiry. The interview procedure will now be reviewed.

3.10.2 Interviews

Researchers use interviews to understand the meaning of central themes of a participant's lived world (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2007; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Silverman, 2015). This inquiry conception of interview knowledge contrasts with a methodological positivist conception of knowledge as given facts to be quantified (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Consequently, as there was no aim of quantification in this inquiry, a qualitative interview method was employed, free of jargon and aimed to elicit easily accessible language. In line with my research paradigm, interviews yielded narrative data in a social context to be analysed qualitatively.

Interviews elicited perceptions of each participant regarding their blogging experiences. They enabled comparison across a range of perspectives without using focus groups which, in this case, were considered problematic in terms of gaining the voices of all involved. For example, Cohen et al. (2013) claim that often it is only the strongest, dominant participant who is heard, thus diminishing data quality. Although the posts were open (online) for all students to view, I did not want to select and then highlight any individual posts within a physical group situation as this may have caused some to feel uncomfortable and exposed. This was in response to discussions found in the literature regarding private and public spaces.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) assert that the subject matter should determine the method used and that researchers should be able to give good reasons which explain and justify their decisions. Although completed at two different universities, this current research did not intend to make comparisons between student groups in each setting. Instead, the intention was to discover how the blog was experienced by the students whilst also capturing the perceptions of those students who did not use the blog, as well as general participant views regarding blog use in HE.

Although self-reporting methods may capture a significant amount of data from a larger population (as seen in the examples above), there were questions regarding the reliability in capturing student and academic perceptions in this research (Opie, 2019). For example, one important aspect of this research was to capture student perceptions of blog output generated by the individual students. Allowing student bloggers to discuss their individual experiences was considered crucial in answering the research questions, gaining in-depth data regarding why they posted and how helpful or useful they considered the blog to be. Therefore, providing a situation in which students and academics could speak freely about their perceptions of blog use in HE allowed for more data analysis on why and for what purpose did students blog, and the reasons why others did not.

3.10.3 Interview questions

Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest a more flexible approach to interview design; for example, they assert that the research may continually adapt to new circumstances and thus, changes to the interview questions may occur along the way. However, for this research, a more formalistic style was adopted regarding the interview design, as outlined in Brinkmann and

Kvale (2015), in that questions and procedural steps remained consistent throughout.

To ensure that interviewees understood the questions, as outlined by Willis et al. (2016), interview questions were piloted with one professional working in the field of Early Years and four academics, residing across both universities (all were outside the research process). From this process, it was decided that some questions should be altered and assembled differently, both for clarity and to reduce any leading and unnecessary questioning. In addition, the questions (see Appendix three – Interview questions) were emailed to the participants in advance as recommended by Bryman et al. (2008).

As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) highlight, the interviewer will invariably have some influence on the interviewee and on what is valued in the research endeavour or deemed useful in the findings. These authors imply that the interview process poses the most significant threat to reliability; therefore, careful consideration regarding this process was sought. As suggested in the opening section of this chapter, my axiological positioning is value-bound and subjective and therefore is not value-free, as seen in other methodologies (positivism). Consequently, I ensured that no participants (academic or student) were connected to me in any way, professionally or personally, to ensure that the findings were as trustworthy as possible. Additionally, following the ethical guidelines set out in BERA (2018) and the GDPR (2018) (cited in Portal, 2018), all interviews were audio-recorded, specifically to reduce any bias or misinterpretations.

A reliance on listening and remembering may result in selective filtering whereby the interviewer retains only those meanings essential to the topic areas and that are consistent with their research aims, which will influence what is reported. All participants were given the option to refuse being recorded (none did), which ensured that no verbal discourse was missed or misinterpreted in translation, as outlined in Brinkmann and

Kvale (2015). At this time, recording with visual cues was seen as both unnecessary and cumbersome for the purposes of interview content analysis. Although body language may shape and add to the spoken discourse, examining this seemed an unnecessary step at this point in answering the research questions.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggest that the interview question should be brief and straightforward and when designing the questions:

> '…the "why" and "what" questions should be asked and answered before the question of "how" is posed.' (p.159)

In line with the above authors, all the 'why' and 'what' questions were initially asked during the interview procedures. The 'how' questions were primarily employed to understand the conceptual ideas regarding how and for what purpose blogs may be used in HE.

The design of the semi-structured interview allowed for a simplified structure. For example, all student participants (non-bloggers and bloggers) and academics answered similar questions (see Appendix three – Interview questions), with some variation. I intended to maximise the bloggers' self-revelatory comments regarding their blogging experiences, thus further supporting accurate interpretations of the student (Flick, 2014). However, caution is needed when using a semi-structured interview because responses cannot be anticipated as in more structured interview processes. Success, therefore, depends on the situational competencies of the researcher at that moment (Flick, 2014). Situational competence was most needed when students were drawn back to their experiences in blogging, making sure that the detail of the responses from the students was relevant to the research questions.

Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes in a place neutral to me (as interviewer) and to the interviewee. One advantage of semi-structured interviews is flexibility, as Flick (2014) outlined. In addition, participants would have some autonomy in discussions of their experiences and perception of use (or non-use), generating subjective narrative whilst providing sufficient structure for data analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2007).

3.11 Thematic Analysis

3.11.1 The development of themes

For qualitative research to be accepted as trustworthy, it is imperative that data analysis 'has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematising, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail' (Nowell et al. 2017, P 1). Several systematic analytic techniques that fall in line with qualitative analysis are available including discourse analysis, conversation analysis and content analysis (Mason 2017).

My research adopted a thematic framework, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). Using thematic analysis for both the blog and interview data allowed for more flexibility in the process and generated meaning in the text. As Creswell and Poth (2016) highlight, this type of analysis is well suited to detect and identify any issues generated by the participants. Additionally, Cohen et al. (2013), Flick (2014) and Silverman (2015) claim that categorisation and strict coding regimes of text can sometimes obscure content.

There are two generally accepted approaches to thematic analysis; one method is situated in a qualitative paradigm; the other is relevant to qualitative and quantitative paradigms that Clarke et al. (2015) label as the 'Big Q' and the 'small q' (p.223). According to Clarke et al. (2015), research conducted within a qualitative paradigm rejects the possibility of discovering universal meaning, as meaning is understood as always being bound to the context in which it is produced.

This inquiry embraced the subjectivity of the researcher rather than viewing it as being problematic, and therefore thematic analysis was selected for its suitability in providing an accessible, systematic and rigorous approach to coding and the development of themes (Howitt, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2012; Clarke et al., 2015).

The flexibility that thematic analysis offers is advantageous. However, this can lead to discrepancies and an absence of coherence when identifying themes (Holloway & Todres, 2007). It was particularly important when analysing the blog data to devote enough time familiarising myself with the data set. Additional transparency was needed in how themes developed. There were no pre-codes applied nor a rigid process for analysis.

As the blog analysis progressed, the initial themes developed inductively. The analysis of the blog data then influenced the interview questions, requiring a more deductive approach to the interview data. This enabled a reduction in the possibility of missing any important interpretation of detail offered by the participants (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), a simple thematic analysis might be problematic as it does not allow claims regarding language usage. In this case, thematic analysis aligns with my research paradigm, which considers research to be an interactive process and that knowledge is never free from subjective positioning. Therefore, the main aim for the overall data analysis was to note patterns and themes, identify clusters in order to gain an understanding of the way a blog was used (or not), and ascertain the perceived value of the use within an educational context.

The overall analysis of the blog data and interview was guided by the principle that meaning and language are intertwined and are constructed together (co-constructed). It was thought that the analysis of the language features of the blog entries would make a valuable contribution towards deciphering and verifying meaning.

Finally, for this research inquiry, it was not the frequency of the content occurrences that was important, nor was it essential to track bloggers. Instead, it was crucial to generate and interpret meaning from the qualitative data. Therefore, thematic analysis was considered best suited for exploratory work of this nature (Holloway and Todres, 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012; Clarke and Braun, 2013).

3.11.2 Data analysis software

Yin (2017) recognises the importance of effectively organising data and the advantages of using a database to achieve this. According to Yin, using a database can improve the reliability of the case study data as it enables the researcher to track and organise sources for easy retrieval. In this case, the software system used was 'QualyPal™'. This system works on a similar basis to Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), in which data can be collected and then organised. QualyPal™ provided data storage times and dates and had search capabilities useful to help manage the data once codes and meanings had been identified. The software works with already transcribed and coded transcripts and allows the researcher to extract into a new document all paragraphs that share a code. It works across a folder, meaning it can extract statements from within multiple documents in one sweep. For example, in my inquiry, one identified code is 'collaboration' and was present across the data set. QualyPal™ created a new document containing all the statements coded 'collaboration' from all the transcripts in the folder. This was a good starting point for analysis, seeking patterns or commonalities in the grouped statements on 'collaboration'.

3.12 Establishing Trustworthiness

To improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research, it is essential to have a transparent and systematic approach to data collection (Ercikan and Roth, 2006). However, Rolfe (2006) holds that once a researcher has adopted a subjective approach towards a study, the levels of reliability of the work will be compromised. This section draws together issues of trustworthiness in the work and presents the steps that have been taken to improve this throughout this study.

In qualitative studies, the concepts of reliability and validity are more obscure than in quantitative studies, wherein reliability and validity are more easily applied (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). However, the most widely used criteria for evaluating qualitative work are those developed by Lincoln and Guba (1986), whereby terminologies such as reliability and validity are transformed to trustworthiness and credibility.

The aim of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are worth attention; therefore, it is crucial to scrutinise procedures taken within the research at every phase, including the preparation, the organisation and the reporting of results. Next, I evaluate how this research has established trustworthiness by considering credibility, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Nowell et al. (2017).

This research has addressed credibility issues in two main ways. Firstly, data collection triangulation, also known as participant or source triangulation (Silverman 2015), was given due consideration. Different respondents, both students and academics, generated data using the same method, i.e. an interview. Additionally, the blog analysis was combined with the interview data; data were collected from the blog analysis and then the interview provided a different level of detail and participant voice, as suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). Secondly, as Tobin and Begley (2004) recommend, peer debriefing was provided throughout the process of analysing these data. This enabled checkpoints at which to examine the findings and interpretations of the results against the data collected. Additionally, particular attention was paid to checking the tools used for data collection; in this case, interview questions were checked with two university lecturing staff that were not involved in the research to ensure the questions were appropriate in answering the overall research questions. Finally, all participants were given the opportunity to review all completed written documentation to check for accuracy and thus improve the trustworthiness of the interpretations made from the data (three students participated).

To achieve dependability, each procedural step has been outlined and justified. The tools and approaches could be replicated in other research in similar ways to compare findings. However, this is an exploratory study, and the participants are part-time students. Therefore, replication would have to take account of the participants' existing knowledge and understanding of the uses of blogs for educational purposes and the academics' use of this in an educational context. Furthermore, the types of courses matter; in this case, students were not studying on a technology course and did not have a class blog already established. Consideration may need to be paid to the sample and sampling strategies.

Confirmability in this research is concerned with establishing that my interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data found in the exposition of how I have reached my conclusions. As Koch (1994) recommends, I have clearly examined my theoretical and methodological choices and my analytical sections. Additionally, to establish confirmability (Patton, 2002; Denzin, 1991; 2001), I have kept an audit trail that highlights all steps of data analysis, and a rationale for the decisions made, to show that the findings accurately portray the participants' responses.

3.13 Summary of Chapter

This chapter has outlined the overall design and approach for this inquiry. The research takes the form of a case study, using qualitative methodologies to answer the research questions and overarching aim. The investigation adopts an interpretivist approach which is not value-free, and, therefore, transparency at all stages of this research was imperative. Silverman (2015) claims that the researcher's own theoretical positions and values need to be considered in their research, and that the notion of 'giving voice' to qualitative data is naïve because the researcher carves out pieces of narrative or written evidence that are selected for and used in an edited version to support arguments. However, in this research, subjectivity is not regarded as a problem or difficulty but rather as a required element of the research that must be acknowledged at every stage of the research process.

This chapter has also provided an analysis of the chosen methods for the research and identified the sampling strategy for selecting participants. The following chapter, Chapter 4, will outline the results and provide discussions based on the findings.

4 Chapter Four - Findings and Discussions

4.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter reports the findings from two different stages of data gathering. Phase one, the blogging stage, took place from September to December 2017. The blog analysis explored how blogs were used by part-time students studying in higher education institutions (HEI) and answered the following research questions:

What kind of activity (if any) takes place on student blogs? What is shared, how, and why in a collaborative online environment?

It is important to note here that, although phase one was effective in answering the above research question regarding what is shared and how, the question of why students use blogs was answered primarily through the second phase of the research (interviews).

Phase Two utilised a semi-structured interview procedure following the blogging phase over two months (February and March 2018). The interviews collected data from both academics and students on their perceptions of the use of a blog in pedagogical practices and answered the following research questions:

What are the reported educational benefits of a student blog for part-time courses: student and academic perspectives?
How do students and academics understand their roles within a collaborative online environment for educational purposes?
What are the reported challenges in the implementation of a blog for educational purposes in higher education provision and practices: student and academic perspectives?

Phases one and two were instrumental in exploring the overarching aim: An exploration into the educational benefits and challenges of a student-led blog for part-time higher education students.

Results from the blog analysis were triangulated with the reported data from the interviews. Furthermore, to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of the results and strengthen the research standpoint, the perspectives of academics and students (including both blogging and non-blogging students) from two different universities were also triangulated.

Table 3 (below) identifies the procedures taken and provides an overview of the participants involved in the research and at which university they study. Although there were more courses involved in the research at university A (UA), most of the student blogger respondents studied at university B (UB) and attended one course (FdA in Childhood studies).

Table 3 Procedures and Participants

Method	University A (UA)	University B (UB)
Blog Analysis (12 blogs were analysed in total)	2 students	10 students proceeded to blog for the research period
Interviews Academic (4 in total)	Academic 1 (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults - CELTA) Academic 2 (Certificate in Human Resource Practice) Academic 3 (FdA: Educational Support Foundation degree)	Academic 4 (FdA in Childhood Studies)
Interviews Student (12 in total)	6 interviews: Bloggers (n=2) Non-bloggers (n=4)	6 interviews: Bloggers (n=6)

For authenticity, all quotations taken from the student's blogs have been transcribed verbatim and retain the participants' original spelling and grammar.

4.1.1 Blog analysis

All twelve student blogs written during the research period were analysed (n=2 at UA and n=10 at UB). Table 4 (page 88) provides individual data showing how many posts each student wrote and the average interval time between their posts. This backdrop of information informs us of the levels of student engagement, highlighting a differentiation between the two universities. Two students at UA (B7 and B8), for instance, posted two times during the first week of the blogging period and then did not continue. Due to this, the blog analysis addresses the first research question – What kind of activity (if any) takes place on student blogs? What is shared, how, and why within a collaborative online environment? - is limited to the data set of one single university, that is UB.

Throughout this section, to establish clarity in the writing, raw data taken from the coding table will be identified by which university (UA or UB), what entry (E) this refers to, and the blogger (B).

Table 4 Frequencies and Intervals on the Blog

Blogger	B1 UB	B2 UB	B3 UB	B4 UB	B5 UB	B6 UB	B7 UA	B8 UA	B9 UB	B10 UB	B11 UB	B12 UB
Posts	9	10	9	11	10	10	2	2	10	5	6	17
Av Intvl (days)	11	7	12	8	8	11	0	0	9	4	16	3

4.1.2 Interview analysis

Extracts from the interviews are identified with a code relating to the thematic framework (see Appendix 2), for example, COO10 relates to a particular extract generated using the software Qualipal™ and will be identified at the end of any extract taken from the interview dataset. All the blogging students who agreed to an interview are identified with the same codes assigned to them during the blog analysis: for example, B1, B2. However, Table 5 (below) highlights, in brief, how the extracts are differentiated for this chapter.

Table 5 Interview Coding Guidance

Blogging students interviewed	**Codes used**
2 at UA (B7&B8) 6 at UB (B1, B2, B6, B9, B10, B12)	Bloggers (B) University A and B (UA, UB)
Non-blogging students 4 at UA	Non-blogging students (NBS)
Academics 3 at UA (A1, A2 & A3) 1 at UB (A4)	Academic (A)

4.1.3 The development of themes

This research follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) (cited in Clarke et al., 2015, p.230) six stages of thematic analysis to provide a more systematic structure and to improve the credibility of the overall findings. *Table 6* (below) gives an outline of the process undertaken:

Table 6 Six Stages of Thematic Analysis

Familiarisation	Data analysis is facilitated by in-depth knowledge of, and engagement with, the data set. Familiarisation – reading and rereading transcripts, listening to audio-recordings, making notes and any initial analytical observations – helps the researcher to move the analysis beyond a focus on the most obvious meaning.
Coding	A systematic process of identifying and labelling relevant features of the data (in relation to the research question). Coding is the first step in the process of identifying patterns in the data because it groups together similar data segments.
Searching for themes	The search for themes is not simply one of discovery: the themes are not in the data waiting to be uncovered by an intrepid researcher. Rather, the researcher clusters together codes to create a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data.
Reviewing themes	The research pauses the process of theme-generation to check whether the candidate themes exhibit a good fit with the coded data and the entire data set. Each has a clear, distinct 'essence' – or central organising concept. Reviewing may lead to no or few changes or, conversely, to the discarding of the candidate's themes and restarting of the previous phase.
Defining and naming themes	This involves writing theme definitions (effectively, a brief summary of each theme) and selecting a theme name, thus ensuring the conceptual clarity of each theme and providing a road map for the final write-up.
Writing the report	The researchers weave together their analytic narrative and vivid, compelling data extracts. Themes provide the organisational framework for the analysis, but analytic conclusions are drawn across themes.

(Braun and Clarke, 2006, cited in Clarke et al. 2015, p.230

This inquiry was initially informed by the literature review, whereby a general mapping was undertaken, apparent gaps in the existing research identified, and points of interest developed. For example, differences in engagement of students, blog types (with or without a summative assessment), and collaborative learning and reflective thinking, emerged as key points of interest in the existing literature.

This general mapping of the existing literature supported in generating codes and creating themes from blog analysis. To gain an in-depth knowledge of, and engagement with, the blogging data set, all the individual blogs were read (and re-read).

The codes that were developed from this analysis surrounded 'information sharing', 'reflective' and 'communication' styles. The coding process allowed relevant features of the data, in relation to the research question, to be identified and labelled and for the eventual mapping of key themes across the data set. Three initial themes developed, as follows:

Information sharing and styles of writing

Reflective writing and thinking

Repository for sharing: writing for an audience and collaboration.

The interview questions were generated after the blog analysis (see Appendix 3). The codes used for the interview analysis therefore followed on from the blog analysis. However, these codes were extended to include other emergent themes (such as 'roles', 'other online comms', 'time', 'training', 'classroom practices') and more defined themes were identified, as follows:

Academic and student roles and views on blog use.

Academic and reflective writing and thinking

Repository for sharing and community of inquiry

Challenges to blogging – HE-ingrained cultures, time, training, and other forms of online communication.

Initially, many codes were generated and placed under one of the broad themes: for example, the theme 'repository for sharing and community of inquiry' contained seven codes, including 'comms lurk' for students viewing a blog without comment, 'comms other' for the mention of other Web 2.0 technology for communication, and 'comms mixed' for offline and online communication. Once this stage was completed, all the data was thematically organised. This stage led to a more precise report of the findings and ensured that each theme was relevant to my research question.

The development of themes naturally adopted a hybrid approach in that an inductive approach (from the blog analysis) was assumed first, but as themes and codes had already been developed from this, a more deductive approach took form (interview analysis). Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) suggest that a hybrid approach, consisting of inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis, can generate more coherence in identifying themes. Moreover, this corresponds with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as they suggest that this approach is most common when a researcher is collecting qualitative data at two different points in the research, whereby at each stage themes evolve and develop from the data.

Allowing themes to develop in this way meant that new themes could be identified from the interview data which in turn guided the findings and improved the credibility of the data. The themes were reviewed and defined at the final stages of the analysis and a final naming of the themes took place to accurately represent the overall findings. The final themes were:

Information sharing and styles of writing

Academic and reflective writing and thinking

Repository for sharing: writing for an audience and sharing vs collaboration

Community of inquiry

Academic and student views of roles and blog use in practices.

Challenges to blogging

It should be noted that the themes for this inquiry did not simply emerge from the data, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Rather, they were constructed through analysing, combining and comparing the different codes in relation to one another across the whole data set. Varpio et al. (2017) point out that the themes identified should closely link to the original data and be reflective of the entire data set.

4.2 Results and Discussions

This study aimed to examine the perspectives of twelve part-time students and four academics of an unrestricted blog for educational purposes. To fully explore what blogs can offer, the findings were thematically analysed to investigate activity on, and engagement with, an academic blog in higher education practice. From this position, both the benefits and challenges of such a blog were revealed.

To answer the research questions, each of the final themes (above) will be addressed in turn. Data from both the interviews and blog analysis will be drawn upon at the same time thus results will be discussed interchangeably.

4.3 Information sharing and styles of writing

The first theme directly responds to the research question: What kind of activity (if any) takes place on student blogs? What is shared, how and why within a collaborative blog? It draws heavily on the blog analysis. Determining, from the student blogs, what information is shared and in what ways provided an initial starting point to the analysis of whether the blog had potential educational benefits for the student users. However, the analysis of 'why' students used the blog was further reported during student interviews and, therefore, will be examined in more depth later in this chapter.

The analysis in this section will begin with writing styles as these varied across the blogging dataset. Discussions have revealed that some styles used to post on the blog, e.g., complete sentences with citations, may encourage the practice of academic writing. However, issues of engagement and limited time are reported as the main factors for some writing styles, such as bullet points, being adopted by students. The blog analysis regarding information sharing showed that this took place around three main contextual areas: professional practices, course content and personal posts, and the discussion centred mainly on the reflective ways in which students were sharing information within a HE context.

4.3.1 Writing styles

How students write for academic purposes is an important consideration in the context of HE, as a student may be measured not just on their abilities to understand the course content but also on how this understanding is academically presented in written form: i.e., their academic writing skills. Therefore, it was important to examine the students' writing styles in this context.

From the student’s posting activity, it was clear that they all used the blog interchangeably for notetaking (using bullet points), presenting reflective accounts (using complete sentences) and referring to relevant course-related theoretical concepts. This is typified by B3, From UB, where the student used a combination of bullet points and complete sentences across the weeks:

> What does a high-quality thinking environment involve?
>
> - visual displays/prompts
> - no distractions
> - resources
> - age/stage
> - key worker

- good quality practitioner
- equal opportunities
- comfort
- warmth
- motivation
- discipline

(UB; E4:B3)

> 'If the leaf failed to print, they realised there was not enough paint on the leaf and they tried to print the leaf again. Tasks like this help the children to make sense of the world. Dewey said that concepts we teach should not just be on paper, teacher-led perspective or on symbolic film. Going outside and doing this activity allowed the children to leave the classroom environment to learn about the autumn.' (UB; E3:B3)

For three bloggers, their predominant use of bullet points was particularly noticeable throughout the blogging period, their blogs containing very little description or interrogation. For example, B4 used bullet points for eight blog posts and complete sentences for only three posts; B5 wrote nine of the ten entries using bullet points, and B9 used bullet points for six of the ten posts (see Appendix 1). This could indicate that for some students, the blog remained a personal space used mainly for notetaking. However, Table 4 (page 88) shows that when comparing the 17 posts B12 produced with those of B10, who produced five, or B11, who posted six times, some students were less engaged than others with the blogging process. Therefore, styles differed not necessarily because the student chose them but because some students were less involved in the practice than others. The students corroborated this notion of engagement during the interview as B11, B5, B9 and B6 (UB) reported blogging as an activity that they wanted to complete as quickly as possible:

> 'I wanted to get it out of the way, so sometimes I just did not have the time to write…I didn't think about the benefits.' (UB, B9: D0024).

> '. . . on occasions, just copied the PowerPoint.' (UB: B6: F0099)

> 'I had other things going on with my course, so I didn't really get into blogging a lot.' (UB: B10: F0098)

This supports the findings of Kitsantas and Dabbagh (2010; 2011), Duarte (2015), and Bonk (2016), which reported that some students are simply less motivated than others to engage with a blog, especially in formal learning environments such as HE. So, although the blog was being used as a space for academic purposes by some students, others were not engaged in this way, which produced this difference in styles and depth of content.

Moreover, styles and blogging activities slowed towards the end of the period, coinciding with summative assessment due dates. Bloggers 10 and 11, for example, stopped blogging towards the end of term and reported during their interviews that their reason was due to summative work:

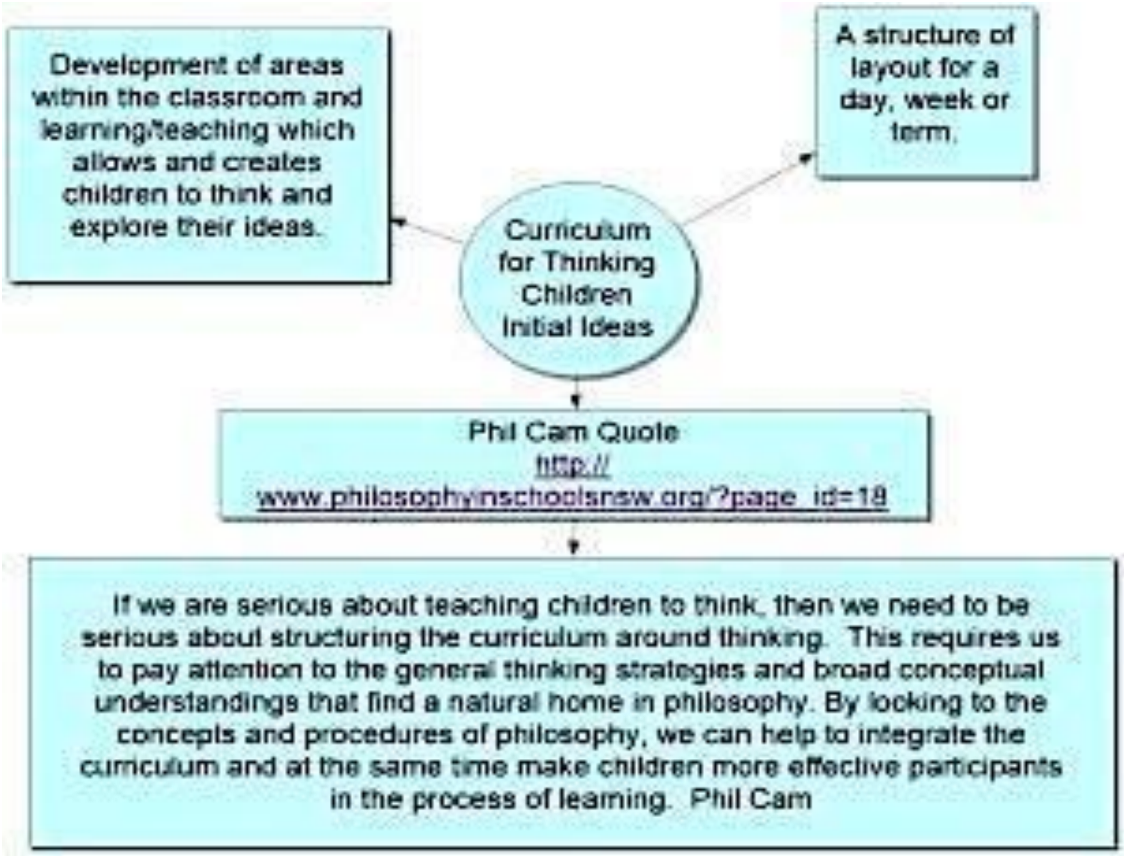
> 'I did stop towards the end of the module once my submission date was getting closer. I was uploading notes made in class but never discussed them in any way as this seemed like extra work at that time.' (UB:B10: K0079)

Even the most proficient bloggers, such as B12, suggested:

> 'My attention to detail did change a bit towards the end. I posted less, and I only used a few sentences or even bullet points as I wanted to work more on my assignment.' (UB: B12: k0089)

Similar to that found by Smidt et al. (2018), and discussed in more detail later in this chapter, one of the challenges for the students was having limited time available to use the blog. The lack of engagement and limited writing styles seen on the blog may not simply be due to a lack of motivation but rather a time deficit and the students' attitudes towards assessment demands. Four of the bloggers consistently shared posts using text boxes, charts and colour codes, which is indicative of the students spending time on and paying attention to the finer details of their posts to personalise them (Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl, 2010; Huang et al., 2011). B12 provides an example of this below:

Figure 3 Student Diagram (UNI B; E1:B12)



For some, therefore, the blog provided a personalised learning space for individual curation, as found in Strong and Hutchinson (2009) and Sullivan and Freishtat (2013). According to Wang et al. (2014), such students would be in the wayfinding phase, in which they were showing how to navigate the networking landscape by sorting and identifying the right resources. This stage is the most relevant to the connectivity learning context as the students were making choices and decisions in their own personalised learning environment.

These differences in writing styles support Lave and Wenger (1991) in that all the community members were inputting differently. Some, especially new members, had to watch before fully participating. However, the various ways students posted does not represent a key component in supporting a sense of community. In the context of HE, academic writing skills, understanding conceptual ideas, and reflecting are all equally important elements which, in this case for some but not all, did evolve through writing on the blog.

Therefore, differences in student styles may matter less in certain contexts, but in HE this is an important skill to develop. Having said this, different styles and attention to detail may always be observed regardless of blog type or academic input. Having more academic guidance could have facilitated the process further for the students. Garcia et al. (2013; 2014) found, using a connectivist model, that academic participation in, but not taking charge of, facilitating was the most effective way to encourage the autonomy of student groups and increase individual activity on the blog and collaboration.

4.3.2 Professional practices

As has been discussed, information sharing took place around three conceptual areas: professional practices, course content, and personal. However, posting activity concerning the students' professional practices was most prominent across the blogging data. In these posts, students reflected on their own practices. This posting often involved students sharing their experiences of curricular activities delivered to the children in their provisions. However, the connections to theory and/or further reading varied, as did the depth of writing across the student group and throughout the students' individual blogs.

B2 provides an example of connecting curricular activities to further reading, while also highlighting the level of depth and the style encountered in the students' posts. Seven of this student's posts, one example is given below, shared a consistent level of reflective writing regarding their professional practices, using citations. Conversely, only three of the same student's posts consisted of bullet points and lacked depth:

> ‘Within practice, I worked on many tasks with the children; this allowed me to think of the different abilities of the children and edit the task at hand for each of them. Shields suggests that any student or researcher looking to compare educational approaches or systems must consider any ‘assumptions and implicit values that limit and constrain one’s understanding’ (2013, p. 2).’ (UB; E4:B2)

Regarding the depth of the reflective accounts, the differences across the student group can also be seen when comparing B10 with B11. B10’s post (below), though citations are not included, extended the reflections through offering a possible solution and including personal feelings regarding the national curriculum:

> ‘The idea of a curriculum not being structured and still being able to inform a child's learning particularly grasped me. Beforehand, I had simply had 'tunnel vision' and only been thinking about the national curriculum in my practices which is very structured and has guidelines for the teachers. However, it has opened my eyes to other ideas of a curriculum with less framework and more free flow for the children I work with. I think that there should be a formalised plan with expected outcomes; however, this should be used as a baseline understanding for the practitioner and not as a guide for where the children should be in their development.’ (UB; E1:B10)

Meanwhile, B11 (below) identifies their changing views but without extensively reflecting or offering any form of a solution or possible changes in practice; therefore, the reflections appear more descriptive:

> ‘I've already started to change my view on how important structured learning is and that it may not be that relevant to a child's development. In my practice, children may not necessarily need structure to learn and may often learn and progress better without it.’ (UB; E1:B11)

Across all the blogging data set, most of the written reflective commentary was descriptive in that there was limited engagement with any reflective model and citations were not used. This is similar to McCormack and Kennelly (2011), who reported reflections, specifically written reflections, tended to be more descriptive on the blog. However, the evidence here demonstrates that students are being encouraged to think differently about their professional practices. All the students, at some point, reviewed some difficult questions relating to their own practices. In line with Novakovich (2016), their posts appeared to assist them in their further reflection on the process, which is exemplified in this extract from B3:

> 'Within my practice, I designed an activity for children to help them understand the concept of different shapes, colours and also the different seasons of the year. This went well but I wish that I had divided the groups up more so that they were smaller.' (UB; E3:B3)

All bloggers shared a professional background, i.e., children/young people and education, which assisted them in writing meaningful thought processes, on the blog, regarding their own practices. This same finding is also seen in Blau et al. (2013) and Kennelly and McCormack (2015). Students shared their personal and professional experiences, which evolved organically into online student groups. In this case, the students migrated toward using reflective written commentary (in the first person), and the blog served to extend their reflective thinking on their professional practice.

4.3.3 Course content

Although postings regarding professional practice were the most prominently found within and across the group, there was also a shared posting regarding seminar and lecture content. In most cases (i.e., all ten main bloggers at UB), it was clear that the students were encouraged to express their thoughts and think differently about subject-specific content. Having said this, many of these posts still involved students referring to their professional practices, as can be seen in the posts of this student:

> 'This discussion we had in class was useful as it highlighted the importance of why we, as early years practitioners, do what we do. It also expressed what should be considered

when creating a curriculum for thinking children, which is in fact these points mentioned. Instilling these points into the curriculum will ensure that children have the opportunity to be educated.' (UB; E11:B4)

> 'I would consider my own practice to be inclusive of all religions and cultures; however, I will use comparative education to compare and contrast my ideas to other countries, which would enable me to see if they celebrated different religions and cultures in any other ways.' (UB; E9:B6)

Although B9, at UB, created six of their ten posts using bullet points, this student also shared, alongside two other posts, visual social media clips from YouTube™ that related to the lecture notes. B9 shared and discussed the ideas presented in the lecture and uploaded a link for a possible audience to read. For another entry, they designed a PowerPoint™ presentation that outlined the lecture content and then shared this with the group:

> National Curriculum – PBL Task-1s58g5y (E7:B9)
>
> *Notes from video (Fröbel & Montesorri):*
>
> Early Childhood Education, Froebel and Montessori(E3:B9)

This student included links to other source information outside of the on-campus taught session. This synthesis of taught content and other related information, whereby articles relating to course-specific content were shared, was observed in a further seven students at UB. Siemens (2018) not only refers to blogs as a tool to contribute to new avenues of learning but emphasises how other internet technologies, such as web browsers, search engines, wikis, social networks and online discussion forums, can assist in the acquisition of knowledge and learning. In this case, there was evidence that knowledge was co-created through connectivity within and across other networks (Downes, 2010).

Eight student posts demonstrated that they were engaging in searches to find resources beyond those that had been shared in the classroom. In this way, these students are utilising the blog in line with connectivism (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2018), highlighting how learning does not simply happen within the individual but is co-constructed through connectivity within and across networks. The posting activity demonstrated that the students were encouraged to be reflective and extend their thoughts regarding course-specific content and what constituted appropriate academic reading resources.

4.3.4 Personal

There was evidence in the blog analysis of some students sharing posts regarding personal experiences and practices. However, this type of reflection only appeared during the beginning of the blogging period and was limited to a few students (n=2 at UA and n=2 at UB). Nonetheless, commentary of this nature can have beneficial outcomes, especially in new groups and contexts (Wenger, 1998a) and is, therefore, a significant blog activity to review.

Bloggers B1, B2 (UB) and B7 and B8 (UA) posted in this way, focusing on various aspects of their lives, for example, regarding themselves and their journey to education. B1 went into some detail about their family and journey to education, sharing ideas about how they were proposed to, and why they had decided to get involved in education; B2 explained their personal experiences of school life and the attributions they had formed regarding their own learning abilities:

> ‘X (name of partner) proposed at the top of the London Eye at night. I was looking out the window. He tapped me on the shoulder, so I turned round and he was stood with the ring box open and said 'marry me,' so I said, 'only if you ask me properly.' (UB; E1:B1)

> ‘… within my experience at secondary school I had to sit many exams and choose 3 optional subjects along with many compulsory subjects which I had to spend extra time studying as I didn’t like being in the lowest group as I felt I learnt nothing in those due to poor behaviour from other children, which was a huge distraction. I was always in the

> bottom sets for the majority of my school years due to my primary school operating differently and having mixed years.' (UB; E1:B2)

B7 and B8 did not share ideas regarding their past experiences but externalised certain emotional stresses of their current situation in education, as exemplified in B8's post:

> 'I have a mixture of emotions. Relief that it's done, worry if I've met the criteria fully but also sadness that it's done - I rather enjoyed it as a first task.' (UA; E1:B8)

The blogs in these four cases went beyond a sharing of subject-specific knowledge. They became more about relationship-building and the social aspects of a student's life when building student communities. In these cases, building confidence in social communities was equally important as their learning journey (Garrison, 2011; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016). One of these four students, for example, during an interview, expressed a need for other students to get to:

> 'know me as a whole person' (UB; B1:H0109)

Thus, these posts assisted in building communities as they were informal and personal (Garrison, 2011; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016) and could be considered a catalyst for creating a more relaxed level of communication among students. For the part-time students, who may not share long periods with their colleagues in the physical space of a university, being able to connect using social networks may be necessary for building a student community (Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013 and Kuo et al., 2017).

In line with Lave and Wenger (1991) and Xie et al. (2010), this sharing of personal narratives and life stories may encourage student conversations which, in turn, can support the participants in feeling part of a group. For these four students, blogs could have been a space to encounter both academic and social life. This seemed particularly relevant as these were first-year students starting a new course; therefore, getting to know the student group and building relationships may have carried more importance. This type of conversation may not have occurred if the blog had been presented at a different time in the students' course, such as the second or third term.

4.3.5 Summary: Information sharing and styles of writing

Twelve bloggers at two universities (UA and UB) were asked to contribute to a student blog. Unfortunately, the two bloggers at UA discontinued after the first two weeks. In the absence of any academic input on how to contribute to the blog, the kind of activities that took place showed that the ten remaining student bloggers made independent decisions regarding how, when, and what to post.

In terms of what was shared on the blog, the findings indicate that the students shared reflections and individual ideas, similar to Deng and Yuen's research findings (2011). This could be because they were encouraged to write freely and spontaneously. It could be said that in this way, the blogs enabled the students to externalise and reflect on their thoughts and feelings.

Because of the diverse ways students posted, the extent of the narrative and content in the posts varied across the blog entries. All ten students from UB used the blog to review class topics and make connections to their professional practices beyond the weekly on-campus meetings. In these cases, student posts had both a professional impact as well as an academic one, which is a similar finding to Boulton and Hramiak (2012), Park (2015), Kennelly and McCormack (2015) and Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis (2017). However, this type of posting was not consistently demonstrated by any one student throughout the twelve-week blogging period.

There were differences in the postings of a single individual, and differences between students' postings in the amounts of narrative. These were written in various styles, ranging from complete sentences using citations to diary-type entries without citations. Therefore, the depth of the writing, the extent of reflective thought and citations to further reading materials varied across the student blogs.

4.4 Academic and Reflective Writing and Thinking

Academic and reflective writing and thinking relate to the research question: What are the reported educational benefits of a student blog for part-time courses? The data was generated mainly through the interviews; however, the analysis of the findings has further clarified what kinds of activities took place on the blog and which are partially relevant to the first research question: What is shared, how and why?

The blog analysis revealed that students posted and shared reflective accounts, especially concerning their professional practices and course content. During the interview, the participants (bloggers, non-bloggers and academics) also reported the benefits of using a blog to practise writing for academic purposes and think reflectively. All the student bloggers at UB, for instance, felt that, through blogging, their academic writing improved:

> '… it helped me to practise my writing, so I thought it was a good use of my time.' (UB; B1:J0019)
>
> 'I think if you see this [the blog] as part of your course and development, then you are more likely to use it. I found it helped me to use references in my writing and to improve my sentence structure.' (UB; B6:L0129)

Additionally, they all noted how a specific benefit to their reflective skills was the product of seeing the academic work of their peers:

> 'It [the blog] made me think about the lecture and say what I think in written form … when I can design it creatively and others could see it.' (UB; B10:G0092)
>
> 'Being away a bit more from other students it [the blog] does help to see how they are writing and using references.' (UB; B9:H0087)

One student's entry shows how the blog was beneficial as it enabled reflective thinking on their own writing:

> 'I liked doing the posts because it gave me space to write things and compare my views to the other students' views. I can see all of the different curriculums through the posts of other students.' (UB; B12:F0087)

In all the cases at UB, reports suggested that online posts helped them keep track of the lesson content, which they could later revisit. All the bloggers mentioned the benefit of having all their notes and writing in one specific place and suggested that this helped to reinforce classroom learning:

> 'The blog was useful to go back to and, even though we did not write on each other's blogs, we were able to see how others were writing and what references they were using after each seminar session.' (UB; B2:C0118)

Therefore, it is clear that the students found benefits in using the blog for academic writing, reflection, storing information and keeping track of the seminar or lecture content.

Similarly, all the academics recognised that blogs could be of benefit regarding practising academic writing and increasing the levels of reflective thinking:

> 'A blog may allow students to practice skills such as academic writing or using references.' (UB; A4:A0026)

> 'I suppose thinking about it might offer them a place to practice assessment writing before they submit their final piece of work, which could be helpful. It would take time though.' (UA; A3:A0027).

> '… reflective thinking would be naturally encouraged, I suppose, through the use of a blog.' (UA; A2:A0017).

However, three academics based at UA emphasised their role in the student process. They reported that for students to benefit and gain reflective writing skills, they would need support from the academic staff to be able to find the correct information and key concepts in their reading:

> 'With peer-peer learning, the tutor needs to be able to assist in extracting key thinking from the student discussion, so somehow we (academics) would need to find ways of marking their (students') work and guiding their writing.' (UA; A3:B0015)

> 'I still think students need to be taught to consider what is good knowledge to extract and what is superfluous knowledge that is out there, and this could be an issue.' (UA; A2:B0022)

> 'I have been part of an online social group with the students before… I found that students would pass wrong information to each other. So much caution is needed so that they can get the right content and information, that can relate to the assignment, especially if the social networking group are not governed by tutors.' (UA; A2:A0005).

These academics at UA also emphasised how blogs were valuable contributors to course outcomes and summative assessment, as exampled here:

> 'The danger is they may be finding information that is not relevant to their programme and course outcomes or assessments. We, as the tutors, need to find out what the students are selecting and then control that to some degree.' (UA; A3:A0010)

This correlates with the work of Sullivan and Freishtat (2013), Deng and Yuen (2013) and Duarte (2015) when reporting that a more supervised blog encounter improved student engagement. These same three academics reported summative assessment as a central motive for blog use. They saw it as a way to channel students' reflective writing and thinking, as indicated in the two extracts below:

> 'For longer discussions, I think blogs may then be of use. But it would need to be assessed, I still think, otherwise the students would see this as something extra and then may not be motivated to use the blog.' (UA; A3:A0016)

> ‘I think if the blog was an assessment, they [the students] would definitely use it as they would need it to achieve their assessment. So, as a tutor, my role would be to make this a summatively assessed piece of work.’ (UA; A1:A0013)

Interestingly, ten of the twelve student bloggers reported the activity as useful or having potential for sharing ideas, and it encouraged reflective thinking without either being assessed or measured.

Only one non-blogging student explicitly reported that having a grade attached to using the blog would encourage them:

> ‘I am very competitive so if there was a grade on the blogs then yes, I would have definitely used it a lot. That, to me, is an incentive and would have definitely motivated me to use it more.’ (non-blogging student, A0038)

The academic at UB proposed that the blog could be a space to build student networks and communities and for students to take responsibility for information sharing and knowledge-building without an assessment:

> ‘The student can be very isolated and fearful, especially on a part-time course, about what they are working on. By looking at others’ blogs, they can compare their work with others and feel settled. There is always a few in the class who are ‘fast trackers’ and they have the threshold knowledge and an understanding of how to make writing in HE work, and therefore these students can share their knowledge and demonstrate their wiring to the rest of the class through the blog.’ (UB; A4:D0012)

These views echoed those of the students in that blog use was recognised as beneficial for sharing ideas as a community and suggested that engagement would be achieved through students and academics sharing and working together:

> ‘The tutors can gain a lot from enabling students to teach each other. I would not particularly say they are good for assessments because what is written cannot always account for knowledge and understanding. The tutor can set them up as an assessment and this is often how blogs are presented on a module in HE. For me, this changes the nature of the blogs being the student's space to check out and share writing.’ (UB: A4: D0012)

It would seem that implementing a student blog that facilitates group sharing and extends topic-driven reflective conversations may depend on the degree to which academics and students agree on its use and how they understand how this type of activity can support a learning journey in HE practices. In this case, from the academic and student perspectives, a difference emerged, mainly between the students and the academic at UB and the academics and one student at UA. This difference was not about the benefits of reflective and academic writing but in terms of how much support students would need to be able to maximise these benefits, i.e., the reports revealed levels of concern over student and academic-led activities and in the use of summative assessment.

Certainly, from the blog analysis, it can be seen that styles varied, and the quality of reflective and academic writing varied considerably. In this case, the critical thinking in the student writing was not consistent and was often underdeveloped and weak. Therefore, as this type of writing is an important feature of HE practices, more academic support and directed activities may assist the students when engaging in tasks that further encourage it. Given more time, this type of writing may have developed and evolved naturally in the student group. It was clear that the students were observing and learning from one another and, given time, this may have developed further, as this student reported:

> 'Seeing some of the other students' work made me think: Ah that's how to write reflectively and critically.' (UB; B12:G0096)

4.4.1 Summary: Academic and reflective writing

Demonstration of reflective thinking was an important feature that students said encouraged them to think beyond their original thoughts and, therefore, it may be considered an educational benefit. The benefits to this type of reflection are widely considered in the literature, specifically for in-training teachers (Hramiak, 2007; Hramiak et al., 2009; Harrison, 2011; Hramiak, 2010; Boulton and Hramiak, 2012; Blau et al., 2013; Ylijoki, 2013; Hemer, 2014; Kennelly and McCormack 2015;

Novakovich, 2016). It is regarded positively in terms of students sharing good practice.

Although three of the four academics reported that more academic support and summative assessment was desirable to maximise the benefits to students, asserting too much control over the blogging experiences, in this case, was not seen as being an important factor by the students and the academic at UB. In many ways, the students found benefits with little persuasion from the academics, despite the research taking place with first-year students at the start of their course and covering a relatively short period of twelve weeks.

Three of the four academics made sense of blogging against more traditional pedagogical practices that involve the notion of measuring outputs. In contrast, the students and one academic found a purpose outside of this whereby blogging supported their academic practices. This tension between student and academic views regarding the importance of assessment may need further attention if blogs are to be considered a viable and useful tool for co-constructed learning and the use of collaboration and sharing practices among student groups for educational purposes.

4.5 Repository for Sharing – writing for an audience and sharing vs collaboration

Although both data sets are used in this section, the focus was on using the findings generated from the interviews to address notions of collaboration and writing for an audience. This section answers the research question: What are the reported educational benefits of a student blog? In addition, it clarifies the question: What activities took place, how and why?

Although the blog had the potential to establish and maintain communication among its members beyond the physical classroom, this did not occur. Considering the blog analysis and interviews, it became clear that only two students (B7 and B8) at UA attempted to comment on each other's posts. However, this was only once during the first week, and both students discontinued their blogging entirely after that.

However, eight students showed signs of intent to collaborate through sharing questions on their posts, two at UA (B7, B8) and six at UB (B1, B2, B4, B9, B10, B12). This activity is illustrated below with B1 and B8:

> 'Do the children get questioned enough about their thoughts? – like we do in uni?' (UB; E5:B1)
>
> 'As a group, we have discussed this in great detail and we are probably all worrying far too much about it. Let's use this first blog as a measure of where we are/need to be.' (UA; E1:B8)

Participant B1 in E5, above, appeared to be directing and possibly attempting to engage an audience: that is, to collaborate. Meanwhile, B8 (below) in entry one (B8; E1) uses language that addresses the audience and directly asks the group to write a first blog entry.

Similarly, B7 (below) directly writes to an audience through the opening line: 'Hello all….':

> 'Hello all, opening up this line of discussion for our notes on how we felt about starting uni. My first thought was about making it on time whilst navigating the rush hour traffic in *(name of city)*, fingers crossed hopefully I have found the best route and have got my timing sorted. What has been your biggest issue so far?' (UA; E1:B7)
>
> 'As we reach the deadline for our first submission, I was curious how everyone feels about it?' (UA; E1:B8)
>
> 'As a group, we have discussed this in great detail and we are probably all worrying far too much about it. Let's use this first task as a measure of where we are/need to be.' (UA; E1:B8)

It is clear that B1 (below) writes for an audience by presenting questions and statements that assume an audience exists; for example, stating 'A lot of pressure on us all?' suggests confidence that the audience has shared a common experience:

> 'Do children get the same education in all schools? There is a large amount of pressure about meeting the curriculum! Ofsted give half a day's notice before arriving into the setting – A lot of Pressure for us all?' (UB; E6:B1)

Often this assumption of an audience and the knowledge within the group was evident, to varying degrees, through posts containing questions relating to the students' course or professional contexts.

During the interviews, all 12 students (bloggers and non-bloggers) across both universities reported the benefits of using a blog as a repository for sharing ideas rather than as a collaborative tool. Similar to that found by Rubin (2010), Blau et al. (2013), Deed and Edwards (2013) and Dabbagh and Fake (2017), those that blogged could see its use in preparing them for academic writing for more formal assessments.

Moreover, four of the students thought their grades had improved because of their blogging. They reported that blogs could (and did) facilitate opportunities to share ideas and sources with other students online for reading about relevant topics, which contributed to their understanding of the assessment:

> 'I can see by sharing stuff that is relevant to the course is really useful and helpful in the long run. My assignment at the end made much better sense to me and I believe the blog helped me to get a better grade.' (UB; B12:A0040)

Eight blogging students felt that other students uploading information relevant to their course content were beneficial to their academic journey:

> 'The blog was useful in sharing ideas with each other. Even though we never really commented on each other's blog we were able to see how others were writing and what references they were using. This was great for me 'cause I could see how others were writing and then I knew what I had to do for my own writing.' (UB; B9:C0118)

> ‘This [blog use] helped me to rethink the content and look at this in a different way.’ (UB; B10: C0134)

> ‘I think, to some degree, they [other students’ blogs] encouraged me to use the blog because through me looking at other blogs I was able to feel better about how I was going to use my blog and I would use the references that others had posted to look at, which I found helpful.’ (UB; B6:I0141)

Similarly, the two non-blogging students recognised the potential contribution a blog could have as a repository for sharing work:

> ‘I think the blog would be useful to share ideas with each other about the course. I think I would have liked to see others’ work, maybe, and share ideas about the assignment.’ (UA; NBS: E0026)

The fact that students still found benefits from using the blog, particularly in positioning their understanding with that of others, without any substantial ongoing conversation online illuminates the discussion about the value of ‘lurking’ (Armstrong, 2014) or the status of the inactive online learner (Deng and Yuen, 2011). ‘Lurking’ is a term that describes the online behaviour of individuals who view others’ posts without commenting or involving themselves. It is a term frequently debated (Downes 2010; 2014; Deng and Yuen, 2011; Armstrong, 2014; Siemens, 2014).

In this study, in line with the connectivist definition of lurking (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2014), all the students remained lurkers because they were observers, looking at their peers' posts without commenting on them. In cases where student’s posted rarely, the lurking position became especially relevant. B10 and B11, at UB (see Table 5 (page 89), reported the benefits of viewing the posts of others:

> ‘From looking at the other posts, I was able to know what I needed to write for my own assignment. It kind of set me off on the right path to think about the ideas and it made me feel more confident that I was doing things right.’ (UB; B10: F00118)

That said, aspects of lurking, in this case, were not straightforward, as the bloggers all belonged to one group at the same university and contributed to the blog development and creation of the space. Although posts did not grow and merge, no student simply viewed their peers' posts without sharing themselves. Despite this and the lack of online written exchanges, the blog did predominantly evolve as a sharing repository of students' individual reflections and academic writing on a common subject. Therefore, lurking, as described in the work of Armstrong (2014), was seen among the ten student bloggers at university B and may be considered valuable to their academic journey.

Additionally, although no collaborations took place online, the ten main blogging students sharing posts supported their on-campus conversations, and these conversations had both an academic and social impact. Connectivism might hold that these students should be creating and sharing their growing understanding and that they all need to be equally involved in this online process (Siemens, 2014). However, in the context of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), they were not solely reliant on the online platform to achieve this connectivity.

The community was formed using face-to-face contact alongside online communication, even though some students were more active than others. For instance, four students said that other students speaking about their posts during face-to-face contact helped them to feel part of the student group, claiming they:

> '… liked it when other students discussed my blog… I think this helped us [the class group] to start to speak with one another.' (UB; B1:C0143)

As the blog appeared to be a catalyst to create face-to-face discussions, a hybrid approach occurred, as outlined in the Massive Open Online Courses document (Yuan and Powell, 2013). The students saw these discussions as supportive.

The blogging students reported that face-to-face communication was an easier and faster way to reflect and debate with one another as no wait time was needed. Furthermore, nine of these students felt face-to-face communication encouraged them to share online:

> 'I really liked it when another student came up to me and said I really liked your blog, this made me want to share more. I think it helped me to think about the things I was writing too.' (UB; B1:C0143)

This confirms that goals were maintained by peer-to-peer communication using a variety of methods consisting of offline and online practices, implying that the students did not rely on digital technologies for their collaboration. In fact, reports suggest that six of the student bloggers felt this online sharing and offline communication offered a unique benefit to the successful completion of their assessments:

> 'We all work very well together in the classroom and share ideas about practice and our study. We all talked about what we had said or uploaded on the blog in class, and this made me feel comfortable to share my ideas on the blog more.' (UB; B9:J0037)

> 'Well, without the blog my assignment would have been poorer. You see through the blog I was able to see other views regarding the curriculum and more research. Through talking to some of the students when we were in class also made their blog clearer and made me think a lot more about the issues.' (UB; B2:G0096)

It is important to note here that this type of student discussion happened freely in their own time on campus, without any directives or encouragement from an academic. Therefore, the students found ways to co-construct knowledge, indicating that the more knowledgeable other (MKO), as outlined by Vygotsky (1978), could be passed from academics to student groups. Additionally, due to the part-time nature of the course, this type of sharing and reflective thought may not have occurred so extensively without the blog being available, as experienced by Boulton and Hramiak (2012) and Dabbagh and Fake (2017).

4.5.1 Summary

As the ten active students did not use it for any online conversation, unlike those reported by Xie et al. (2010), Trespalacios and Perkins (2016) and Kuo et al. (2017), this was not seen as the most successful aspect of the blog.

According to connectivism, the students here are classed as lurkers, but it should be recognised that they debated and discussed many ideas when 'offline', away from the blog. In this study, the blog acted as a catalyst for the blogging students' on-campus discussions. Therefore, although collaborations were not documented on the blog, there is evidence here to suggest that the most consistent blogging students at UB had face-to-face discussions regarding blog posts and to the extent the posts were developed. McCormack and Kennelly (2011), Ravenscroft (2011), and Smidt et al. (2018) placed importance on face-to-face spaces alongside online learning environments.

In this study, a symbiosis developed between online and offline activities, creating a co-dependency. This collaboration was to have some influence in creating a community of inquiry among the students.

4.6 Community of inquiry

This section reports on and examines the benefits of the blog regarding the formation of a community of inquiry, which relates to the research question: What are the reported educational benefits of a student blog for part-time courses?

In the context of HE, although the blog was found to be most beneficial as a repository for sharing as much of the communication and collaboration that occurred face-to-face, this was not the only online medium where discussions and collaboration took place. Many of the students (n=8) reported the benefits of other online collaborative practices involving Facebook™ and WhatsApp™.

During their interviews, the students recognised that communication and collaboration were important components of their study but, in most cases, this understanding was already well established:

> 'I think if we hadn't got the WhatsApp group we would have blogged more as it is a form of communicating when you are at home and keeping in touch with one another.' (UB; B10:B0021)

Facebook™ and WhatsApp™ groups served as an integral part of creating a community of inquiry and giving the students a sense of togetherness as a group. Thus, blogs, face-to-face and other online platforms functioned together, predominantly to encourage formal and informal conversations.

Inquiry-based activities, therefore, were formed using multiple methods and played a part in forming a community of inquiry. However, unlike the literature in this field (Huang, 2014; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016; Hannaford, 2017), the levels of inquiry were not always content-driven and assisted by the blog. In fact, all the students said they preferred more instant forms of online communication to support them in building relationships and getting to know one another, as shown in this non-blogging student's comment:

> 'It's a massive help to be connected with other students on the course… and when it's coming up to assessment deadlines, just confirming dates and layout of things. It is nice to just be connected with other students on your course.' (NBS: UA: E0020)

All ten bloggers often looked beyond the post's content to observe how others were writing academically. So, here, a community developed which had strong correlations to self-efficacy, as outlined by Bandura (1977; 2004) and Fencl and Scheel (2005).

Although collaboration was limited on the blog, cooperative learning structures were developed in this case. The students felt that a willingness to share helped them have positive evaluations of their capabilities. For example, seven of the ten blogging students reflected during their interviews that they felt more confident in their writing after using the blog:

> 'I felt better about my writing, and it gave me confidence to carry on.' (B4: UNI B: L0133)

This indicates that co-constructed learning in a student community of inquiry evolved, but learning experiences went beyond subject knowledge in that confidences were built in seeing other students' work.

Although Zahl (2015) asserted that academic departments should improve their peer mentoring programmes for the part-time learner to foster the development of community and draw on both the physical and online platforms available, students are already finding ways to do this independently. In fact, as has been reported elsewhere by Deed and Edwards (2011), with limited instruction given by their academics, a student learning community evolved. That said, as Bonk and Wiley recommend, promoting online experiential and community-based learning with more direction and input from the academics and strategically placing online resources in the heart of practices may support both student and student and academic communities to evolve.

As found in Duarte (2015), blogging can be successful alongside traditional teaching methods and strategies, and it does not necessarily rely upon the full implementation of connectivist frameworks. The academics also spoke about enabling online communities that are co-constructed and regulated by students. All four academics recognised the benefits of building a student community based on online communication and collaboration. However, all the students and academics at UA frequently referred to WhatsApp™ and Facebook™ as the main tools to achieve this by:

> 'For the many years that I have worked here, there has always been a group chat on WhatsApp or Facebook that the student has taken on and developed.' (UA; A2:C0015)

All the academics believed that the students were already experts in using online technology. Furthermore, they all reported that the students would always find ways to communicate with each other, with or without their help or support:

> 'They [students] are using things like WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram to network in groups and I am not part of that and would not be, as this is their private space.' (UA; A1:A0011)

There was, however, an acknowledgement, made by all the academics, that a blog might function as a valuable tool to encourage student communities further:

> 'I also think by looking at the strands of communication between students, the blog, perhaps, gives them impetus to join in or not to join in. Then to reflect or actually say, 'That's a useful comment'. And this is my view on it ; it gives them freedom to access and have their say.' (UA; A3:D0040)

> 'Great. The students don't have much time to collaborate during the lecture and very little in the seminar… so anything that helps to get them to talk or share knowledge and get them talking to one another would be good.' (UB; A4:D0033)

However, the academic at UB noted that if all the students and academics were not fully engaged in the process, then the benefits to students would be limited:

> 'In a collective learning space, one that is not reliant on online communication but is reliant on an unspoken consensus that all students and staff would share resources and be part of the collaborative process. Without this, a student will either find interests elsewhere or provide superficial blogging, which would be no good to anyone.' (UB; A4: D0037)

Face-to-face and other, more instant online forums, specifically Facebook™ and WhatsApp™, were additionally cited by the students and academics as having a direct or indirect impact on students forming a sense of community. The blogging students did not rely on one form of communication to create a community but developed their own mix of online and offline communication to suit their preferences and requirements.

4.6.1 Summary: community of inquiry

In line with connectivism (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2015), the blog benefitted students in sharing and extending their subject knowledge in similar areas of study. However, they used multiple online and offline platforms to communicate and share items of interest; therefore, they were not reliant on the blog as the sole medium. Without resorting to online commentary or discussion via the blog, they reported benefits in both the professional and academic contexts. This indicates that the blog is not all-encompassing and will not meet all the students' needs alone, suggesting a more blended way forward.

In many ways, communicating online was a highly cooperative process as the group worked together for their mutual benefit. Consequently, offering a multi-layered interactive blog platform for both collaborative and cooperative learning experiences and reflective conversation that is supported by physical spaces may ensure a necessary balance for the students to create student communities and share ideas (Yapici, 2016).

4.7 Academic and Student Views of Roles and Blog Use in Practices

This section answers the research question: How do students and academics understand their roles within a collaborative online environment?

Although the academics did not have an online presence, face-to-face prompts, encouragement, and ongoing suggestions from one academic (UB) appeared to yield a stronger and more enduring culture of student blogging. This is clear in that the most consistent bloggers studied at UB. During the interviews, these students stated that their consistent use of the blog was because the academic provided ongoing praise and encouragement and gave general ideas for posting during face-to-face times in class:

> '[The academic] did matter to get us going and to keep suggesting ideas and things.' (UB; B7:H0093)

In the context of HE, a level of structuring and directing conducted by the academic (face-to-face) is important to encourage student mastery of their experiences. Although the academic concerned did initially provide ideas for posting, the students did not see their role as taking up an authoritative position or being the source of learning in terms of being the provider of the information that flowed through the network (blog). Nor did they wish to lead in any discussions.

The position of authority continued to lie in the face-to-face directions given in class to guide the students in how to use the blog:

> 'The blog offers a platform for students to practice academic skills and as an academic, we need to guide them and encourage them, but not necessarily be online with them, this can be achieved verbally offline in the classroom, perhaps.' (UB; A4:D0012)

In HE, the academic and student roles are often clearly defined in relation to the MKO: i.e., the academic. These findings, like those of Deed and Edwards (2011), de Andrés Martínez (2012), and Deng and Yuen (2013), support the notion that the online or face-to-face presence of an academic directing and supporting improved student use and engagement. However, unlike in the case of Deng and Yuen (2013), the blog design here was unrestricted, and, thereby, the student and academic roles evolved more organically. The blog was primarily the students' responsibility, and the position of MKO then shifted to the student group, thus enabling levels of self-management and decision-making, both of which are important connectivist learning principles (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2014; Wang et al., 2014).

The blogging students additionally noted how the academic's role involved showing enthusiasm to encourage the use of the platform. In this case, the academic's praise and encouragement had a positive impact on their use of the blog:

> 'The tutor was enthusiastic (in class) for us to use the blog and would mention the blog regularly at the start and made suggestions regarding the use.' (UB; B7:K0098)

Praise, encouragement and face-to-face direction can also be seen in the comments made by all four non-blogging students, in which they spoke of the absence of on-campus academic encouragement as being a major reason for their lack of engagement with the blog:

> 'I think, definitely, this would have influenced my use. If the tutor had exposed us more to example blogs or displayed the blogs that were happening … seeing someone with enthusiasm and passion for this (the use of a blog) would get me more involved.' (UA; NBS:A0040)

> 'I think so. They (the academic) could have given encouragement and praise for effort in the classroom, this would have encouraged my use.' (UA; NBS:G0094)

The importance of the academic role for promoting student engagement offline was further exemplified in the remarks made by two students (B7 & B8) who did not maintain blogging after the first week for reasons such as:

> 'If my tutor was encouraging us to use the blog, we would have used it more. I think if they had put some interesting discussion topics forward in the class time, we would all be more inclined to use this and discuss more between ourselves online.' (UA; B8:I0026)

However, the use of the blog was not solely reliant on the academics' input; it was also dependent on the students' role. For instance, in this study, the least successful blogging involved one post in the first week made by the only two students that blogged at UA. One of them (B7) commented:

> 'I was happy to use it as a forum to communicate and gain further ideas from other students, but as others didn't blog with me, I lost interest and the drive to keep blogging, if I am honest, so just gave up on it.' (UA; B7:D0018)

Three of the blogging students at UB (B6, B9, & B10) also discussed the role of other students as being important in reporting that once the academic had provided encouragement and direction, the student group vicariously supported each other in the blogging process:

> 'We (the students) all just then helped each other to use the blog and work it out. Once we got used to it, we all just got on with sharing ideas and thoughts.' (UB; B6:K0099)

Although their academics seemed important for these students, the process was maintained through their acknowledgement of posts during on-campus times. Thus, why students used the blog in the ways they did depended on the engagement of the other students in their group; without this, the blogging was discontinued.

The idea of the role and value of an audience to encourage blogging is seen in the literature by Armstrong (2014), in which it is recommended that a student audience for the blogging needs to be cultivated primarily to sustain further blogging.

It is clear that blog use existed in student communities without continued academic involvement online. However, reports by the students and academics regarding the desired online role of the academic seemed to be in favour of a leading figure who would share knowledge and appropriate information and provide critical feedback.

When the students and academics were asked to consider who might fulfil the academic role online, ten of the twelve students interviewed (including bloggers and non-bloggers) suggested a tutor who would provide discussions and critical feedback:

> 'I think the tutor's role in all of this would be to get involved and make the chat or blog a lot more formal and purposeful

> for us so that it related to the assignment topics.' (UA; NBS:B0025)

> 'I think the tutor could take charge then and guide the discussion much more specifically to a subject.' (UA; NBS: L0148)

The students wanted an academic who would offer a more traditional role of rewarding, assessing and teaching, which follows policies held in formal educational establishments (Bruner, 1973; 1996; 2004).

It was clear through the blog analysis that only two students at UA commented on another student's blog, and then only once. The reasons why students in both universities blogged in this way, i.e., failing to respond to their peers' posts, would seem to be based on their ideas about the student and academic roles, as can be seen in comments such as:

> 'It's not my place to provide feedback.' (UB; BS 6:E0012)

And:

> 'They [the students] do not have the answers and may not be right in guiding me on important subjects.' (UB; BS 2:G0094)

> 'I think it is the tutor's role to give feedback on posts not the students', so I did not reply to any posts because I wasn't sure whether I was right or not.' (UB; BS 10:G0093)

> 'Even if the students had commented something on my posts, I might not have taken the feedback seriously, but I would if it was any of my tutors, a 100%.' (UB; BS 12:G0098).

Despite connectivist assertions (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2018) regarding the problematic nature of academics being an authoritative source of learning, in this study, the students placed or showed a desire to situate the academic firmly in the centre of the online environment as the sole provider of their learning.

Many blogging students limited their online role to presenting and sharing ideas (without collaboration) with their student peers. They positioned the academic as the MKO, as Vygotsky (1978) outlined, and themselves as novices. For instance, the ten students who blogged regularly still regarded the academic, situated online, as taking a central position in sharing knowledge regarding assignment outcomes, reading material, and general course topics.

To engage with a new process or practice that involves a blog may be difficult, especially if this is not valued as an educational tool, as seen in some academic comments based at UA and conveyed here:

> 'I do not see the value of this (a blog) especially as we have a virtual learning room. Collaboration can be achieved in the class time.' (AC: UNI A: A0019)

Therefore, training for pedagogical, not just technical, aspects of how to facilitate and maintain a blog, for academics and students, could provide the basis for the co-construction of student-led knowledge alongside that which is academic-led. Although, even with this understanding, as seen in Garcia et al. (2013; 2014) regarding the benefits of student groups using a connectivist model, the students and academics both reverted to the academic being in the authoritative role.

The role of the academic in the online network may be determined by the students (Guder 2010; Armstrong 2014) and might not solely depend on the academic's pedagogical positioning. However, for two of the academics at UA, their role in the blogging process was reported as being likened to their traditional and familiar forms of online communication, such as virtual learning rooms or emails. From this viewpoint, the academics dismissed the idea of blogs having value:

> 'I have a virtual learning room that students can use to get the course content and outcomes. So, information is readily available and ordered for all the students to see.' (UA; A1:A0019)

> ‘I use emails to communicate with all students on an individual level and I think that is enough for the part-time learner.’ (UA; A2:AOO16)

All three academics based at UA reported their role in educational practices online as one that exists outside of the online student community or forums:

> ‘It is the students’ responsibility to create networks with each other and they often do. The students use WhatsApp and Facebook groups to communicate outside of the classroom, which I think for a part-time course is more than enough.’ (UA; A1:A0025)

However, one academic at UA reported the changing attitude of tutors as an important consideration when using a student-led blog:

> ‘Blogs would be good to allow tutor and student to work together and collaborate, but I am still mindful that the tutor needs to have that attitude that does not take ownership of the blog and encourages autonomy of the student. This is something I think needs to be tackled in staff training.’ (UA; A3:B0020)

Students' participation and collective input online also appeared to affect their engagement, as seen in the comments by the two students at UA who stopped blogging after the first week.

As with the reports made by the students, the academics valued their role as one that exclusively shared the ‘correct’ knowledge and information. Concerns were raised by three of the academics (UA) regarding the students acquiring the relevant and correct information, as seen in these two comments made by A2 and A3:

> ‘Students might pass on incorrect knowledge to one another.’ (UA; A2:C0015)
>
> ‘Tutors need to be in charge of the knowledge sharing.’ *(*UA; A3:A0010)

At both universities, although to varying degrees, the academics appeared to interpret their role in blogging as part of their existing pedagogical practices. However, those at UA (n=3) expressed some concerns regarding online platforms that they did not oversee, implying a level of control was needed. Concerns were also expressed regarding students getting incorrect information. In these same three cases, it was felt knowledge distribution was best channelled through the academic and not through student groups.

Having this overall view can prevent other pedagogically philosophical ideas to be realised. Indeed, in connectivism (Siemens, 2006), learning occurs within a fluid and dynamic context and knowledge is distributed across the networks. In this way, learning involves the ability to construct and manage these networks instead of gaining content-specific knowledge per se. So, there is a need to consider the context and place of the student and academic.

University education has followed a long line of traditional ideological perspectives. Therefore, to engage with learning and knowledge-building in this case, using the fundamental principles of connectivism seems far-reaching. It can be challenging to shift existing teaching and learning concepts, especially when dealing with large numbers of students (Bruner, 1996; 2004). However, more conscious awareness, both at the individual and institutional level, of the reality of the present technological era, specifically the use of Web 2.0 technology for educational purposes, may need to arise for any action or fundamental changes in practice to occur.

4.7.1 Summary

With little persuasion from their academics, the students found their roles in the process of blogging and sharing and, ultimately, found a purpose for blog use. Although this correlates with the lack of prompting or encouragement given by the academics at university A, both students there noted the importance of other forms of online peer engagement, suggesting their continued use if other students had blogged. This combination of discussion and sharing online to reflect on their own practices (both academic and professional) supported and maintained the process for those who used it.

It was noted that the academic was necessary as the students would not have used the blog without their prompting. However, the need for other students to look at and acknowledge posts was equally essential to cultivate sustained blogging.

A successful virtual environment is likely to depend on how far students and academics recognise both the value and limitations of their online interactions and develop strategies and working practices to overcome these. My findings suggest that they may need either to prepare themselves, or to be prepared for, an educational adventure in online participatory environments (Ahn et al., 2013), and it may be necessary to consider the existing cultures of the classroom (virtual or physical). For example, setting a high value in assessment activities may discredit the value of blog use in meaningful ways (Sivan, 1986; Murphy et al., 2015).

In this study, although the bloggers did experience benefits from using this online environment, the encultured social norms of the classroom persisted, which are positioned to value the academic as the primary source of knowledge (Sivan,1986; Rowlands, 2000; Hung, 2001; Perry et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2015).

From a theoretical position of connectivism and social culturalism, knowledge can be disseminated by student groups effectively. This, however, would depend on the social meanings that the students and academics placed on their own and each other's roles. The student role as the novice persisted, which appeared to detract from any meaningful student-to-student online exchanges. Therefore, collaborative uses of a student-led blog will also need to consider whether the students see themselves and their work-life experiences as valuable enough to share and for others to learn from. This will impact pedagogical practices and how effectively, and in what ways, the blog is accepted for academic ends.

In this study, all twelve students emphasised the academic as the sole provider of knowledge if involved online. Therefore, the academic was always perceived as the MKO and expert, even though they also expressed the benefits of sharing.

4.8 Challenges to Blogging

This section addresses the reported challenges to blogging and specifically answers the research question: What are the reported challenges in implementing a blog for educational purposes in higher education provision?

Challenges in using a blog for part-time courses were reported in three areas during the interviews: training, attitudes and value and time.

4.8.1 Training

Regarding incorporating blogs, three of the four academics, based at university A, reported concerns about their own skill in guiding students and their knowledge of pedagogical best practices (Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Johnson et al., 2016). All the academics reported that training had a crucial role in providing any meaningful engagement with blog use for educational purposes:

> 'I think training would perhaps be appropriate for us to fully integrate ideas such as using a blog in the classroom.' (UA; A2:B0020)

One of these academics, at UA, reported a lack of cohesion with pedagogical and collaborative technologies in training provided by the university:

> 'We have training on blended learning concepts, which I attended once but really, this is not helpful as it just talks about things that we really already know, such as how to

> use flipped learning in group work exercises… I think more helpful would be to look at the concepts and pedagogies behind using collaborative technologies, perhaps how we could set up and use a blog in practice.' (UA; A2:COO26)

This implies that more contextual training is required as it is not simply about how to use the tool but, more importantly, how the tool functions pedagogically.

All three academics at UA highlighted training as being an important factor in building confidence in the use of a blog:

> 'Well, personally, I have very little confidence in using a blog because I have never used this.' (UA; A1:B0011)

> 'I think a development point could be that we develop or change attitudes of students and staff together, and this comes through training.' (UA; A3:B0014)

Therefore, a central point made by all academics at UA was a need for training, not just in the use of technology but in how to use it in pedagogical practices.

If the use of a collaborative student-led blog is perceived as incompatible with the needs of both academics and students, it is unlikely that adoption will be successful (Garcia et al., 2013). Academic staff and students must first be willing and able to use a blog and have knowledge of how this tool can be used for educational purposes. Two of the academics (A3 and A4) suggested necessary changes to attitudes regarding the pertinent pedagogical practices:

> 'With training, I think all tutors could achieve this [the integration of blog use] in the classroom but, again, there needs to be a shift in attitude as well. For me, the criteria is important to get across so that they [the students] can complete their assignments, but I see, in theory, that it is perhaps the online discussion that will help them to further understand the concepts and ideas being presented.' (UA; A3:C0030)

Although the academics in this study reported training as necessary for the integration of collaborative technologies in pedagogical practices, it is a more cohesive training programme that includes how to use a blog in pedagogical practices that is required. Although Downes (2012) and Siemens (2005) agree that training will help, teaching practices need to shift to allow the integration of collaborative technology. This may be difficult for academics who value more didactic, traditional teaching styles or delivery formats.

Allowing a system in which academics can observe their colleagues more freely and regularly in practice, and which provides for the inclusion of collaborative technologies, may offer a situation whereby a more focused view of the benefits for students are highlighted and, thus, create a culture of academic staff sharing good practice.

When considering the student reports, my findings suggest that all the participating students were using WhatsApp™ and Facebook™ informally to connect with others on their course. However, this did not extend to them using the blog in the same collaborative ways. Four student bloggers reported the difficulties they had with the technicalities of using the blog tool and forcing them to return to communicating using other, more familiar and accessible online forms, as was found by Deed and Edwards (2011).

> 'We are all on the WhatsApp group and it's a massive help to be able to confirm what's been said in the classroom.' (NBS: UNI A: E0020)

How students engaged with the blog appeared partially dependent upon the transference of situated learning to a new context. In this case, as Prensky (2005) suggested, it is insufficient to think that because students are part of the "digital generation", they will immediately be able to engage in a given technology for academic ends. Only twelve students used the blog out of a possible thirty-four, and none used it to communicate. From a Vygotskian perspective, one possible explanation for this is that learning is situated (Murphy et al.., 2015). Therefore, the assumption that students will undertake blogging based on their use of other informal technologies outside the educational environment was not the case in this research.

4.8.2 Attitudes

A part-time student, while part of a physical community, might be expected to value a virtual one, as reported by Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) and Kuo et al. (2017). However, in this study, the number of students who elected not to blog exceeded those who did.

During the interviews, it was clear that all twelve students reported a preference for synchronous, face-to-face communication and other online platforms such as WhatsApp™ and Facebook™. Although using these platforms served as an integral part of creating communities, it was also reported they prevented any collaborative exchanges on the blog. Seven out of the 12 student bloggers suggested that they did not need to use the blog for discussion as they had a WhatsApp™ group. Four out of the six non-bloggers at UA reported that they did not use the blog as they have other platforms to communicate with their fellow students outside of class time.

The students' attitudes towards more instant forms of online and face-to-face communication go some way to explaining why they used the blog as a repository for sharing and not for commentary. Many of the student participants were already finding and selecting their own online spaces to achieve this connection:

> 'I can see the use of communicating with others on the course is important, though we have a WhatsApp that does this so why would we need to do this on the blog also?' (UA; NBS:E0026)

In this case, using the blog to communicate with other students was, on many occasions, seen as having less value and unnecessary:

> 'I do think that being on a part-time course there is a need to communicate with other peers more outside of university. I really like group chat on WhatsApp in our

> group and that’s really helpful… We talk about all sorts of things… I don't see this is as part of my course, I just think it’s about letting off steam.’ (UA; NBS:B0017)

As with the students studied by Andergassen et al. (2009), even when students blogged regularly and were active bloggers, they still favoured other forms of social software to communicate with peers.

Adjacent to the students’ preferences for other platforms, three academics at UA recognised that the students were already connected outside of the classroom, independently of their tutor. Therefore, any other connections in this way would:

> ’...overwhelm part-time students.’ (A1: UNI A: A0028)

However, although these academics were clear on the importance of students connecting outside of class time, this was reported as remaining in the informal sense, on Facebook™ or WhatsApp™. It was the responsibility of the student rather than the academic to ‘set up’ and engage in communities outside of class time. However, although Facebook™ could offer a socio-emotional dimension (Deng and Tavares, 2015), encouraging more informal conversations and the casual use of language, the subsequent written exchanges may have lacked depth and breadth (Deed and Edwards, 2011). In this case, the blog was of limited value in offering opportunities for students to formally discuss and extend their depth of knowledge, understanding, and criticality regarding the course.

How students and academics perceive and then value the functions of a blog in pedagogical practices in comparison to other more familiar social networks is considered, in this case, to be a challenge to the uptake of blogging for formal online conversations.

However, traditional learning rooms, email and face-to-face teaching were considered by these three of the academics (UB) to be enough for the students, as seen in the following academics’ comments:

> 'I would not set up a blog as I do not see the value of this, especially as we have a virtual learning room… Collaboration can be achieved in the class time.' (UA; A1:A0018)

> '… these part-time learners have not got time to use technology to collaborate, they have enough to do in the class time.' (UA; A3:A0017)

Focusing on the existing collective beliefs and values held by all the community members regarding how knowledge is shared, by whom, and for what purpose seems necessary. Both universities were at similar stages regarding the introduction and use of virtual pedagogical technologies.

Viewpoints may not be initially at institutional level but instead explained through individual knowledge, understanding and expertise regarding the use of blogs (Waldeck and Dougherty, 2012). This, to some degree, validates the State of Digital Education (2017) findings that few academics have more expertise in using technologies for educational purposes. Furthermore, their expertise is often not disseminated to other less experienced colleagues who may have lower confidence, leading to uncertainty about how to incorporate blogs into their own practices. This may lead to the persistence of customary beliefs and social norms in the dominant group.

4.8.3 Time

Having the time to blog was reported as a challenge by both academics and students. One academic at UA voiced explicitly how the use of other online platforms may impact their workload and that of the students:

> 'The student will need some support in trying to reduce this [the information found], to filter this with their course outcomes, which would be extra time for me and the student and what would be the point?' (UA; A2:A0024)

Three of the academics at UA also felt that part-time students would struggle to find time to complete the blog:

> 'We do not want students to feel overwhelmed. These are part-time students with little time. They have busy lifestyles and cannot be given another thing to do such as the use of a blog.' (UA; A1:A0019)

This was echoed by some of the student bloggers, who noted the extra time it took to blog; even without a summative assessment or pressures to post, they referred to blogging as a means to an end rather than seeing this as a process:

> 'I wanted to get it out of the way so sometimes I just did not have the time to write so I wrote anything that came into my head at that time… I didn't think about how this might benefit me or the group.' (UB; B9:D0024)

This view was echoed thus:

> 'I didn't know what to do or where to start so I put some of the content regarding the lesson down and on some occasions just copied the PowerPoint notes onto my blog and spent the least amount of time on it (the blog) as possible.' (UB; B6:F0099)

Time issues were also evident in the blog analysis phase, as some students stopped blogging at the end of the term when a summative assessment was due for submission. It appeared that four of the student bloggers and three academics viewed blog writing as something that was additional and not integral to their studies. Although all the blogging students found value in blogging, there was uncertainty about expectations on what they were meant to do.

4.8.4 Summary

Attitudes and values regarding pedagogical practices incorporating blog use can be a challenge. In this case, the three academics at UA believed that using emails, PowerPoint™, learning rooms and on-campus activities was enough for the part-time students, and any more would be burdensome. However, the academic at UB did think blogs could be an integral part of pedagogical practices.

How academics and students view the implementation of a blog for academic ends and how confident, experienced, and technologically literate they are, can affect outcomes and make the journey problematic (Deed and Edwards, 2013).

4.9 Overall Discussion

With little interaction or direction from an academic, blogs were used, and students did engage with the process, using them as a space to note-take, as a repository for sharing, and to reflect and practice academic writing. In this way, the students did find benefits for educational ends without the academic using the blog as another channel to disseminate information and without the blog being overly prescribed or assessed.

Xie et al. (2010) and Kuo et al. (2017) reported that students found communication with peers was the most beneficial aspect of the blog. In this study, the findings are similar to those of Li et al. (2013) in that, there was very little commentary or discussion of the blog by the students, but an awareness of an audience was present. The students preferred to use the blog as a repository for sharing, and the benefits (or potential gains) of this were felt by them all.

The greatest advantage of using the blog was that it provided the students with a space where they could deposit and revisit their writings, and where they could practise academic writing. Many posts were reflective in nature and were focused on the students' experiences, either in a professional or a personal context. However, although there were benefits found in students' using the blog for academic and reflective writing, this aspect remained underdeveloped. Therefore, although all the blogging students gained from seeing the writings of others, further interaction may have extended their thought processes and, perhaps more importantly, these would be documented for all the students to view or refer back to at a later date.

For students to engage with the blog in the first instance, they reported the face-to-face involvement of an academic on campus as being a significant factor. The main student participants on the blog were all in the one class group at UB, and their academic regularly reminded them (face-to-face) about the blog during class time. Such academic involvement was not in the initial design of this research, but it became evident that the students did not blog without this continued encouragement.

Alongside the students' use of Facebook™ and WhatsApp™, all the blogging students migrated to face-to-face communication as they found this more personalised and an easier way to connect with others. Although blogs can be a substitute for face-to-face conversation, it is difficult to achieve intimate and free-flowing connections using them. Lurking and face-to-face communication seemed to have been an important part of the students' experiences in this study.

Offline prompts, encouragement, and suggestions made by the academic to the students appeared to yield more substantial and more enduring blogging. Few students blogged or maintained blogging at UA, where the value and confidence felt by the academic for it was an issue of concern.

Time constraints on blogging were frequently referred to as a problem by both academics and students. From an academic viewpoint, there were concerns regarding the part-time nature of the course and the extra time for blog use alongside students' already intensive academic workload. In addition, as in Smidt et al. (2018), the academics' own time to develop an online environment for students was questioned. Two of the four academics, for instance, based at UA, expressed concerns regarding how they would be able to manage a blog under an already extensive workload. Furthermore, the other academic based at UA suggested that academics may struggle to find time to participate and contribute to blogging processes regularly. Undoubtedly academic participation, specifically encouraging inactive students, requires a level of instructional presence or intervention (Park, 2015).

Four of the blogging students also referred to time as an issue that had led to a minimal amount of blogging at certain periods. Time issues were especially clear during the end of the blogging period when summative work increased (Ylijoki, 2013). This indicates that academics need sufficient time to consider pedagogical practices with the inclusion of blogs and opportunities to explore innovative practices using technology. Without this, the blog may not be fully integrated or supported and may be regarded as an ‘add-on’ activity, which falls short for students (Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Park, 2015; Johnson et al., 2016). The students (academics) needed time to engage with the blog (Deng et al., 2017a) without the perceived distraction of summative work. This may depend on a more blended approach whereby the blogs are integrated into the academic schemes of work and thought about during on-campus meetings. This would allow time for student-led activities alongside other more formalised learning activities involving the academic.

Managing expectations regarding blog use might combat some of the time issues. In this case, the students blogged with regular but brief face-to-face prompts from the academic. With some extended thought regarding the blog's purpose, it may not require much of the academic’s time. In addition, most of the blogging occurred during the first six to eight weeks of this study; therefore, blogging may not need to persist beyond this, especially through assessment periods.

Similarly, three academics at UA expressed that some training and context regarding blogging in pedagogical practices would support their understanding and confidence in using it. Students may need support to bridge the gap between their existing knowledge of online collaborative environments and that of blogging for academic ends, as this did not occur naturally for some of them. However, the three academics based at UA reported both technical and pedagogical difficulties in using a student-led blog, prompting them to question its purpose. This academic perspective indicates that the use of a blog is not only dependent on the transference of technical skills but also reliant on academics (and students) perceiving a benefit and value in such a platform for educational purposes. Extending the benefits of using a blog is not simply a case of supporting levels of digital literacy but finding ways to assist pedagogical understanding by employing one.

Student and academic attitudes towards how online collaborative tools are compatible with their needs are important considerations, especially at the implementation stages. Students and academics may not blog if they see no educational value in it. This, coupled with the lack of technical ability, may induce feelings of not being able to communicate online or navigate the blog environment.

Through the continued active participation of the ten students at UB, they all played a part in the creation of knowledge, which is imperative for learning in online environments, according to the connectivist perspectives of Prensky (2005), Downes (2010) and Siemens (2018). However, attention should be given to the amount of instructional guidance provided by the academic, and how it is crucial to finding a balance between too much and too little.

The implications of these findings will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5, which highlights how the values and confidence of academics regarding blog use may impact collective beliefs and cultures within the classroom, and further explores the question of appropriate training and preparation.

4.10 Implications from the findings: a professional context.

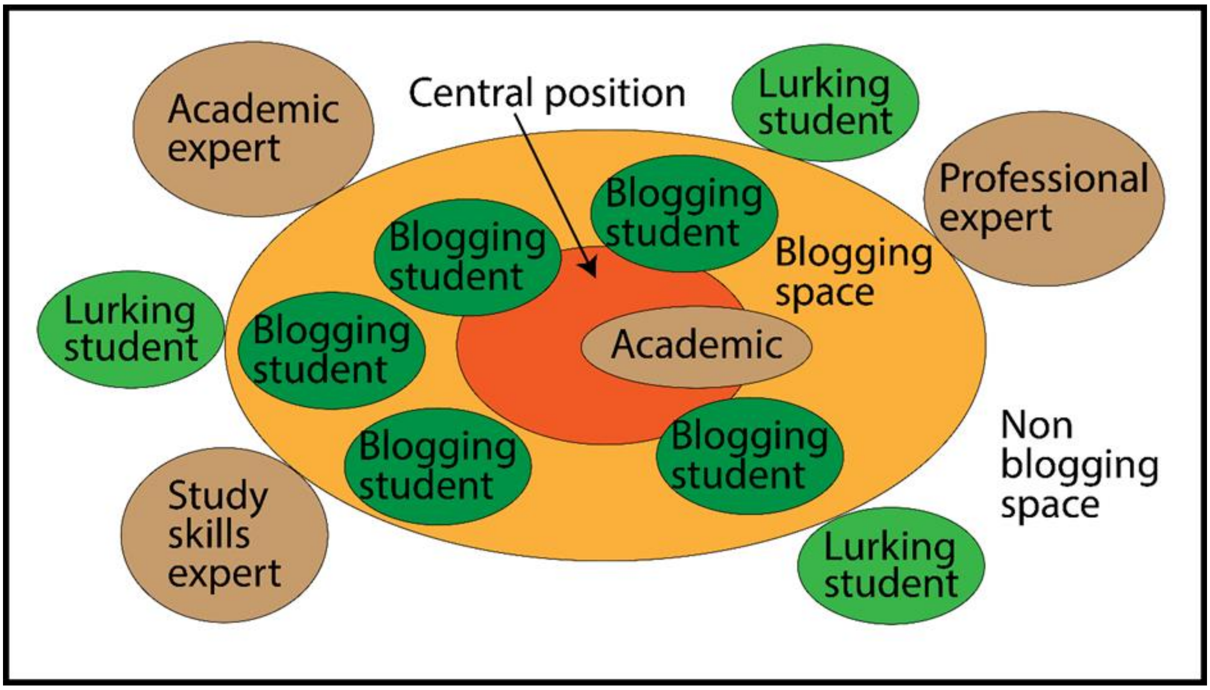
An important implication drawn from the findings is that successful online collaboration when using a blog is likely to depend on the extent to which students and academics recognise the value of this, and this is not a quick fix. The findings suggest that academics need to prepare specifically to learn about, plan, develop, and teach with a student-led blog. If blogs are to evolve to be a valuable learning tool, academics will need to ensure that expectations are clear from the outset.

Having more of an academic presence, both on campus and virtually, might encourage all students to engage. However, for this to be accomplished, tailored training in collaborative technologies in pedagogical practices may be required to distinguish educational blogging from other casual social media use.

A summary of findings can be viewed below (Figure 4, page 141), which provides a starting point for embedding the blog platform into educational practices and intends, in its use, to begin to develop a culture of blog use in HE part-time courses.

The model's basic structure is similar to that of Garcia et al.'s (2013) original connectivist-learning blog model discussed in the literature review chapter, in that there is an outer and inner blogging environment. Though, within Figure 4 there are three areas in which individuals can become engaged with the process; central position; blogging space; non-blogging space. It should be noted that Garcia et al.'s model allows for fluidity as positions and roles taken are not static and may change throughout the blogging period.

Figure 4 Wider Learning Educational Blog Model, Casserley 2020



Although the academic is placed here primarily as the more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978), the model allows scope for the academic to withdraw from this position as and when required, to let other experts and students take that central position. This supports Ioannou's (2017) finding that having the academic in the central position may build student confidence, as they will have a role model for how to use the blog and for what purpose — subsequently having the potential to facilitate more student-led online discussions, collaborations and sharing. As Bruner (1996) shows, academics (and students) have set ideologies regarding what constitutes learning, and therefore certain expectations of the learning environment are constructed. This study finds that academics may always need to maintain the facilitator role in overseeing the blogging process, but this can be achieved in all three areas found in Figure 4. The academic can take a central position that allows for instruction and guidance and also move to the blogging space taking on the role of a more experienced peer or an observer role as a lurker in the non-blogging areas.

The blogging space in Figure 4 consists of individuals sharing and collaborating. This area intends to allow for the student to take responsibility for their own learning. Students in this area may begin to see connections between thoughts, ideas and concepts - a fundamental principle in connectivism (Siemens, 2005). This space can be shared with academics, professional and study skills experts, as each can take on a more experienced peer. Although this space is expected to be predominantly occupied with the student community, it is important to note that this research is based on part-time students who are away from the university for longer periods. In this case, students reported that they needed more support and encouragement from the academic in building the community, sharing and searching for interesting (and relevant) items to share within the space.

The non-blogging space represents the outer space. As students in this study benefited from lurking, Figure 4 additionally shows that, unlike Garcia et al.'s model, students can be outside the blogging environment and still gain from viewing the discussions and sharing with others. The model, as in Garcia et al., represents experts in the students' field, but, as this research was conducted around part-time professional courses, these experts are divided into academic, study skills, and professional experts. Initially, the main academic will ask these experts to join. They could be unknown to the student and residing within a different country, offering national and international practical and theoretical perspectives as well as study skills guidance. In order to extend the knowledge base of the network, both types of experts can be accessed globally in order to offer comparable perspectives.

In applying this model, debates may emerge relating to the concepts of 'networks' and 'nodes' put forth by connectivism. However, it offers a potential way forward for mastering experiences using online learning environments with part-time students studying on professional courses.

Guidance and training may encourage students and academics to distinguish between the benefits of formal and informal conversations, which may, in turn, provide a more meaningful and useful engagement for the students' blogging experiences. In this study, notions of scaffolding outlined in Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) can be extended to the academic staff. This is an important concept since, as the findings indicate, the inclusion of collaborative technology in HE pedagogical practices will need to be scaffolded into an already established teaching culture and environment.

Using a model, such as in Figure 4, can scaffold classroom practices. It can provide a base to monitor and modify the activity accordingly, which might train students (and academics) to build their online communication skills and practices. The model intends to encourage students to navigate the networking landscape by sorting, identifying, and sharing appropriate resources. Through this, academics may also be supported in guiding students' use and, perhaps more importantly, develop an understanding of how collaborative online learning environments can benefit the students for academic ends.

As found in this study, changing practices with the inclusion of collaborative technology will need careful scaffolding. The starting point needs to consider the students' and academics' actual level of development and then examine the potential for growth. However, this needs to focus on not just the individual but also the socio-cultural aspects, that is, the environment and practices that occur within this.

4.11 Conclusion of Chapter

Overall, there is evidence that student groups will accept and facilitate an unrestricted blog-type on part-time professional courses. With little interaction or directives from the academic, blogs were a useful tool for sharing ideas, reflective thinking, and practising academic writing skills. My research demonstrates that students could further contextualise their class topics with their own professional practices beyond the weekly on-campus meetings (Harrison, 2011). These findings echoe that of Boulton and Hramiak (2012), Park (2015), Kennelly and McCormack (2015) and Jimoyiannis and Tsiotakis (2017), who found that using blogs supported students to develop a deeper level of reflections which had both a professional impact as well as an academic one. While this is the case, the introduction of collaborative technologies led by students is not straightforward.

There are limitations to using such tools for academic ends, which need careful addressing for blogs to reach the full potential for part-time students. Students and academics need to see a value and purpose for a student-led blog and to re-imagine academic authority over the content and materials shared within it. Socio-cultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978) draw attention to the learning environment where pedagogical ideas are shared and thought about.

In many ways, student and academic acceptance of a new cultural (learning) tool is the key to whether this will work in practice. Their acceptance relies on the enculturation of the environment and the institution in which teaching and learning occur. Therefore, training issues need to be managed and considered carefully, as it is not simply a case of learning how to use the blog technically; an understanding of the reasons for, and the purpose of blog use, is essential in order to establish the full benefits for the use of a blog tool – it is this that will provide a paradigm shift in the way students and academics become engaged.

Connectivist models offer the students autonomy and provide many learning experiences such as decision-making and searching for appropriate resources. Still, from a socio-cultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), my research found that connectivist frameworks did not naturally function in higher educational institutions wherein there are pre-existing expectations of both academics and students. Furthermore, if provision and practice favour more traditional pedagogical practices that emphasise measuring outcomes and assessment-based learning, a student-led blog may not be seen as valuable or useful to the learning process and, therefore, may be dismissed in favour of more traditional ways of communication such as email and online learning rooms. Therefore my model in Figure 4 (page 141) offers a way forward for the potential use of blogs that are more in line with higher educational institutions while still encouraging the use of collaborative technologies that can be student-led and offer global connections.

Based upon the findings of this study, and those discussed in existing literature, achieving the democratic vision of interconnectivity may not be straightforward or possible in practice, but this does not necessarily mean that what was achieved, or can be achieved, is not of value. It appears that, in practice, academics and students may transfer established socio-cultural attitudes and hierarchies into the virtual space, in a sense re-creating, or expressing a desire to re-create, familiar relationship dynamics and establishing and maintaining the same roles online.

Students and academics need a good reason to employ this form of technology as many other forms of conversational social networks are available for students' personal use. The attributes of a blog are often referred to in the literature as being a tool to devise deep learning, yet in this case, when left initially in the hands of the students, this may not be fully realised.

If the blog is not perceived as purposeful for student groups to collaborate and share ideas for academic ends, then the outcome will have little benefit to them. However, suppose student collaborative online groups are considered to have benefits that can coincide with existing practices as an added function and platform to support other learning spaces. In that case, this could be effective in the educational landscape.

5 Chapter Five – Conclusions

5.1 Introduction to Chapter

Using the conceptual framework of connectivism (Siemens, 2005), this research has addressed the educational benefits that a blog may have when integrated into two part-time professional courses. In this report, the inquiry offers a model for blog use (outlined in chapter 5) in HE designed to enhance reflective thinking, encourage decision-making, and play a part in the development of communities of inquiry and collaborative learning.

Although connectivism presents a rationale for using a collaborative blog for educational purposes, there are some challenges when applying this theory to HE practices. Using a Vygotskian paradigm (Vygotsky, 1978) has provided a framework to consider these challenges in more detail. One of the main cautionary concerns is situated in the environment, specifically how this is encultured, as this will predict what is therefore valued as a teaching tool.

Students and academics are part of the environment and will, according to Vygotsky, socially construct ideologies regarding what is valuable and purposeful for blog use in building knowledge. So, although information is readily available for students through collaborative technologies, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills could be gained through student-student engagement, academics are still valued as being the 'sage on the stage' (Senjov-Makohon, 2014). This means that a paradigm shift, experienced by the academic and the students, is needed as to what is valued as knowledge for any meaningful student-student collaborative practices.

The use of a blog for educational purposes is at the heart of this inquiry and was explored from an interpretivist perspective. Therefore, the research did not intend to measure objective outcomes but was concerned with how participants interpreted the blog as an educational tool. From this position, findings have highlighted the benefits to, and challenges in, using a blog for educational purposes within part-time professional courses in HE provision.

5.2 Benefits and Challenges

In this study, communities of inquiry did not develop online using the blog. However, the blog evolved as a repository for sharing and became a catalyst for on-campus discussion. Students' discussions on-campus assisted in them sharing resources and in furthering debates and discourse beyond the physical classroom. Therefore, the blog played a part in the students' co-construction of knowledge and in decision-making regarding the materials they would add.

However, as not all students took part, and those that did needed on-campus academic encouragement and involvement, it is crucial to review the academic role in online environments. This is especially important when student-led blogs are introduced alongside traditional pedagogical practices that rely on measuring outcomes, assessing and grading, as is more usual in HE practices.

As demonstrated in this research, changing the notion of the academic as the primary source of knowledge, as suggested in connectivism (Siemens, 2015), and for the academic to behave more like a peer on the blog, is not an expectation that can be completed through the use of a blog alone. Students reported the academic role as one that guides and supports the process, therefore my own model for blog use represents this by placing the academic in the centre of the blogging process, at least initially; curating, guiding the process and sharing interesting items, rather than outside of this as in the connectivist model put forth by Garcia, et al. (2012).

Findings regarding student writing on the blog further indicate that guidance and support from the academic would ensure that students have more direction in writing critically and in online collaborative practices. For example, although there were definite signs that students were learning from one another, critical reflective writing may need more time to develop and evolve in student-led virtual communities.

In this inquiry, I have presented a model for employing collaborative technologies that has evolved using the basic principles of connectivism, but with a consideration of the environment, which I framed using socio-cultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978). What is especially important within the model is that it provides an online situation that aims to encourage decision-making, the sharing (expansion) of knowledge (information) and professional input and provides an online framework that aims for more student-centred learning.

In a professional context, my model offers a first step to enculture a classroom where collaborative blogs and student-centred learning (sharing) are valued and opportunities created for the academic to move away from teacher-centred approaches, specifically online. Additionally, my model ensures some flexibility that will allow academics and students to interchangeably take a leading role and position, allowing for student-led groups to evolve but with academic encouragement and support. As the central role of the academic is not fixed once the blogging process has begun, a student can take on the role of more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978) with the support of the academic, at appropriate arranged times when student groups have formed.

As the blog was disregarded as a viable tool to create communities and for collaborative learning, this online tool needed to co-exist with other more informal social software and face-to-face communications. In this case, the students used many platforms so that a hybrid approach evolved, where all online tools played an important role in building communities of inquiry. Having an awareness of the functionality of each platform will illuminate how they can each support the students' learning journey. Therefore, finding out what students are accessing already, and for what purpose, is essential for strategic planning of the blog before introducing the blog model.

As the blog evolved to be a repository of shared work, lurking emerged as an important vehicle for students gaining knowledge and understanding. Although connectivists dismiss the role of lurking (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2014), this study identified benefits to others through simply looking and reviewing the work of their peers. The blog's content was not as crucial as the structuring of ideas, and the writing styles that students used. Therefore, lurking had the beneficial quality of the part-time students observing how others were performing academic writing, which supported their own writing for assessment purposes.

Acknowledgement of how lurking might assist students in their learning journey needs to be clearly set out. For instance, student groups need to be established and the benefits of sharing and engagement need to be regularly referred to by the academic and exposed throughout the blogging period. This idea is represented in the model for blog use, as lurking is seen as an expected and accepted part of the process. The blog is set to provide fluidity in roles so that a student can sometimes become the MKO in a central position and sometimes lurk. Thus, students can decide to participate or lurk, especially at the critical beginning of the blogging period.

This study found that three of nine learning and knowledge-building principles in connectivism (Siemens, 2006, p.31) naturally evolved using a blog. The principle of 'decision-making' was evident in student behaviours when blogging, specifically as they made choices regarding what content to post and how to present this on their blog. It could also be argued that students, through their posting, offered a 'diversity in opinions' and that 'learning resides in the network' (student groups) using the blog as a platform for this. My adapted model allows for connections to be made with professionals and academics in a field of study, which can assist in framing collaborative technology alongside other learning activities. This engenders the achievement of further learning principles outlined in Siemens work, such as 'connecting specialised nodes or information sources' (ibid, 2006, p.51), nationally and internationally, with special guests and experts (Kumi-Yeboah, 2019; Bonk and Wiley, 2020).

There are, however, additional problems when embedding blogging into part-time courses. Students already have busy lives and blogging was too much for many to maintain. Even blogging students found that increased assessment pressure prevented some engagement with the blog. Additionally, it matters how academics are informed and supported with new technologies online. Although academics stated that the university provided professional development training, this did not include the pedagogical implementation of collaborative technologies in or beyond the classroom.

Academics need time, space, and training to fully engage with models for blog use in pedagogical practices and thus fully support and enable students. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for academics to keep up to date with technological advancements (Bonk and Wiley, 2020). In this study, there was a heavy reliance on academics sharing practices with one another, informally in 'corridor conversations'. If the blog and other collaborative technologies are to function to their full potential in part-time courses, it is vital to rethink how learning is organised for students and how training is delivered to academics. Academic maintenance would only occur if the cultural tool, outlined in socio-cultural perspectives, is valued and accepted in the learning environment.

It is through the academic and student acceptance of how the tool can assist in the learning environment that better support mechanisms can evolve, and this may only come from further pedagogical understandings in this area. The introduction of a model as found in this inquiry can be a starting point for changing classroom cultures and identifying additional training issues both for the academic and student. It is not the tool (in this case, the blog) that really matters; it is the pedagogical understanding of the use of the tool.

In this study, offline academic encouragement was found to be essential to maintain student blogging. There was a distinct difference in student blog engagement if the academic in class was encouraging and enthusiastic about the blog. Students who participated in the blogging process were in the one class group whose academic reminded them to blog regularly. An academic's engagement with the blog created higher uptake among students. From a Vygotskian perspective, this academic played a part in influencing the classroom culture to value blogging for educational purposes. However, most academics did not consider blogging as adding educational value to student groups, and the possibility of the blog providing any general interactive and sharing qualities was not perceived.

5.3 Contribution to Knowledge

The main contribution to knowledge, or value-added, according to Dunleavy (2003), is through redevelopment of the Garcia et al. (2013) model. This contribution is based on the interplay between the old and new (Baptista, 2015).

While there are similarities to Garcia et al.'s (2013) model, in that there is an outer and inner blogging environment, the model developed from the findings of this inquiry has identified three areas in which individuals can become engaged with the process; central position; blogging space; non-blogging space. Unlike Garcia et al.'s model, this inquiry allows for fluidity as positions as the roles taken are not static and may change throughout the process of the blogging period. Additionally, the central position is initially occupied by the academic and represents a fundamental difference from that of Garcia et al.'s model. The contributions to research from this inquiry is that the revised model helps support both students and practitioners to use a blog in HE practices with and understanding that each member on the blog can take on the MKO position.

The revised model provides a framework that academics can follow and use in practice as a starting point for introducing online collaboration between academics and students and course content. This blog model extends to include other indirect individuals not necessarily attached to the module or course per se, such as librarians, employability staff and practitioners working within the community. The research contribution is important for part-time students, but it may be used by other academics with different course specific information and with a different demographic such as on full-time programmes.

There are a number of studies in the literature regarding blog use, but there are fewer using part-time HE students and based in the UK. Therefore, the findings presented here provide an additional contribution to the existing literature with a specific focus on part-time HE courses

5.4 Recommendations for other academics

In summary, this study found that students will blog and that there are learning and social benefits to its use. For this to occur more successfully, academic involvement maximised the effectiveness of the students blogging. This finding suggests that academics need to be involved in the blogging process, from set up to completion of the set task. This may require training with a focus on the technology itself, flipped learning, and the use of collaborative technology for pedagogical purposes. Training needs to focus on integrating online technology into a practice that may need more time, given it is a reflective process. This may require both the student and academic to work together during this process. The notion that collaborative technology can be embedded into pedagogical practice may take a shift in both student and academic beliefs (and skills) regarding how knowledge is shared and by whom. A clear plan for the inclusion of collaborative technologies, to offer support throughout the process of blog use and share good practice in blog development amongst academics and student groups, will enable more consistent use of blogs throughout the term. This, in turn, may encourage added value for the use of collaborative technologies in pedagogical practices.

The students in this inquiry were all attending work placements and were therefore connected to the extended education community. Extending the use of a blog, so that professionals working within specific fields relevant to the students' career path can assist in providing a context in which the university cannot typically achieve, helps inform the communication within a particular setting.

5.5 Further Research

This inquiry illuminates areas for future research. Based on the results of this study, one area of potential interest is the involvement of academics in shaping (or not shaping) the online participation of students. Additional research could focus in greater detail on the reasons why some students do not blog.

My own model focuses on blog use for part-time students. Further research is needed to explore the challenges to adopting this with other courses, such as full-time or international courses, within higher educational provision and practices.

Further action research using the model of blog use developed in this research to involve both students and academics, could yield more explicit structuring of the students' experiences. Having clear reflective research points, as elicited using action research (Kemmis et al. 2013), may assist in shaping the culture and pedagogical practices that include virtual collaborative environments.

The model for blog use found in this thesis can be a catalyst for more focused training that delivers a framework to support the co-construction of knowledge, and which can monitor students' use of a blog, as such it may support engagement in different online conversational contexts.

In this case, only three of the learning principles identified by Siemens (2009) were explicitly evident. Connectivism offers a meaningful and purposeful view of learning through collaborative technologies. More learning models such as the one developed in this inquiry, based on the connectivist paradigm, may further support practical and purposeful blog use in higher education pedagogical practices.

5.6 Limitations and implications of methodology

This study investigated the perspectives of two small cohorts of part-time students in their first year, and their academics, studying professional courses in two universities. While these findings can be evaluated and interpreted in other contexts, care is required when generalising to other universities, part-time HE courses, students, or academics (Berg, 2009; Berg and Lune, 2012: Bryman, 2012). For example, full-time students typically have more face-to-face group interaction, so the importance of a blog in providing inter-student communication is likely to be relatively lower. However, it can be assumed the function of a blog, along with its benefits and challenges, will persist even if to a lesser degree. Similarly, the model of student and academic roles and relationships presented in Figure 4 (page 141) should apply in other HE contexts and courses, though other communication channels will be involved. Therefore, whilst this qualitative study is not generalisable, the educational blog model presents a way forward to use collaborative technologies and thus can be valuable in the educational community.

Secondly, I did not have access to the process of the academics' or the students' blogging, only the written blogs and student accounts of the process. Future studies could expand the investigation to include the process in which the academics and students undertook to blog. This may enrich the data and explain why some students did and did not blog. This would provide depth to the understanding of students' perceptions, which have been important in this study.

There was no monitoring or investigation of the use of other virtual platforms that the students may have used. The importance of these became apparent during the analysis of these results. A fuller review of all student communication channels would have been valuable, both to assess the importance of blogs and understand the totality of community and learning.

5.7 Further Relevance in 2020: Covid-19

In 2020, the prevalence of virtual environments had unexpectedly increased due to the global pandemic of Covid-19. The need to explore the effectiveness of online learning, for all courses, is now at the forefront of issues faced by higher education institutions. Covid-19 has rapidly changed the landscape for learning in higher education in that courses are now delivered online, with limited on-campus teaching. In this new context, blogs offer a range of opportunities for students and academics across all courses. 'Teams' provide an example of technology being rapidly adopted during a period of 'lockdown' which came into force across the UK. Key government restrictions are in place to prevent the further spread of coronavirus. Therefore, video conferencing among pairs and groups, the sharing of pre-recorded taught sessions via video link, and live broadcasting are all currently on the frontline of pedagogical practices and provision.

Although this inquiry was explicitly designed to cover part-time students studying on education courses, the campus environment is no longer as available as it was, to all students and academics, due to the current pandemic. Consequently, the professional implications for this inquiry are more immediate and far-reaching.

This thesis could inspire new studies of online learning in the context of the global pandemic (2020). Covid-19 has encouraged higher education institutions to extend their use of online technologies for learning. Now is the exact time to begin focussing on how technology is valued and used to engage students in both curricular and co-curricular activities (Bonk and Wiley, 2020) and community-based learning.

Although connectivism offers a meaningful and purposeful view of learning through collaborative technologies, this research shows the limitations of this model when used in HE practices with part-time students.

My research offers a model based on connectivist paradigms but considers the environment in which the blog is placed. Having a more flexible approach to the process, as seen in this evolved model for blog use, allows for all students to sometimes take on different roles: a lurking role; the more knowledgeable other; and the participating role. However, ensuring that the academic is principally positioned in the centre of the process, not necessarily taking control of the content but guiding the content and writing styles, is appropriate if students are to engage purposefully in the blogging process.

This is an appropriate time to focus on problems that technology might help address and begin to change practices that embed collaborative technologies. However, simply exchanging one environment (face-to-face) for another (online) without reflecting (and challenging) on what is valued as worthwhile, meaningful, or purposeful within that environment may not bring about a shift in the use of student-led collaborative blogs and pedagogical practices, thus reducing the benefits that this tool may bring.

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7 Appendix One – Coding Table (Blogs)

7.1 Styles of writing

Blogger 1

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	4/10/17	5/10/17	10/12/17	10/12/17	10/12/17	2/1/18	2/1/18	2/1/18	2/1/18	
Word Count	118	57	187	187	187	191	197	236	621	
Format	First person text	Lecture notes 1 paragraph	Bullet points	Bullet points	Note form and bullet points	Note form	Bullet points	Bullet points Note form		
Images	Photo of Bloggers child									
Refer-ences	None	Integrated and reference section	2 reference sources given	In-text references	none	none				

Blogger 2

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	12/10/17	19/10/17	15/11/17	15/11/17	16/11/17	21/11/17	23/11/17	30/11/17	15/12/17	16/12/17
Word Count	682 words	655 words	272 words	392 words	1237 Words	493 words	741 words	391 words	86 words	123 words
Format	Bullet points	Full sentences First and third person	Full sentences First person	Full sentences First and third person	Note form Bullet points	Full sentences First person	Bullet points (like lecture PowerPoint)	Notes/ Bullet points	Full sentences First person	Full sentences First person
Images			2 photos from placement	Photo of Piaget (web)		2 photos from placement	Photo Vygotsky (Web)			
Refer-ences	1 web link	In-text references No full citations	1 reference source	YouTube TM	In text citations Ofsted/ Motessori Reggio Emilia) No full refs.	None	Theorists named in text No references	Mentioned ECM/EYFC No citations	None	None

Blogger 3

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	4/10/17	5/10 /17	4/1/18	4/1/18	4/1/18	6/1/18	6/1/18	7/1/18	7/1/18	
Word Count	425	180	715	235	230	189	88	186	29	
Format	Notes Theory without citation	Notes Theory without citation	Full sentences Paraphrasing / discussing theory	Full sentences mix of first and third person Some bullet points	Note form	Bullet points	Note Form	Notes Form		
Image s			2 photos from placement							
Refer-ences	None	One in-text referenc e	In-text references (6) Reference section	None	In-text references without citation	One reference given	none	none		

Blogger 4

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10	Entry 11
Date	22/10/17	21/11/17	23/11/17	23/11/17	30/11/17	1/12/17	27/12/17	27/12/17	29/12/17	31/12/17	
Word Count	40	344	164	385	99	122	671	208	330	399	
Format	Bullet points	Bullet points	Bullet points Not form	Bullet points (number-ed)	Note form	Note form	Full sentences	Note form	Full sentences first and third person	Full sentence s in the first person	Bullet points Note form
Images											
Refer-ences	In-text citations No full references	Reference to theory/ theorists No formal citations	Referenc e to theory/ theorists No formal citations	Named theorists Partial reference	none	none	Partial references Named sources	Named source No full refs		None	1 web link

Blogger 5

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	28/9/17	4/10/17	5/10/17	12/10/17	19/10/17	16/11/17	21/11/17	23/11/17	30/11/17	7/12/17
Word Count	28	158	54	475	324	188	4	225	154	147
Format	Bullet points	Note form Bullet points	Note form Bullet points	Bullet points Note form	Full sentences	Bullet points/ notes	Heading with no content	Bullet points	Bullet points	Bullet points (number-ed)
Images										
Refer-ences	None	none	Some named source Not referenced	Ref list (book/ web)	Named sources No refs	Few Partial refs	Web link	Named theorists no refs	Named theorists no refs	Named theorists no refs

Blogger 6

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	28 /9/17	10/10/17	11/10/17	6/1/18	6/1/18	6/1/18	6/1/18	7/1/18	7/1/18	7/1/18
Word Count	181 words	663	591	102	137	137	154	37	174	84
Format	Note form Large quotation	Note form some full sentences (first and third person) and bullet points	Full sentences /note and bullet points	Full sentences in the third person	Full sentences in the third person	Full sentences in the third person	Full sentences in the third person	Full sentences in the first/third person	Full sentences in the first/third person	Full sentences in the third person
Image s										
Refer-ences	Web link	Partial references / named sources	Partial references / named sources	Named source no date/ref	Named source no date/ref	Named source no date/ref	Named source no date/ref	None	None	None

Blogger 7

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2 (thread)	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	4/10/17	10/10/17								
Word Count	54	90								
Format	Full sentences first person									
Images										
Refer-ences	None									

Blogger 8

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2 (response to Blogger 7 Entry 1)	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	1/11/17 ?	6/11/17								
Word Count	81	76								
Format	Full sentences first person	Full sentences first person								
Images										
Refer-ences	None	None								

Blogger 9

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	28/9/17	28/9/17	6/12/17	6/12/17	6/12/17	9/12/17	12/12/17	12/12/17	18/12/17	18/12/17
Word Count	30	247	383	384	127	335	34	456	130	181
Format	Bullet points/ note form	Note form	Full sentences and note form	Note form and some full sentences	One sentenc e	Full sentences and bullet points note form	Note form bullet points	Note form	Note form	
Images		One image of the EYFS	You tube clip 2 images to theory				Power-point uploaded	Two images of Piaget's experiment performed in class		
Refer-ences		Reference list given	References in text	References in text but not a reference list		References used in text but not a reference list		References in text but no reference list at the end	Reference to childhood theory but no ref list at the end	

Blogger 10

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	16/11/17	16/11/17	20/11/17	22/11/17	1/12/17					
Word Count	304	325	442	256	222					
Format	Full sentences	Full sentences	Full sentences	Full sentences	Full sentences					
Images										
Refer-ences				References in text to Ken Robinson *2010) No reference list	References in text to Dewey and Sternberg – learning theory No reference list					

Blogger 11

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	11/10/17	22/11/17	23/11/17	22/12/17	22/12/17	31/12/17				
Word Count	178	360	677	602	371	117				
Format	Full sentences reflective writing	Full sentences reflective writing	Full sentences reflective writing	Note form some full sentences	Note form some full sentences	Questioning possible audience. Full sentences				
Images										
Refer-ences				References to learning theory. No reference list	References to learning theory. No reference list					

Blogger 12

Posts	Entry 1	Entry 2	Entry 3	Entry 4	Entry 5	Entry 6	Entry 7	Entry 8	Entry 9	Entry 10
Date	28/9/17	7/10/17	9/10/17	11/10/17	12/10/17	12/10/17	14/10/17	16/10/17	19/10/17	23/10/17
Word Count	47	342	513	507	273	265	330	270	365	342
Format		Full sentences	Note form	Note form and full sentences	Full sentences	Full sentences and note form	Full sentences and note form	Full sentences	Note form	Full sentences
Images	A chart of thoughts about the curriculum	A chart of thoughts	One diagram			Picture of Frobel's Resources				Image of practice – activity
Refer-ences		Use of reference sources with a full reference list	Use of reference sources with reference list	Use of references with reference list		Reference list	Reference list	Reference list	Reference list	References and reference list

Blogger 12 continued

Posts	Entry 11	Entry 12	Entry 13	Entry 14	Entry 15	Entry 16	Entry 17
Date	26/10/17	28/10/17	30/10/17	2/11/17	13/11/17	19/11/17	22/11/17
Word Count	236	208	238	33	299	156	487
Format	Full sentences – lecture notes	Lecture notes	Lecture note	Small paragraph - full references	Full sentences	Full sentences	Full sentences
Images							Image of analysis of curriculum documents
Refer-ences	References used in text and reference list	Small reference list	Reference list		References in text with a small reference list	Reference list	References and reference list

7.2 Themes

Reflective writing and thinking professional practice	
Blogger 1	In practice we had to choose and carry out a task relating to the curriculum. I have chosen to look at assessment approaches. (Entry 4)
Blogger 2	In practice i work on many tasks with the children, this allowed me to think of the different abilities of the children and edit the task at hand for each of them. (Entry 3) I gave the child a choice if they wanted to make them and what colours they wanted to use so therefore they could interpret the way they saw a rocket and what they thought or wanted them to look like. this gave them the chance to be creative and design their very own rocket, free of will. (Entry 3) Within practice I ran the outdoors for a day and therefore developed the children's interests by planting a couple of seeds within the 'mud garden' and because i was doing it all the children came to join me which then allowed me to tell them why i was planting seeds and what would eventually happen. (Entry 6) By this i mean, one child had the rake another had the spade, another had the barrow and the others added soil after the plant was in place. (Entry 6) From this it allowed them to get to know one another a little better and therefore become more comfortable within the setting. (Entry 6) Sometimes i feel like if the child has seen someone build a tower or plant a seed before for example they can remember snippets from that and use that in order to think for themselves and develop their skills through what they have previously seen. (Entry 6)

Reflective writing and thinking professional practice	
Blogger 3	During practice I designed an activity for children to help them understand the concept of different shapes, colours and also the different seasons of the year. (Entry 3) Tasks like this help the children to make sense of the world. (Entry 3) I also learnt on placement about the yellow door curriculum. (Entry 3) The activity allows children to engage in active learning and become self motivated as i left them to do the activity how they wanted to. The children were self motivated to continue with the task when i left them to do what they want and at the peak level of concentration. Some of the children were very motivated and didn't give up when the activity didn't go right the first time. If the leaf failed to print they realised there was not enough paint on the leaf and they tried to print the leaf again. Tasks like this help the children to make sense of the world. Dewey said that concepts we teach should not just be on paper, teacher led perspective or on symbolic film. Going outside and doing this activity allowed the children to leave the classroom environment to learn about the autumn. Doing an activity can help the activity to stick into the children's mind.
Blogger 4	Whilst on placement in a primary school I had many opportunities to observe play activities that were available for children. (Entry 9) I noticed that it was very simple to incorporate numeracy and literacy in the activities whether this was spontaneous or structured. (Entry 9) How great is it listening to a great practitioner who knows what he wants in his curriculum. I totally agree with his child centred way of working whilst still meeting the Ofsted requirements and data collections without becoming papers bound. (Entry 10)
Blogger 5	
Blogger 6	

Reflective writing and thinking professional practice	
Blogger 7	
Blogger 8	
Blogger 9	As a teacher we are judged on our data. If the teaching is good then the data will be and that is what Ofsted look out for. (Entry 6)
Blogger 10	Also, having been in practice placement I find that most of the activities that are bought out for children to play with are the same ones over and over again. (Entry 1) I feel that there would be many positives of this idea. Teachers are very restrained in what they are able to teach, if they were given the opportunity to stretch beyond the national curriculum and bring their own ideas into the profession there may be more passion and exuberance than there currently is. (Entry 2)
Blogger 11	I've already started to change my view on how important structured learning is and that it may not be that relevant to a child's development. This is because children do not necessarily need structure to learn and may often learn and progress better without it. (Entry 1) In my personal opinion, I do not believe that there should always be a formalised plan with expected outcomes. This is because it could result in curbing children's curiosity as it does not leave much room for digression or following a child's own interests as it may not be relevant to the lesson plan. (Entry 2) I believe that there should be a happy medium between structured play and spontaneous play. This is because spontaneous play allows children to exercise curiosity and learn through their own interests. However I do believe that structured play is also important as it can help children learn things that they may otherwise not have experienced. (Entry 2) I have been in many settings where the children are only allowed to play with what has been set out for them and are not able to play with whatever they wish; which is an obvious difference to Colin's settings approach. (Entry 3)

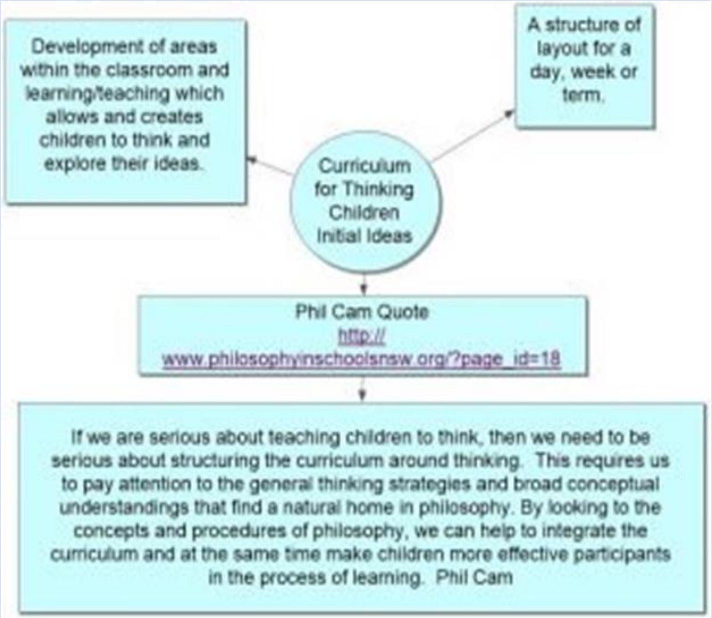
Reflective writing and thinking professional practice	
	Colin held online learning journals in high esteem as it said it was easy and clear to use. In my personal opinion, I prefer paper copies. The main reason for this is because all different types of families can access a paper copy and it is not interent dependent. (Entry 3)
Blogger 12	From my practical experience over the years, I can comment on how I have seen some these ideas put into practice. Firstly, one of the primary school I went to, focused their décor of their classrooms to be neutral colours – of browns and greens, and a woodland theme. As can be seen in the picture below. This indeed made the room feel calmer even when filled with 30 children. (Entry 7) This school, along with another I went to, had resources accessible to the children in baskets on open shelves. So that they children can get what they want out during the day and their various free time over the course of the day. One of the schools followed the idea of free flow and resources for Community Playthings, for the layout of the room, the structure of the day and it allowed the children to play and learn as they wanted. The children had access to a sand pit and water play both indoors and outdoors at all times, so that they made the choice for themselves. Being able to implement ideas to create a high-quality thinking environment will allow children to think and explore their ideas and interest in their own time. Which is something that can be seen within many approaches to early childhood education – for example the Norwegian education system. (Entry 7) My setting uses a long-term plan for each half term and then a shorter weekly plan to break down what is to be done. This helps to make sure both classes carry out the same lessons and are taught the same information. (as shown in appendix). (Entry 11)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
Blogger 1	I really like the fact that Norway's early years provision as it has a real home from home feel and that the government pay for most of the bill. However, the days can be very long for the child. (Entry 6) I really like the fact we have a curriculum that we can use as a guide to see how the children are developing. However, it is relied on too heavily and we tend to almost forget about each individual, unique child. (Entry 6) My ideal curriculum would be; • No ages/stages • Child initated • Strong relationships with parents • Play based More natural resources (eg made of wood rather than plastic). (Entry 7)
Blogger 2	i personally think is vastly pushed aside and needs more attention. I often question whether we are so focused on impressing Ofsted that we forget actually what the children need and focus more of what we need to pass a visit. Through my personal experience the tension in the setting when a visit is expected is more stressful than enjoyable as i feel we a constantly tested on less important factors of a setting. (Entry 2) Sometimes i ask myself was it a good sample as on own kids/friends children; was this bias? (Entry 4) When children get to 5/6 they begin to lie. Personally i feel they do this because they are checking out whats in someone elses head compared to theres. I believe this to be shared thinking, the child may test out an adult and see if we have got the same things in our head. Which again leads us back to knowing what is in someone's head = theory of mind. (Entry 4)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
	Within a child's environment i feel as though it should be organised in way the child will feel comfortable to explore and a facilitator should be at hand to make connections if the need one. (Entry 4) Without knowledge from this module, when i think about what a thinking child is i feel it consists of a child in an environment using their imagination to develop their thinking. For example if a child is playing and from this take their thinking to their next level e.g. involving role play therefore they are a thinking child, able to develop their thinking without the help of an adult. (Entry 9) I still believe a thinking child consists of different stages but I do believe now that a thinking child is a child that thinks for themselves. By this is mean, if the child has the opportunity to be involved within the right thinking environment for instance a comfortable, welcome environment with the right resources for the child therefore they have the opportunity to develop their thinking. (Entry 10)
Blogger 3	In class we were given a bag of sweets. We were told to create an activity which was in relation to Piaget's Conservation Theory. Conservation is the understanding that something stays the same in quantity even though its appearance changes. We made two different lines, one with yellow skittles the other with red. (Entry 2) Example: schema = birthday. In this schema I think of cake, candles, banners, badges, celebration. (Entry 8)
Blogger 4	This discussion we had in class was useful as it highlighted the importance of why we as early years practitioners do what we do. It also expressed what should be considered when creating a curriculum for thinking children which is in fact these points mentioned. Instilling these points into the curriculum will ensure that children have the opportunity to education. (Entry 11) The key points I picked out from this video was that the current education system was designed and structured for a different age (industrial revolution). (Entry 11)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
	After watching this video I do believe that in a sense the education system is killing children's creativity. Children are being taught the same thing in the same way without being taught as individuals and when they reach a certain age creativity is seen as less important. (Entry 11)
Blogger 5	. In my opinion, many children have specific needs, such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or English as an additional language, that may affect them meeting certain aspects of the developmental milestones expected of them within the EYFS (2014). Analyzing the key points underpinning this document has led me to believe that there is not one true definition of "school readiness". (Entry 4)
Blogger 6	I would describe a curriculum for thinking children as- development of areas within the classroom and learning/reaching which allows and creates children to think and explore their ideas. A structure can be described as a layout for a day, week or term. However when working with children thinking structures need to be easily changed and adapted to fit their needs. You might need to adapt a curriculum for many different reasons such for a child who has special educational needs. (Entry 1) I see this as an important development within a child's education. (Entry 2) You can incorporate your own activities in order to enable that child to meet a certain learning outcome. This means that you do still have the freedom to base activities on the children's interests. (Entry 2) My interpretation of a curriculum for a thinking child is areas within the classroom which had been developed in order to allow children to think and explore their different ideas, through various materials and resources. (Entry 8) I would use comparative education to explore how other countries go about including all religions and cultures within their practice. (Entry 9)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
	I would consider implementing within my own practice to be inclusive of all religions and cultures, however, I will use comparative education to compare and contrast my ideas to other countries. Which would enable me to see if they celebrated different religions and cultures in any other ways. (Entry 9)
Blogger 7	
Blogger 8	
Blogger 9	
Blogger 10	The idea of a curriculum not being structured and still being able to inform a child's learning particularly grasped me. Beforehand I had simply had 'tunnel vision' and only been thinking about the national curriculum. Which is very structured and has guidelines for the teachers. However, it has opened my eyes to other ideas of a curriculum with less framework and more free flow. This may be enhanced in the next couple of weeks when we learn more about other curriculum's. (Entry 1)
Blogger 11	After having a group discussion about the classes patches I've already started to change my view on how important structured learning is and that it may not be that relevant to a child's development. This is because children do not necessarily need structure to learn and may often learn and progress better without it. (Entry 1) I think that there should be a formalised plan with expected outcomes, however this should be used as a baseline understanding for the practitioner and not as a guide for where the children should be in their development. (Entry 2) I feel as though it is of benefit to the children as it is providing them with opportunity to explore beyond the boundaries that they can have in schools in England. (Entry 2) I believe that play should be spontaneous. Children cannot work to their best whilst they are constantly being told what they can or cannot play with. (Entry 3)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
Blogger 12	 Entry 1 When discussing this it made me consider what I felt was the pros and cons are to me of the national curriculum: Pros Cons Structure to content Limits teaching and subjects Continuity across the country for each key stage and year group Reduces ability to follow interests Ability for assessment of content and teaching Not a child centred approach – not suiting their needs for development, learning and education or giving the child a say in how they learn or allowing them to do it for themselves. General subjects to suit ‘norm’. (Entry 1)

Reflective writing and thinking course content	
	As I found this an interesting idea I wanted to go out to see what the views of other people were on this topic. Upon initial research I found that there are a few authors who express their views on the national curriculum within the UK. For example, Bolden and Newton (2008, pg 427) states that in relation to the national curriculum for mathematics, that 'a student has acquired the knowledge from a teacher… this seems at odds with the idea that children learn by constructing their own understandings.' (Entry 2) This topic has inspired me to think how it could be a topic within my final assignment and how, with further research, I could find more supporting and conflicting views to compare with my opinion and compare the UK's National Curriculum with that other countries similar curricular. (Entry 2) These are very similar to that of the reasons that we came up with as a class during the lecture, which were o To prepare for the future o Helping children to develop effectively o To form a solid basis of knowledge o To teach life skills o To provide an opportunity for learning within the culture The main difference between the two, is that in our reasons we considered the idea of the culture a child is in and creates. (Entry 9)

Reflective writing and thinking Personal experiences (not directly lecture related)	
Blogger 1	Hi all, (Professional me) My name is Kassie and I am a 23 year old, third year student at the University of *******, studying Early Childhood (Professional Practice), Ba(Hons). (Entry 1)

Reflective writing and thinking Personal experiences (not directly lecture related)	
	I completed my second apprenticeship, this time in Business and Administration. It was during this time, I got to know my sister-in-law better and had some opportunities to work with her as her childminding assistant, that I decided that Early Years and Childcare is what I truly wanted to do. (Entry 1) Since starting this course I have completed a range a placements in a variety of settings including nurseries, special schools and childminders. (Entry 1) (Personal Me) I the eldest of two girls, my sister Hannah is 21 and has recently finished her degree in Music and perform. She has moved back home with mum. It has just be the three of us since I was about 6/7 years old. Mum did have a long term partner for about 9 years, and although he lived with us; I still felt like it was just the three off us. (Entry 1) XXX proposed at the top of the London Eye at night. I was looking out the window, he tapped my on the shoulder, so I turned round and he was stood with the ring box open and said 'marry me,' so I said, 'only if you ask me properly.' (Entry 1) On June 12th of this year we became first time parents to our gorgeous baby boy Oliver, who make everyday brighter. And that is all about me! (Entry 1)
Blogger 2	whereas when i was younger there was more play and choice. (Entry 1) Within my experience at secondary school i had to sit many exams and choose 3 optional subjects along with many compulsory subjects which i had to spend extra time studying as i didn't like being in the lowest group as i felt i learnt nothing in those due to poor behaviour from other children was a huge distracted. i was always in bottom sets for majority of my school years due to my primary school operating differently and having mixed years. because i was the youngest of the year i had to have my classes with the year below because there wasn't enough space for me in my year group i did this along with all the other children born in july and august. we had to leave

Reflective writing and thinking Personal experiences (not directly lecture related)	
	school at the same time despite not having equal education. i found it really had adapting to secondary school and learning the same as everyone else and being punished for being behind and from this got put in all lower sets which set my confidence back hugely and made me not want to try and not want to come to school as all my friends where in different groups and it felt as though they were a lot more intelligent than i was. (Entry 1)
Blogger 3	
Blogger 4	
Blogger 5	
Blogger 6	
Blogger 7	It has been a very busy time for me lately, my daughter left for uni last weekend and this weekend I moved house! Wow some big things happening!!! It has shown me though that I CAN managed my work load (another thing that I was concerned about when applying for uni), although I am definitely hoping to develop more time management strategies, as I'm looking forward to a slightly calmer pace ;) (Entry 1 thread response)
Blogger 8	I have a mixture of emotions. Relief that it's done, worry if I've met the criteria fully but also sadness that it's done- I rather enjoyed it as a first task. (Entry 1) Hi XXX. I have made a don not disturb sign for my door where I study. At the age of 8,10 and 12 my children had no concept of privacy! They are getting better now but I need to be alone to read so it can be a real balancing act. We have had no television or wi-fi over the weekend which has actually been nice. I'm going to permanently introduce a silent reading each evening. (Response to Blogger 7 Entry 1)
Blogger 9	
Blogger 10	
Blogger 11	

Reflective writing and thinking Personal experiences (not directly lecture related)	
Blogger 12	

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
Blogger 1	Paper or digital? What are the advantages of modern day methods? (Entry 4) The class discussed what we thought was meant by 'curriculum' (see previous blog 'What is Curriculum?) and what it should include? (Entry 5) Our guest speaker told us what he believed a 'curriculum for thinking children' should look like. (Entry 5) Within the class we looked at aspects we thought created a 'High Quality Thinking Environment,' we came up with the following ideas: (Entry 7) Our guest speaker told us what he believed a 'curriculum for thinking children' should look like. (Entry 7) We also came up with the following curriculums: • Early Years Foundation Stage • Early Years Foundation Phase • National Curriculum • SEN Curriculum Please let me know your thoughts. (Entry 8)
Blogger 2	naughty kids always get rewarded, but how does that make the high performers feel? (Entry 1) So therefore ensuring that we as practitioners put together all learning topics and involve them into all aspects of the school subjects. By giving the child a chance to get involved within the learning task this ensured that they understand the topic much more. (Entry 2)

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
	I personally feel children shouldn't be copying the teacher they should be free to make their own decisions (previously mentioned on my rocket blog). (Entry 4) here's what i thought.. (Entry 5) does the curriculum stay the same? (Entry 5) if teaching is good the data will be good vis versa. (whats good data?) (Entry 5) what should go in the curriculum? – subjects > core subjects > prime and specific. (Entry 5) does that effect teaching? gets good data though… why are they doing that and what pressure are they facing in order to do that? all comes back to data. could trigger internal or external; ofsted? (Entry 5) Do the children get questioned enough about their thoughts? – like we do in uni? (Entry 5) but how do they use it? are we allowing children to soak up what were teaching? (Entry 5) we as teachers can explain what it is or means to the parents – honesty (Entry 5)
Blogger 3	How can we reward children who are hard working and succeeding but also children who are struggling? (Entry 2) The first thing we would do would be to ask the child how many are in each row and count with them, then we would move the ones apart and ask them how many are in the row the second time, the same with the circles (see pictures attached). (Entry 2) This makes us miss opportunities as what children can do as they are showing us through free play. (Entry 2) –Has educational practise/provision changed over time? Consider possible areas of change and possible areas of similarity.

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
	–What policy/legislation/theory/ research/literature/frameworks have been put into place to make the identified changes? –Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage, recognises the importance of informal learning through play; (3 questions -Entry 6)
Blogger 4	But how can they be when they can be interested in other things like games, phones and TVs. (Entry 4) So.. today, we asked ourselves the question 'What is education for?' We spend all this time promoting the importance of education and doing our best to provide children with this however do we really know 'What is education for?' (Entry 11) As a collective class we came up with these ideas; (Entry 11)
Blogger 5	Therefore how can every child meet the same targets and be at the same point in their development to show that they are school ready. (Entry 4) In our lecture, we demonstrated our understanding of Piaget's theory using sweets. (Entry 5) The way that we carried out our experiment allowed for the development of life skills. (Entry 5) "If teaching is good, the data should be good and if there's bad teaching, there is bad data" (Roberts-Holmes. 2013: Online). Agree or disagree? (Entry 6) Where do your beliefs come from? What impacts this? (Entry 6) can children co-construct the curriculum as well, finding their own interests to use as a learning tool. Is this possible? (Entry 6)
Blogger 6	As you will see below, I have listed some of the Pros and cons that I have noticed when working alongside the national curriculum: (Entry 2)

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
Blogger 7	Hello all, opening up this line of discussion for our notes on how we felt about starting uni. My first thought was about making it on time whilst navigating the rush hour traffic in Nottingham, fingers crossed hopefully I have found the best route and have got my timing sorted. What has been your biggest issue so far? (Entry 1) Anyone got any good tips you use for time management? (Entry 1 conversation response)
Blogger 8	As we reach the deadline for our first submission I was curious how everyone feels about it? (Entry 1) As a group we have discussed this in great detail and we are probably all worrying far too much about it. Let's use this first task as a measure of where we are/need to be. (Entry 1)
Blogger 9	In today's lecture we represented Piaget's 'Theory of Mind' conservation experiments using sweets. (Entry 5) Do children get the same education in all schools? There is a large amount of pressure about meeting the curriculum! Ofsted give half a days notice before arriving into the setting – A lot of Pressure for us all? (Entry 6)
Blogger 10	Hello XXX. What is curriculum? (Entry 1) XXX and I came up with; Activities to inform learning, rich content, key workers and so forth. Once we had brought all of the difference thoughts together it has exemplified how vast a curriculum can be and has definitely given me some good ideas that I wouldn't have thought of. (Entry 1) xoxo gossip girl. (Entry 2) Should there always be a formalised plan with expected outcomes? (Entry 2) Should play be structured or spontaneous? (Entry 2) What's your thoughts about the free play/choice element in Norway's primary schools- Is this of benefit to the children (Entry 3)

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
Blogger 11	Moved away from making meaning to sustained shared thinking (Blatchford et al. 2002) do not include your point p you don't tell them what to make you just let them do it. What are you thinking? (Entry 5) The afore mentioned child wanted to draw a picture for his mum using a different dinosaur stencils and was very pleased with his end result. He showed his picture to all the members of staff in the room and asked if he could go into the other room to show the remaining members of staff. –Is he/she proud of their accomplishments- not just the end result? Have you got an example of when the child displayed this to share? Does the child enjoy meeting challenges for their own sake rather than for rewards or praise? (Entry 6) Does the child think of ideas? Any examples? (Entry 6)
Blogger 12	Should there always be a formalised plan with expected outcomes? Should play always be structured or always spontaneous? (Entry 5) What's your thoughts about the free play/choice element in Norway's primary schools? (Entry 6) as a group. Our ideas were; 1. Visual Displays and prompts 2. Limit distractions – for example; in our room you can see people walking past. 3. Access to resources and activities 4. Age and stage appropriate activities 5. Detail in the décor within the room 6. Comfortable and safety (Entry 7)

Repository for sharing – writing to an audience and collaboration	
	Would you plan the whole curriculum in advance for the year? Before you've met those children? or plan as you go? On a whole I would plan the basics of the teaching a year in advance, in order to take away some of the stress that could come with planning as you go. But still leaving room for additions of interests or topics that come up at the time, to be planned in each term to suit the children you are teaching. (Entry 9) In the lecture we created a learning activity in order to learn the meaning of the word within Piaget's theory of mind. Here is a link to this activity: Jean Piaget – Key words-2ggduwd (Entry 14)

8 Appendix Two – Coding Table (Interviews)

Theme: Academic and Student views of roles and blog use in practices	
Non-blogging student	I think definitely this would have influenced my use. If the tutor had of exposed us more to example blogs or displayed the blogs that were happening… seeing someone with enthusiasm and passion for this (the use of a blog) would get me more involved. (NBS:UNI A: A0040) I think the tutor is not necessarily needed on the blog, although adding relevant information to help with the assignment would have been helpful. (NBS: UNI A: D0028) I think the tutor's role in all of this would be to get involved and make the chat or blog a lot more formal and purposeful for us so that it related to the assignment topics. (NBS: UNI A: B0025) I am very competitive so if there was a grade on the blogs then yes, I would have definitely used it a lot. That to me is an incentive and would have definitely motivated me to use it more. (NBS: UNI A: A0038) I think so they (the academic) could give encouragement and praise for effort in the classroom, this would have encouraged my use. (NBS: UNI A: G0094) I think the tutor could take charge then and guide the discussion much more specifically to a subject. (NBS: UNI A: L0148)

Blogging student	If my tutor was encouraging us to use the blog, we would have used it more. I think if they had put some interesting discussion topics forward in the class time, we would all be more inclined to use this and discuss more between ourselves online. This would be helpful to share ideas and practices. I don't think the tutor needs to be involved in the blogging just encouraging perhaps in class time. (B8: UNI A: I0026) I think definitely this would have influenced my use. If the tutor had of exposed us more to example blogs or displayed the blogs that were happening… seeing someone with enthusiasm and passion for this (the use of a blog) would get me more involved. (BS 6: UNI B: I0141) [The academic] did matter to get us going and to keep suggesting ideas and things. (B7: UNI B:H0093) Being away a bit more from other students it [the blog] does help to see how they [other students] are writing and using references' (B 9: UNI B: H0087). I can see by sharing stuff that is relevant to the course is really useful and helpful in the long run. My assignment at the end made much better sense to me and I believe the blog helped to get a better grade. (BS 12: UNI B: A0040) The academic reminded us to use the blog and gave ideas of what to post from each session. I often did this in class, so I did not forget and then later I could check the references and spelling or add reflection. (BS 9: UNI B: F0089) The blog was useful in sharing ideas with each other, even though we never really commented on each other's blog we were able to see how others were writing and what references they were using, this was great for me 'cause I could see how others were writing and then I knew what I had to do for my own writing. (BS 9: UNI B: C0118)

	I think to some degree they [other students' blogs] role was to encouraged me to use the blog because through me looking at other blogs I was able to feel better about how I was going to use my blog and I would use the references that others had posted to look at which I found helpful. (BS 3: UNI B: F0083). It's not my place to provide feedback. (BS 6: UNI B: E0012) …they [the student] do not have the answers and may not be right in guiding me on important subjects. (BS 2: UNI B: G0094) I think it is the tutor's role to give feedback on posts not the students' so I did not reply to any posts because I wasn't sure whether I was right or not. (BS 10: UNI B: G0093) Even if the students had commented something on my posts I might not have taken the feedback seriously but I would if it was any of my tutors, a 100%. (BS 12: UNI B: G0098) I think to some degree they (other students blogs) encouraged me to use the blog because through me looking at other blogs I was able to feel better about how I was going to use my blog and I would use the references that others had posted to look at which I found helpful. (BS 11: UNI B: I0141) Some (students) had just cut and pasted from somewhere at least I did a bit of my own thoughts. The useful ones were those who analysed and reflected and said what needed to go in the essay. (BS 2: UNI B: K0090)

Academic staff	I think if the blog was an assessment, they [the students] would definitely use it as they would need it to achieve their assessment, so as a tutor my role would be to make this a summative assessed piece of work. (A1: UNI A: A0013) I think I would be comfortable with setting an assessment for the blog, so, we are not making the students do anything extra, but even then, this can be done in a written form as often assessments are. (A 3: UNI A: A0028) I would not set up a blog as I do not see the value of this especially as we have a virtual learning room… Collaboration can be achieved in the class time. (A1: UNI A: A0018) I have a virtual learning room that students can use to get the course content and outcomes, so information is readily available and ordered for all the students to see. (A1: UNI A: A0019) …these part-time learners have not got time to use technology to collaborate, they have enough to do in the class time. (A3: UNI A: A0017) I use emails to communicate with all students on an individual level and I think that is enough for the part-time learner. (A2: UNI A: AO016) Blogs would be good to allow tutor and student to work together and collaborate, but I am still mindful that the tutor needs to have that attitude that does not take ownership of the blog and encourages autonomy of the student, this is something I think needs to be tackled in staff training. (A3: UNI A:B0020) I think a development point could be that we develop or change attitudes of students and staff together and this comes through training. (UA; A3:B0014)

	I think the tutor’s role is to make sure that the students are comfortable in using it. (A4: UNI B: B0017) The blog offers a platform for students to practice academic skills and as an academic need to guide them and encourage them, but not necessarily be online with them, this can be achieved verbally offline in the classroom perhaps. (A4: UNI B: D0012) Great, the students don’t have much time to collaborate during the lecture and very little in the seminar… so anything that helps to get them to talk or share knowledge and get them talking to one another would be good. (A 4: UNI B: A0012) We (academics) need to encourage networking on a blog, to enable the students to teach each other, this does not necessarily mean setting an assessment for the students, but perhaps modelling the uses of networking amongst themselves as a group to support their learning and progression on the blog. (A 4: UNI B: D0013) The student can be very isolated and fearful, especially on a part-time course, about what they are working on. By looking at others’ blogs they can compare their work with others and feel settled. There is always a few in the class who are ‘fast trackers’ and they have the threshold knowledge and an understanding of how to make writing in HE work, and therefore these students can share their knowledge and demonstrate their wiring to the rest of the class through the blog. (A4: UNI B: D0012) Students might pass on incorrect knowledge to one another. (A2: UNI A: C0015) For the many years that I have worked here, there has always been a group chat on WhatsApp or Facebook that the student has taken on and developed. (A2: UA; C0015) Tutors need to be in charge of the knowledge sharing. (A3: UNI A: A0010)

	The danger is they may be finding information that is not relevant to their programme and course outcomes or assessments. We as the tutor need to find out what the students are selecting and then control that to some degree. (A3: UNI A: A0010) It is the students' responsibility to create networks with each other and they often do; the students use WhatsApp and Facebook groups to communicate outside of the classroom which I think for a part-time course is more than enough. (A1: UNI A: A0025) Students don't want us on their private spaces, this is their space to talk about whatever they want. (A 2: UNI A: C0015) I have been part of an online social group with the students before…I found that students would pass wrong information to each other, so much caution is needed so that they can get the right content and information, that can relate to the assignment, especially if the social networking group are not governed by tutors. (A2: UNI A: A0005) Once I asked to join (the student Facebook group) and I did for literally five minutes and then an IT technician at the time said I wouldn't because the university strongly discourage it. I got the impression also that the students were not keen on me being part of it either. (A 2: UNI A: COO15) The student can be very isolated and fearful especially on a part-time course about what they are working on. By looking at others blogs they can compare their work with others and feel settled. There is always a few in the class who are 'fast trackers' and they have the threshold knowledge of how to make writing in HE works. (A 4: UNI B: D0012) I am really interested in any tools that allow students to share ideas, thoughts and worries… My seminars are usually set around using technology. This benefits the students academically and emotionally as not only can they continue the learning with each other online but they can also gauge their own learning and writing through seeing that of others.

	(A4: UNI B: D0030) Great, the students don't have much time to collaborate during the lecture and very little in the seminar… so anything that helps to get them to talk or share knowledge and get them talking to one another would be good. (A4: UNI: B: D0033) I also think by looking at the strands of communication between students, the blog, perhaps, gives them impetus to join in or not to join in. Then to reflect or actually say, 'That's a useful comment'. And this is my view on it; it gives them freedom to access and have their say. (UA; A3:D0040) In a collective learning space, one that is not reliant on online communication, but is reliant on an unspoken consensus that all students and staff would share resources and be part of the collaborative process. Without this a student will either find interests elsewhere or provide superficial blogging which would be no good to anyone. (UB; A4: D0037)

Theme: Repository for sharing and community of inquiry	
Non-blogging student	I think the blog would be useful to share ideas with each other about the course, I think I would have liked to see others' work maybe and share ideas about the assignment (NBS: UNI A: E0026) It's a massive help to be connected with other students on the course……and when it's coming up to assessment deadlines, just confirming dates and layout of things. It is nice to just be connected with other students on your course. (NBS: UA: E0020)
Blogging student	I realised that this space could be a space for me to share and also for me to write and take notes, nobody judged and we all looked at what each other were posting which we would all talk about face-to-face in our group. (BS 10: UNI B: C0016) When we saw each other again we would often talk about what we had put on the blog. (BS 11: UNI B: L0141). I tended to be reflective and seeing some of the other students' work made me think ah that's how to write reflectively and critically. (BS 12: UNI B: G0096) I didn't really know what to comment but it was funny as I would tell other students face-to-face that I liked their posts or I found the post really helpful. (BS 9: UNI B: L0152) I think blogs are great for sharing deeper ideas and thoughts. I guess we are a group that feels comfortable to share thoughts and ideas, we all get al.ong really well and there is not competition involved. The blogs are a great place to share ideas and experiences with people with similar goals. (BS 10: UNI B: A0055) But any questions were just for the individual to think about and there was no expectation that any of us would respond to the questions put out there, I think we all understood they were just a way of expression. (BS 5: UNI B: COO16) We all work very well together in the classroom and share ideas about practice and our study. We all talked about what we had said or uploaded on the blog in class and this made me feel comfortable to share my ideas on the blog more. (BS 9: UNI B: J0037)

Theme: Repository for sharing and community of inquiry	
	The tutor was enthusiastic (in class) for us to use the blog and would mention the blog regularly at the start and made suggestions regarding the use. We all just then helped each other to use the blog and work it out. Once we got used to it we all just got on with sharing ideas and thoughts. (B7: UNI A: K0098) We (the students) all just then helped each other to use the blog and work it out. Once we got used to it we all just got on with sharing ideas and thoughts. (B6: UNI B: K0099)
Academic staff	They (students) are using things like WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram to network in the groups and share ideas and I am not part of that and would not be as this is their private space. (A 2: UNI A: A0011) For longer discussions I think blogs may then be of use, but it would need to be assessed, I still think, otherwise the students would see this as something extra and then may not be motivated to use the blog. (A3: UNI A: A0016)

Theme: Reflective writing and thinking	
Non-blogging student	
Blogging student	I think if you see this [the blog] as part of your course and development then you are more likely to use it, I found it helped me to use references in my writing and to improve my sentence structure. (BS 6: UNI B: L0129) I only posted useful things, things that I thought I needed to complete my assignment and things that I thought would be useful to the group… it helped me to practice my writing, so I thought it was a good use of my time. (BS 1: UNI B: J0019) The blogs give time to see everyone's thoughts and reflections. (B 10: UNI B: C0112) I enjoyed writing about me and my family on the blog at the start. I thought it was good for the group to get to know me as a whole person. (B 1: UNI B: H0109) I started to write about things the group had in common so a working life and some with a family. I wanted to share how we were all in the same boat juggling everything. (B 7: UNI A: H0119) It [the blog] made me think about the lecture and say what I think in written form … when I can design it creatively and others could see it. (BS 10: UNI B:GOO92) This [blog use] helped me to rethink the content and look at this in a different way. (BS 10: UNI B: C0134) I felt better about my writing and it gave me confidence to carry on. (B4: UNI B: L0133) I liked it when other students discussed my blog, this made me want to share more. I think this helped us [the class group] to start to speak with one another. I think it helped me to think about the things I was writing too. (BS 1: UNI B: C0143) Well without the blog my assignment would have been poorer. You see through the blog I was able to see other views regarding the curriculum and more research. Through talking to some of the students when we were in class also made their blog clearer and made me think a lot more about the issues. (BS 2: UNI B: G0096)

Theme: Reflective writing and thinking	
	I liked doing the posts because it gave me space to write things and compare my views to the other students' views. I can see all of the different curriculums through the posts of other students. (BS 12: UNI B: F0087) I was happy to use it as a forum to communicate and gain further ideas from other students, but as others didn't blog with me I lost interest and the drive to keep blogging if I am honest so just gave up on it. (B7: UNI A: D0018) From looking at the other posts I was able to know what I needed to write for my own assignment. It kind of set me off on the right path way to think about the ideas and it made me feel more confident that I was doing things right. (BS 10: UNI B: F00118) The blog was useful to go back to and even though we did not write on each other's blogs we were able to see how others were writing and what references they were using after each seminar session. (BS 2: UNI B: C0118)
Academic staff	A blog may allow students to practice skills such as academic writing or using references (A4: UNI B: A0026) I suppose thinking about it might offer them a place to practice assessment writing before they submit their final piece of work which could be helpful, it would take time though. (A3: UNI A: A0027) Yes reflective thinking would be naturally encouraged I suppose through the use of a blog. (A2: UNI A: A0017)

Theme: Challenges to blogging – time, training and other forms of online communities and communication	
Non-blogging student	I can see the use of communicating with others on the course is important though we have a WhatsApp that does this so why would we need to do this on the blog also? (NBS: UNI A: E0026) I do think that being on a part-time course there is a need to communicate with other peers more outside of university. I really like group chat on WhatsApp in our group and that's really helpful … We talk about all sorts of things … I don't see this is as part of my course, I just think it's about letting off steam. (NBS: UNI A: B0017) When I connect with the other students using the WhatsApp group I want to be able to talk about the course freely without the thoughts of any tutor being involved or seeing this. (NBS: UNI A: JOO47) I would be worried more about what I wrote on the blog if the tutor was on there. (NBS: UNI A: K0096) We talk about all sorts of stuff, so I don't think I would like the tutor involved in this. I see it as letting off steam. (NBS: UNI A: B0017) I think if we hadn't got the WhatsApp group we would have blogged more as it is a form of communicating when you are at home and keeping in touch with one another. (NBS: UNI A: B0021) We are all on the WhatsApp group and it's a massive help to be able to confirm what's been said in the classroom. (NBS: UNI A: E0020)
Blogging student	I wanted to get it out of the way so sometimes I just did not have the time to write so I wrote anything that came into my head at that time … I didn't think about how this might benefit me or the group. (BS 9: UNI B: D0024) 'I had other things going on with my course, so I didn't really get into blogging a lot. (UB: B10: F0098) I didn't know what to do or where to start so I put some of the content regarding the lesson down and on some occasions just copied the power point notes onto my blog and spent the least amount of time on it (the blog) as possible. (BS 6: UNI B: F0099) I did stop towards the end of the module once my submission date was getting closer. I was making notes in class but never got them to the blog as it seemed like extra work at that time. Sorry. (BS 10: UNI B: K0079)

Theme: Challenges to blogging – time, training and other forms of online communities and communication	
	I did stop towards the end of the module once my submission date was getting closer. I was uploading notes made in class but never discussed them in any way as this seemed like extra work at that time. (UB:B10: K0079) My attention to detail did changed a bit towards the end, I posted less, and I only used a few sentences or even bullet pointing as I wanted to work more on my assignment. (UB: B12: k0089)
Academic staff	

9 Appendix Three – Interview questions

9.1 Interview Questions – Bloggers

All bloggers will have the printed copies of their blog post in front. Some of the post will be highlighted for further questioning later.

1) Why did you blog?
    - Reasons, purpose, any encouragements or hidden incentives, what is the motivation behind the use.
2) What sorts of things did you post?
    - How often was this occurrence? Why were occurrences like this or followed this pattern?
    - The length of the post, if varied why did this vary
    - The writing style, if varied why, if the same why?
    - Levels of engagement on the blog and perceived affordances
3) Were there any factors that affected your usage on the blog?
    - What factors, why were they factors? Barriers to using the blog
    - positive or negative to the blogging process – what encouraged the use and discouraged the use?
4) Did using the blog help you in anyway throughout this first term?
    - How? Course content or communication with others, seeing others' work online. What did they gain?
5) Did being a part-time student influence your use of blogs in anyway throughout your first term?
    - Connects to others
    - Seeing work
    - Barriers
    - Community of inquiry and practice
6) Do you feel that blogs have a purpose in education at this level?
    - How - For what reason/ purpose?
    - Collaboration
7) Are peers important in the blogging process?
    - In what ways?
    - Would students have helped you blog more / less, at all?

- Did seeing other work or posts help or not?
- Public / private spaces
- Community

8) Would you have liked to see your tutor on the blog with you?
    - Role of the tutor and role of the student. Why, in what capacity, how might this have affected your blogging (positively or negatively)?

9) Did you connect, collaborate or communicate online with any of your peers?
    - How?
    - If not why?
    - Did you read any of the other student blogs? If so did you read more of one than another – why – does this connect with the offline relationships?
    - Collaborative properties

10) Did you find the blog an easy tool to use?
    - Any issue with the use
    - How did the introductory session help with the use?
    - Did the blogs that I sent out initially help you to post? How?
    - Did you access the technical support at any time? If so, for what purpose?
    - Barriers

11) Do you use any other social technology for educational purposes?
    - What tools and how are they being used? With whom?
    - Roles of other technology and perceptions of use

9.2 Interview Questions – Non-Bloggers

3) Can you tell me about why you did not blog?
    - What were the reasons for not blogging?
    - Did you start to blog?
    - Did you decide not to blog from the beginning? Or did you think you would use the blog?

4) What would have encouraged you to blog?
    - Incentive
    - Summative work

5) Would you be encouraged to post on a blog if others in the class blogged?
    - In what ways?
    - Would students have helped you blog more / less, at all?
    - What factors positive or negative to the blogging process?

6) How do you think that you being on a part-time course influenced your decision regarding the use (or lack of) on the blog?
    - If so what are the differences?
    - What is the impact?
    - How could technology help – what types, for what purpose?
    - Why do students not blog?

7) In reference to the above questions how do you (if at all) see blogs having a purpose in education for part-time students such as yourself, at this level?
    - How, for what purpose/reason?
    - Benefits to the course

8) How do you think you might have used the blog if it were a private space and no other could view your posts?
    - Public and private space
    - Collaborative practices

9) How do you think your tutor being involved with the blogging process would have made a difference?

    Present online?

    Present offline

10) In relation to the above question then, if blogs were part of your course, how would you prefer them to function?

    So with the tutor or without?

As summative work or no summative work?

A place to practice your writing

Private /public spaces

11) Have you experienced connecting, collaborating or communicating with any of your peers online outside of the classroom regarding your course? if so, what platform is this and what is discussed?
    - how useful / helpful do you find this?

    Collaborative practice

12) Did you find the blog an easy tool to set up?
    - Any issue with the use?
    - How did the introductory session help with the use?
    - Did the blogs that I sent out initially help you to post? How?
    - Did you access the technical support at any time? If so, for what purpose?
    - Barriers

9.3 Interview Questions – Tutors

1) How do you see the use of blogs and other social media tools in higher education?
    - Communication
    - Social
    - Academic
    - Community of practice / networking
    - Attitudes towards the use of blogs in an educational capacity
    - Affordances and collaboration

2) What are your thoughts regarding tutor involvement on a blog or similar tool for education?
    - What might be your role?
    - In what ways do you see yourself involved?
    - Do you think you would have made a difference to the engagement students had with the blog, i.e. would they blog more or less with you in this space? (public/ private space)
    - Tutor and student roles

3) Why do you think that the students did or did not blog in this study?
    - Attitudes towards technology in the classroom
    - Time issues
    - Part-time nature of the course
    - barriers

4) Do you embrace technology for educational purposes or other?
    - What type?
    - What purpose?
    - The uses
    - Why students blog or not

5) Do you use social media and / or social technology within your pedagogy?
    - Social media
    - Social technology – collaborative approaches versus non-collaborative approaches
    - Other social and collaborative tools such as Facebook, Yammer, WhatsApp
    - Roles and affordances

6) Do you consider that social and collaborative technologies, such as the blog, can assist students on a part-time programme?
    - How, why, what?
    - Why students blog or do not

10 Appendix Four – Consent Forms

10.1 Project information

Informed Consent and Project Information

Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in this research project. Before you decide whether to take part in the research, it is important that you understand the reason why this research is being carried out, and what your participation will involve. I would be grateful if you would take time to read the following information carefully. Please feel welcome to ask me if anything is unclear, and to take as much time as you need to decide whether or not to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

This is a study to look at how blogs are perceived by students in educational contexts.

Who is running this study?

My name is Fiona Casserley-Williams, and I am a senior lecturer at a university in Nottinghamshire. I do not teach on any of the modules connected with your course. This research is part of my doctoral study.

Why have you been chosen to take part?

Your course has been selected because it is a professional or foundation degree on which typically students attend the university on a part-time basis.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to take part or not, as you choose. If you do decide to take part, you will also be asked to sign this consent form. You will still be free to withdraw at any time. If you decide not to take part, or to withdraw at any stage, you will not be asked to give us any reasons.

What is involved if I take part?

On meeting you I will ask some questions to establish your skills and experience using technology. Additionally, you will create and make entries in a blog space. This will not be onerous. This will not be part of your assessed work. You can choose whether your blog is made visible to your tutor.

You may be asked to take part in an interview at a later point in the research. If this is the case then I will ask you to sign a further consent form at that time.

Taking part in this research will have no influence on your grades awarded for your studies.

How will I protect your confidentiality and anonymity?

All information gathered will be handled only by myself, in line with data protection principles and our approved research protocol. All data will be kept in password protected computer.

Your blog entries will be seen only by myself and your fellow students. Optionally you may wish to make your blog visible to your tutor, but this is not necessary for the research.

You will not be named or otherwise identified in any research output arising from this. I may use quotes from your blog but I will be careful to ensure that you cannot be personally identified from your quote.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The only cost to you will be the time needed to take part.

What are the possible benefits?

I hope that you will find the process interesting, and will be pleased to have helped develop understanding of this important topic.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be written up for my doctoral thesis and possibly for later publication.

What if I choose to withdraw?

Please use the contact information below to contact me to ask me to remove your interview data, or if you would like to withdraw all your data from the whole project. You do not need to give any reason. The latest date you can withdraw your data is September 20th, 2018, after which it will not be possible, for practical reasons.

Contacts for further information

Contact details were available here for the students and academics

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Agreement to consent

I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. In completing this form I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. I shall be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant’s name	
Participant’s signature	
Date	

10.2 Interview consent form

Informed Consent and Project Information (Interview)

Thank you for agreeing to consider being interviewed for this research project. I would be grateful if you would take time to read the following information carefully. Please feel welcome to ask me if anything is unclear, and to take as much time as you need to decide whether or not to take part.

What is the purpose of the interview?

This is an interview which is a continuation of my research to look at how blogs are perceived by students in educational contexts.

Who is running this study?

My name is Fiona Casserley-Williams and I am a senior lecturer at a university based in Nottinghamshire. I do not teach on any of the modules connected with your course. This interview is part of my doctoral study.

Why have you been chosen to take part?

Your course has been selected because it is a part-time professional or foundation degree. You have been selected for this interview to extend my investigation based on your views about blogs in education.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to take part or not, as you choose. If you do decide to take part, you will also be asked to sign this consent form. You will still be free to withdraw from the interview at any time. If you decide not to take part, or to later withdraw your consent for me to use your interview data, you will not be asked to give any reasons. You may also choose not to answer any particular question during the interview.

What is involved if I take part?

The interview will last approximately 20 minutes. It will be audio recorded.

How will I protect your confidentiality and anonymity?

The interview recording, and transcript, will be stored on a password protected computer. They will be accessed only by myself.

You will not be named or otherwise identified in any research output arising from this. I may use quotes from your interview but I will be careful to ensure that you cannot be personally identified from your quote.

All project data will be deleted or destroyed immediately after the completion of my doctoral studies, or after publication if publication is pursued.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The only cost to you will be the time needed to take part.

What are the possible benefits?

I hope that you will find the process interesting and will be pleased to have helped develop understanding of this important topic.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be written up for my doctoral thesis and possibly for later publication.

What if I choose to withdraw?

Please use the contact information below to contact me to ask me to remove your interview data, or if you would like to withdraw all your data from the whole project. You do not need to give any reason. The latest date you can withdraw your data is September 20th 2018, after which it will not be possible, for practical reasons.

Contacts for further information

Contact details were available here for students and academics

---

Agreement to consent

I voluntarily consent to participate in this interview. In completing this form I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. I shall be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant's name	
Participant's signature	
Date	

10.3 Course leader consent form

Project Information and agreement (course leader)

Thank you for agreeing to me approaching your students to gather data for my project.

What is the purpose of the study?

This is a study to look at how blogs are perceived by students in educational contexts.

Who is running this study?

My name is Fiona Casserley-Williams and I am a senior lecturer at a university based in Nottinghamshire. I do not teach on any of the modules connected with your course. This research is part of my doctoral study.

Why has your course been chosen to take part?

Your course has been selected because it is a professional or foundation degree on which typically students are attending the university on a part-time basis.

What is involved for the students?

They will be asked initially five questions to establish their skills and experience using technology. Additionally, they will create and make entries in a blog space. This will not be onerous. This will not be part of their assessed work. Students may choose whether their blog is made visible to their tutors. Some students may also be selected for interview in a follow up stage of the research.

Taking part in this research will have no influence on their grades awarded for their studies. I will not undertake any teaching on your course, other than instructions for the creation and use of the blogs.

How will I protect their confidentiality and anonymity?

All information will be handled only by myself, in line with data protection principles and my approved research protocol. All data (blog and interview recordings and transcripts) will be stored on a password protected computer.

Their blog entries will be seen only by myself and their fellow students. Optionally they may wish to make their blog visible to their tutor, but this is not necessary for the research.

They will not be named or otherwise identified in any research output arising from this. I may use quotes from blogs and interviews but I will be careful to ensure that they cannot be personally identified from their quote.

All project data will be deleted or destroyed immediately after the completion of my doctoral studies, or after publication if publication is pursued.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The only cost to them will be the time needed to take part.

What are the possible benefits?

I hope that they will find the process interesting and will be pleased to have helped develop understanding of this important topic.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be written up for my doctoral thesis and possibly for later publication.

Contacts for further information

Contact details were available here for students and academics

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Agreement to consent

I agree that the students on my course can be approached to take part in this study.

Course name and course leader's name	
Course leader's signature	
Date	

11 Appendix Five – Ethical Clearance

Professional Doctorates Research Ethics Committee (PDREC)

A Ethical Approval Checklist for Ed D/D Soc Prac/D Legal Prac/D Fashion/ADBE professional doctorate group of courses

This form must be signed off by the research student, one member of the supervisory team, and a course leader, to signify that the proposed research conforms with good ethical principles and standards, before commencing any research in preparation for **Documents 3, 4 or 5** in any of the Ed D/D Soc Prac/D Legal Prac/D Fashion/ADBE professional doctorate group of courses.

Assurance that all research will conform with good ethical standards is provided by the student when signing this form. Please complete this document following the Ed D/D Soc Prac/D Legal Prac/D Fashion/ADBE professional doctorate group of courses ethical approval guidelines.

Award title	Doctor of Education
Cohort	First year undergraduate students, studying on a professional or foundation degree route. 3 programmes from 3 different schools across the university.
Research Student’s Name	Student names are unknown as the class list for each programme will not have been generated yet.
	The values and uses of a shared blog for returning students

Project title and short description of project	***Aim of the research*** ***[This] University ([uni acronym]) supports a digital framework aimed at improving the quality of engagement with the use of technology. This research aims to develop an understanding of the online discourse that may take place among a first-year cohort studying a part-time foundation degree programme at [THE UNIVERSITY].*** ***Main research questions*** • ***What happens when blogs are taken up by student users? What kind of activities take place?*** • ***How, if at all, is knowledge shared and developed within an online environment?*** • ***If collaboration takes place what is the nature of the collaboration; does collaboration happen across the cohort or in smaller clusters?*** • ***Are collaborative properties intrinsic to blogs? Is it as straightforward that the tool fosters collaborative learning by students?*** • ***What are learner perceptions about using blogs?*** • ***How can online spaces be curated to maximise learning benefits particularly for adults returning to education?*** The research will take a case study approach to exploring the use of blogs within a UK HE establishment. The study adopts an interpretivist approach gathering rich qualitative data in the social context regarding perception and attitudes. The methods were chosen to include the use of semi-structured interview, and discourse analysis of the blogs using a thematic approach, by which data will be analysed by looking at recurring themes and patterns relating to the rationale, and then clustered for interpretation.

Supervisors (List lead supervisor first)	1. [Name of supervisor] 2. [Name of supervisor]
Date	29/5/2017
Identify any questions in the completed form which indicate that approval by PDREC or its successor is required.	

At the end of each section it is indicated whether ethical approval must be sought from the Professional Doctorates Research Ethics Committee (PDREC) or its successor.

WHEN COMPLETING YES/NO BOXES, PLEASE ENSURE YOU HAVE CLEARLY INDICATED YOUR RESPONSE. IF YOU ARE DIRECTED NOT TO COMPLETE SECTIONS OF THE FORM, PLEASE PUT A LINE THROUGH THE IRRELEVANT SECTIONS.

Section O I: Familiarisation with policy

Please confirm that you are fully acquainted with policy guiding ethical research:

• [THE UNIVERSITY] research ethics policy and code of practice for research, and the procedures for ethical approval on this group of courses.	Yes	
• The guidelines for ethical research promulgated by a professional association, as appropriate.[1]	Yes	

- please specify which professional association's guidelines you will be following (if any): ______________________________

• The [THE UNIVERSITY] Computer Use Regulations (*see* [THE UNIVERSITY] website)	Yes	
• Guidelines for Risk Assessment in Research (Appendix 2)	Yes	
• Guidelines on carrying out research with children, and with your own students and colleagues (Appendix 3)	Yes	

If you answered **NO** to any of these questions, please note that you must study these guidelines and regulations before proceeding to complete the remainder of this form.

Section O II: External Ethical Review

[1]For example: Arts and Humanities Research Council; British Educational Research Association; British Psychological Society; British Sociological Association; Economic and Social Research Council; Research Councils UK; Social Research Association; Socio-Legal Studies Association

O.1 Has a favourable ethical opinion already been given for this project by an NHS or social care research ethics committee, or by any other external research ethics committee? [2]		No
O.2 Will this project be submitted for ethical approval to an NHS or social care committee or to any other external research ethics committee? [3] **SUBMISSION OF THIS CHECKILST OR OF THE FULL APPLICATION DOES *NOT* CONSTITUTE A SUBMISSION TO AN EXTERNAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**.		No

If you answered **YES** to either of these two questions, please sign the declaration at the end of the checklist (p7) and submit it (together with a letter confirming ethical approval from the external committee) before starting any research.

If you answered **NO** to both questions, please proceed to Section A

Section A: Investigator

[2] An external research ethics committee means any research ethics committee *other* than the PDREC at Nottingham Trent University (or its successor). Submission of this form is *not* a submission to an external research ethics committee. The research ethics committee of another academic institution is an external research ethics committee for this purpose.

[3] An external research ethics committee means any research ethics committee *other* than the PDREC at Nottingham Trent University (or its successor). The research ethics committee of another academic institution is an external research ethics committee for this purpose.

A.1. Have you attended workshops 1, 2:1 and 2:2 or attended other award-bearing or training courses on research ethics?[4] ▪ Date attended workshop 1: Jan 20th and 21st 2017 ▪ Date attended workshop 2:1: 12th May 2017 ▪ Date attended workshop 2:2: 13th May 2017	YES	
A.2. Are you in regular contact with your supervisory team?	YES	
A.3. Are you expecting to undertake physically invasive procedures (not covered by a generic protocol) during the course of the research?		NO
A.4 Are you in a position of authority that may compromise the integrity of participants (this includes a member of academic staff using his/her students, or a manager using subordinates as participants)?[5]		NO

If you answered **NO** to either of questions A.1 or A.2, or **YES** to either of questions A.3 or A.4, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

Section B: Participants & Method/Procedures

B.1 Does the research involve vulnerable participants? If **not**, go to Section C

B.2 If the research does involve vulnerable participants: will participants knowingly be recruited from one or more of the following vulnerable groups?

• Children under 18 years of age		No
• People over 65 years of age who are perceived to be vulnerable		No

[4]If you have yet to attend any of these workshops, or alternative courses, you will need to make a full application explaining how you have ensured that you are sufficiently conversant with research methods and research ethics to make an informed application.

[5]These projects will not normally require a full application to PDREC but may do so. This will require completion of this checklist together with the full application (p8) and supporting documents.

• Pregnant women		No
• People with mental illness		No
• Prisoners/detained persons		No
• Other vulnerable group		No

- please specify: ______________________________

B.3 Do you need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check as a condition of access to any source of data in the UK for this document?[6]		No

B.4 To the best of your knowledge, please indicate whether the proposed study:

• Involves procedures likely to cause physical, psychological, social or emotional distress to participants		No
• Is designed to be challenging physically or psychologically in any way (includes any study involving physical exercise)		No
• Exposes participants to risks or distress greater than those encountered in their normal daily life		No
• Involves the use of hazardous materials		No

If you have answered **YES** to any of questions B1-B4, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

Section C: Data collection

[6] **All** projects involving investigation where a DBS check is necessary require a full application to the PDREC – completion of this checklist together with the full application (p8) and supporting documents.

C.1 Does the study involve data collection?[7] **NOTE THAT DATA COLLECTION *INCLUDES* THE RE-USE OF MATERIAL ORIGINALLY COLLECTED FOR A NON-RESEARCH PURPOSE (E.G. CLIENT OR STUDENT DATA ALREADY IN YOUR POSSESSION).**	Yes	
C.2 Will those contributing to the data collected or the appropriate authority with ownership or responsibility for the data, be informed that the data collection will take place?	Yes	

If you have answered **NO** to question C.1, because you are not undertaking empirical work, proceed to the declaration a the end of this form. If you have answered **NO** to question C.2, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to PDREC or its successor.

Section D: Consent and Deception

Informed Consent & Data Withdrawal D.1 Will participants, or the appropriate authority, be fully informed of the objectives, and of all other particulars of the investigation (preferably at the start of the study, but where this would interfere with the study, at the end)?	Yes	
D.2 Will participants, or the appropriate authority, be fully informed of the use of the data collected (including, where applicable, ownership of any intellectual property arising from the research)?	Yes	
D.3 For detained persons, members of the armed forces, employees, students and other persons who may not be in a position to give fully independent consent, • Will care be taken over the gaining of freely informed consent? • Will you comply (if relevant) with the guidelines on carrying out research with children, and with your own students and colleagues (Appendix 3?[8]	Yes	
D.4 Will participants, or the appropriate authority, be informed of their right to withdraw from the investigation at any time (or before a specific deadline) and to require their own data to be destroyed?	Yes	

[7]For the purposes of this form, this includes, *but is not limited to,* the interviewing, observation or recording of participants. It does *not* include, for the purposes of this form, collection of written material in the public domain (eg traditional doctrinal legal research).

[8]These projects will not normally require a full application to PDREC but may do so. This will require completion of this checklist together with the full application (p8) and supporting documents.

If you have answered **NO** to any of questions D.1-D.4, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

D.5 Does the study involve deception of participants (i.e., withholding of information and/or misleading participants) which could potentially harm and/or exploit participants?		No

If you have answered **NO** to question D.5, please proceed to section E.

Deception

D.6 Is deception an avoidable part of the study?	Yes	No
D.7 Will participants, or the appropriate authority, be de-briefed and the true object of the research revealed at the earliest stage upon completion of the study?	Yes	No
D.8 Has consideration been given to the way that participants, or the appropriate authority, will react to the withholding of information or deliberate deception?	Yes	No

If you have answered **NO** to either of questions D.7-D.8 an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

Section E: Storage of Data and Confidentiality

Please see University guidance on http://www4.[The University].ac.uk/research/research_at_[The University]/data_management/index.html.

E.1 Will all information on participants be treated as confidential and not identifiable unless agreed otherwise in advance, and subject to the requirements of the law of the relevant jurisdiction?	Yes	

E.2 Will storage of data comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the law of any non-UK jurisdiction in which research is carried out?	Yes	
E.3 Will any video/audio recording/still photographs of participants be kept in a secure place and not released for use by third parties?	Yes	
E.4 Will video/audio recordings/still photographs be destroyed within six years of the completion of the investigation?	Yes	

If you have answered **NO** to any of questions E1-E4, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

Section F: Incentives

F.1. Have incentives (other than those contractually agreed, salaries or basic expenses) been offered to you by any funder of the research to conduct the investigation?		No
F.2. Will incentives (other than basic expenses, catering) be offered to potential participants, or the appropriate authority, as an inducement to participate in the investigation?		No

If you have answered **YES** to either of questions F1-F2, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

Section G: Research instruments

G.1 The design of the participant information sheet/consent form and of any research instrument (including questionnaires, sampling and interview schedules) that will be used has been discussed with, and approved by, my supervisor(s).[9]	Yes	

If you have answered **NO** to question G.1, an application for ethical approval needs to be made to the PDREC or its successor.

[9] You do not need to attach these documents to the checklist when it is submitted provided your supervisors have approved them. If you are required to make a full application to the PDREC, it may, however, be helpful to include these documents or extracts from them to show how you have addressed the ethical issue(s) that made a full application necessary.

Compliance with Ethical Principles

Please sign the declaration below, to confirm that this form has been completed to the best of your knowledge and after discussing the answers provided with your supervisor(s). If at any stage you have been asked to submit an application for ethical approval to the PDREC or its successor, please also complete and submit the appropriate form (which appears on the following page).

Signature of Research Student Date: 29/5/2017

Signature of Lead Supervisor ……………………………………………………. Date ……………………………………………

(note that this signature confirms that you have seen and approved any participant information sheet/consent form and research instruments such as questionnaires)

Signature of Course Leader/nominee ………………………………………….Date ……………………………………………

Professional Doctorates Research Ethics Committee (PDREC)

B Application for full Ethical Approval

Please complete this form if you have been asked to submit an application for full ethical approval to the PDREC or its successor, while completing the Ethical Approval Checklist.

Please complete this form and attach the following documents:

	√
Completed Ethical Approval Checklist (pp 1-7)	
Project proposal (this can be an extract from your document 1 or a concise account of your proposed research)	
A statement of up to 800 words outlining the ethical issues raised by the project (as highlighted in the Ethical Approval Checklist), and an explanation of how you intend to deal with these issues for the consideration of the PDREC or its successor.	

Please identify the question or questions in the checklist which prompted the full application:

	√		√		√		√		√
O.1		A.4		C.2		D.8		F.1	
O.2		B.1		D.1		E.1		F.2	
A.1		B.2		D.2		E.2		G.1	
A.2		B.3		D.3		E.3		Other reason (please specify):	
A.3		B.4		D.7		E.4			

The complete application must be given to the Graduate School Administrator who will monitor the progress of all submissions to the PDREC or its successor.

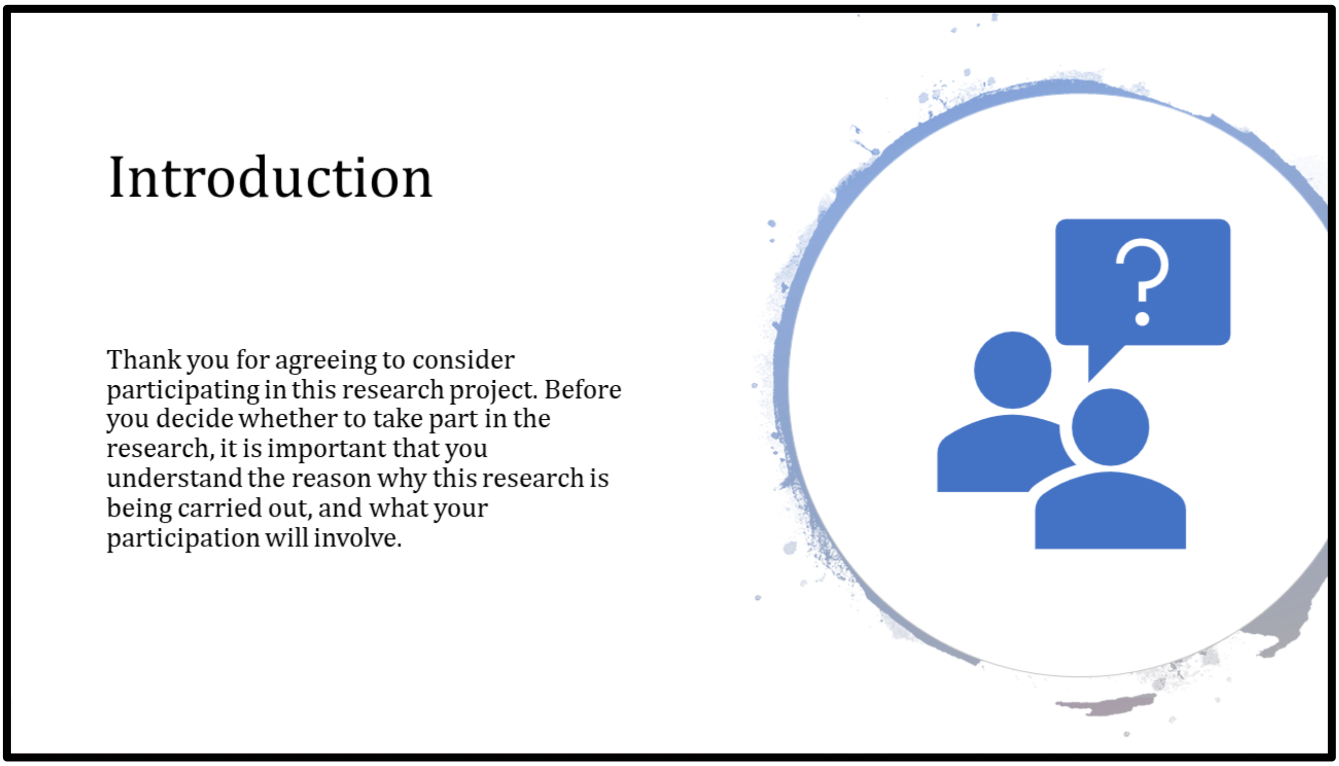
Applications must be fully signed before being submitted to the Graduate School Office.

Signature of Research Student ……………………………………………………. Date ………………………

Signature of Lead Supervisor ………………………………………………………. Date ………………………..

Signature of Course Leader/nominee ……………………………………………Date ………………………..

12 Appendix Six – Introductory PowerPoint



This session aims to:

An introduction to me and my research

Introduce blogging as an educational tool

Review consent for the research

Setting the blog tool for your individual use

Who am I

As a further education (FE) and HE academic, I conducted pilot studies over a period of nine years examining the nature of online learning (Casserley, 2010). In both published and unpublished studies, I investigated various online interventions such as blogs, Wikis, and discussion platforms, found improvements in retention, confidence, emotional security, and working with others (ibid, 2010).

From my experience, in research and practice, the acceptance of a learning tool is dependent on how it is perceived, understood, and valued for pedagogical purpose.

The research

This is a study to look at how blogs are perceived by students and academics in educational contexts.

The blogging materials will be collected from one academic term, however you can continue to use the blog afterwards if you select to do so.

Your course has been selected because it is a professional or foundation degree on which typically students attend the university on a part time basis.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to take part or not, as you choose. If you do decide to take part, you will also be asked to sign this consent form at the end of the session. You will still be free to withdraw at any time. If you decide not to take part, or to withdraw at any stage, you will not be asked to give us any reasons.

You may be asked to take part in an interview at a later point in the research. If this is the case then I will ask you to sign a further consent form at that time.

Taking part in this research will have no influence on your grades awarded for your studies.

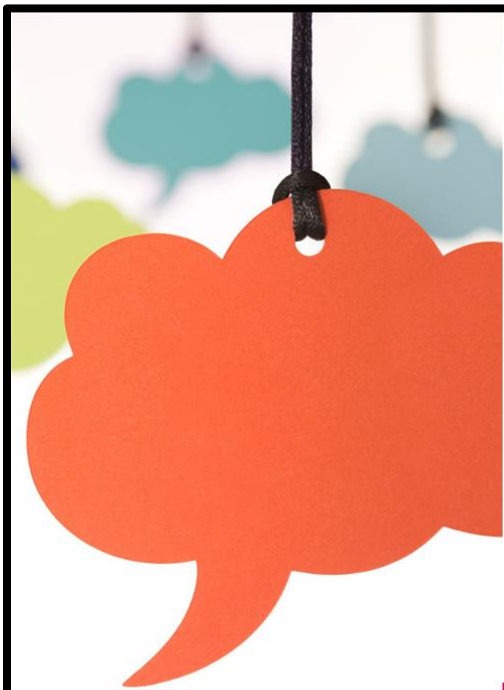
Introduction to blogs as an educational tool

Initially, the work of William and Jacob (2004) and Herring (2004) stimulated my interest in the use of a blog in an educational context. Originally, 'to blog' meant individuals used a web-based communication tool for 'micro-publishing' (William and Jacob, 2004; Herring, 2004). Herring asserted that blogs allow others to view research activities whilst also participating through comments.

Blogging

From this position, blogs quickly became a viable tool in education (Halic et al 2010; Downes, 2012; Yuan and Powell, 2013; Siemens, 2015; Trespalacios and Perkins, 2016).

Currently, blogs continue to be a leading platform for scholarly discussion in education (Hramiak and Boulton, 2013: Sullivan and Freishtat, 2013; Kuo et al, 2017; Garcia et al, 2019), and thus became central in the use for my own research inquiries.



You can connect with others on your course and written notes and discussions will be there for you to refer back to at a later date

Blogs are an available resource for learning design, especially due to the asynchronous nature (in which contributions need not be made at the same time), and they can be chronologically ordered and archived (Top, 2012). This functionality of a blog assists in being able to track and refer back to posts.

You can connect and share ideas with one another and respond to other posts which can be referred to later.

Create your own beautiful blog

Your blog can be individualised

The blog can be used by you and for you throughout the term

Only your class will be able to see your postings (closed group)

You have the opportunity to invite your tutor to see your individual posts (if you select to do so)

Your tutor will not be part of the blogging process

I will be on the blog during the intial stages to support you with any technical issues or to answer any questions regarding the research.

One final thought - What is your experiences of using technology and/or a blog

For what purpose?

In what context?

How regularly

What other technology do you use, for what purpose and how confident would you suggest you are?

Setting the blog up for your use

I will go through this step by step so you can set your individualised blog up whilst we are together as a group

Please also see the information sheet provided

Any Questions

13 Appendix Seven – EduBlogs guide

EduBlogs creation and sharing guide

To create an account access https://edublogs.org and add a username and password into the white box and click sign up, you will then be shown a page asking you which best describes you:
I'M A STUDENT
I'M AN EDUCATOR
OTHER OR GUEST
ALREADY HAVE AN ACCOUNT? SIGN IN

Click on **I'M A STUDENT** and you will be taken to an account creation page where you can confirm your Username and Password. Copy the captcha code and tick to agree the terms and conditions.

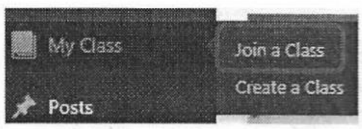
Click **CONTINUE TO CREATE A BLOG.**

You will then setup your blog with a Domain and a Title click **REGISTER AND CREATE BLOG** to finish.
You will then be shown your **Username, Password** and **Blog URL.**
Click GO TO DASHBOARD

You will then see a landing page with options on the left hand side with your blog title above these.
To visit your site hover over the title and click **'Visit site'** If you wish to add a new post click the '+ **New'** option from the top menu. This also gives you other options.

To change the theme of your blog click **customising,** you can alter the theme completely or you can change any sections that you want to, once done click **save.**

To Join a Class
You will need to join your blog to Fiona's blog , this will enable you to view all the blogs within your group.
Navigate back to your blog Dashboard, click on **My Class** then **Join a Class**
In the text box search for the blog, you want to join, either:
Childhoodstudies, Secondary Education or Language123



Click on the 'send a request to join' link and Fiona will accept and confirm your request.

You will be able to view the site from the drop-down menu on the top left.