Using B.L.O.G.S.
The Deployment of Blended Learning to Orient Graduate Study

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Abstract

This paper is a proposal for the strategic and structured blending of online and face-to-face learning modalities in higher education. It specifically explores the possibilities for the effective use of web logs or blogs in combination with classroom sessions at the level of graduate study. The paper posits the application of blogging as a practice for enabling graduate research writing – as a practice for supporting the development of research writing skills among new/first-year graduate students. The paper looks at a marriage of 1) blogging, 2) classroom active learning sessions that focus on research writing and 3) assessment for development strategies. In doing so, the paper makes a dual case: a case for using blogs, and simultaneously, a case for using B.L.O.G.S., that is, for the deployment of Blended Learning to Orient Graduate Study.

Keywords: Blogs, Blended Learning, Higher Education

FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF LEARNING

> Asking a colleague about a problem in his or her research is an invitation; asking about a problem in one's teaching would probably seem like an accusation…How might we think of teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated?
>
> It takes a deliberate act to look at teaching from the perspective of learning. (Bass, 1999).

This paper makes use of the case study tradition of inquiry. It shares the discovery of a problem in teaching and learning practice by positioning that problem at the centre of intellectual engagement and investigation. The paper aligns itself with the philosophy of the scholarship of teaching and learning by serving as an embodiment of what the University of Illinois describes as the "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public" (McKinney, n.d.). The problem presented herein did not surface by viewing classroom practice from the angle of teaching, for, as Grant Wiggins (1996) writes: "teaching, by nature, is an egocentric profession in the sense Piaget used the term: we find it difficult to see when our teaching isn't clear or adequate. We don't easily imagine how what is so obvious and important to us cannot be equally so to novices." The problem, therefore, only became apparent by daring to take another point-of-view – by venturing to look deliberately at teaching through the lens of student learning.

THE PROBLEM

The words of Wiggins, that is, his observation that what is obvious and important to us is not equally so for neophytes, resonate here, for my teaching and learning problem arose in the context of novice learners: the teaching of first-year graduate students of a Cultural Studies programme at the St Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies. These were students who, after their first year of mandatory classes, would embark on independent research to explore their individual theses. In September 2008, I

inherited a yearlong or two-semester course and I soon confronted the questions: How were compulsory first-year classes preparing new graduate students to tackle research, communicate their lines of argument, justify their research design and effectively share analyses and research outcomes? How might I effectively facilitate learning among new graduate students? My course was handed over with an already set content outline, established learning outcomes and assessment methods. One assessment method – a 5000-word research paper to be submitted by the students at the end of the academic year – would become the stimulus for reflecting on my students' learning and the impetus for conceptualising a blended approach to orienting graduate study. How could I issue the task of writing a research paper without facilitating opportunities for students to learn to write at the graduate level? How could I assume that my students, having left undergraduate study – a domain traditionally characterised in many aspects by the consumption of knowledge – were equipped to deal with a different realm, that of graduate study, where students are expected to be proficient producers of knowledge (see table 1)? How could I presume that these new graduate students were prepared to articulate their research arguments, rationalise their viewpoints, review the literature, present conceptual frameworks, support their claims and offer conclusions in a 5000-word paper?

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF GRADUATE STUDY
More self-directed learning: Student takes initiative to identify resources for learning, formulate goals and set priorities; student assumes primary responsibility for identifying challenges, assessing outcomes and reformulating strategies for learning.
Greater/deeper engagement in scholarly activity: Chris Hart (1998, p.8) observes that scholarship is an activity that involves reading critically, interpreting and analysing arguments, synthesising ideas and making connections across disciplines, writing and presenting ideas clearly and systematically.
Greater/deeper participation in conversation: Through research papers and the dissertation, students are expected to develop their own ideas and enter the debate/discourse of a chosen research topic. Students are expected to contribute their own perspectives to statements made by other scholars and to make their contributions public through avenues like conference presentations and publications.
Student as a producer: Greater expectation of student to produce knowledge that makes us rethink what we have taken as unquestionable knowledge; to produce knowledge that advances our understanding of the world.

Table 1. Some characteristics of graduate study or education. What are we doing to orient or guide graduate study? Table by author.

The quality of smaller writing projects in semester one allowed me to see the need to address what John Biggs (1999) calls an "emergent learning outcome." In contradistinction to learning outcomes that are intentional or calculated, an emergent outcome is that which surfaces in our work with our students; it is an unanticipated outcome but one we come to recognise as significant. What I saw emerging as a valuable learning outcome was: for my students to be effective communicators in the writing of research papers. Guided by Biggs' notion of "constructive alignment," I sought to realign learning outcomes with teaching and learning activities as well as with assessment so that there was consistency or agreement in the relationships among outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment (see figure 1).

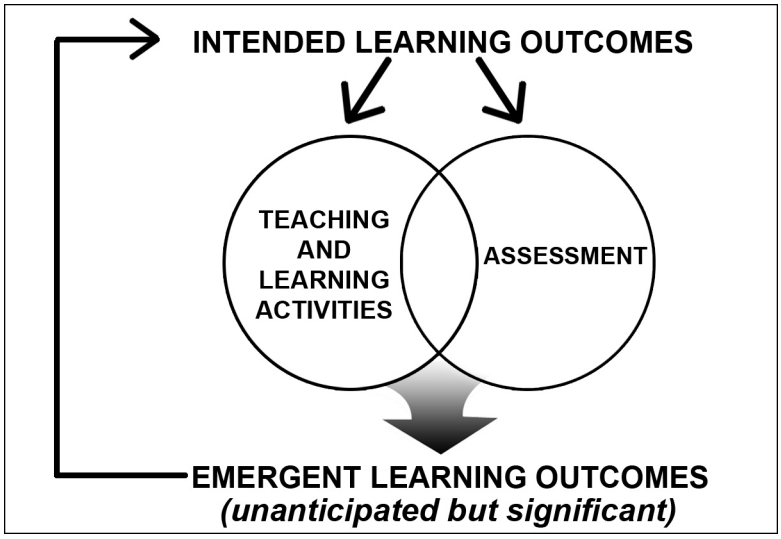

Figure 1. Aligning learning outcomes with teaching and learning activities and assessment. Illustration by author. Adapted from Biggs (1999) idea of constructive alignment.

More specifically, I consciously made "effective communication in research paper writing" an intended outcome and worked to align or synchronise this outcome with active classroom sessions on research writing. I also attempted to align the new outcome with the assessment for development strategy of student self-assessment (see figure 2).

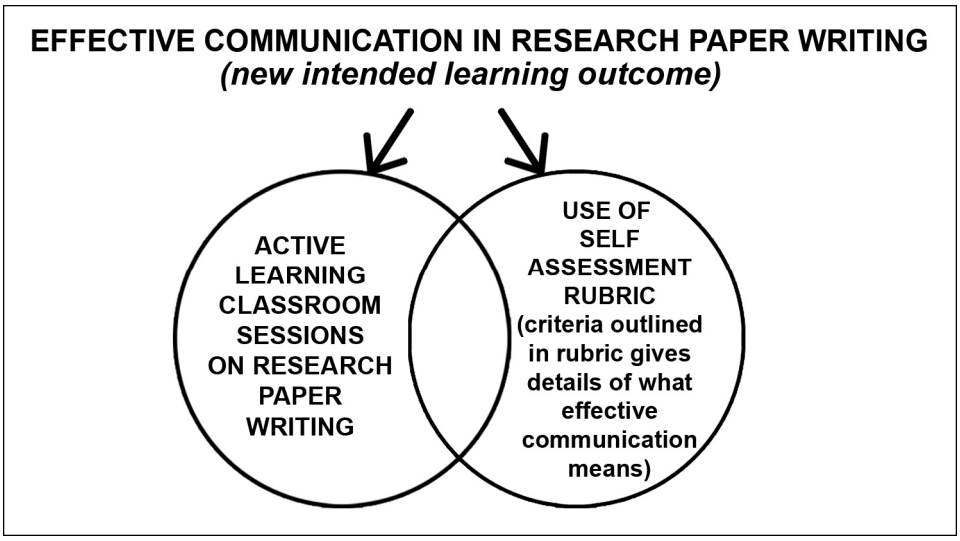

Figure 2. Aligning new intended learning outcome with active learning classroom sessions and the assessment for development strategy of student self-assessment. Illustration by author.

I designed a rubric with target performances for writing which would allow my students to reference criteria for effective communication, to reflect on their own writing, chart their own development and award themselves scores for drafts of their work – work they were expected to do outside class sessions (see figure 3). It was anticipated that the students and I would meet in class on given dates to review drafts of work and examine reflections on the development of their writing communication skills. Yet, I soon discovered that my students were not writing outside of the classroom – many were waiting to write shortly before the due date of the assignment. My students were giving me feedback that classroom active learning sessions were valuable to them but their learning remained invisible. How then, could a spirit of inquiry be fostered outside of class sessions? How could my students become connected to each other in a way that created a community of inquiry? How could their thinking and learning processes become visible? How could my students' metacognition be developed? And, how might students be stirred to sustain their writing – producing plans and drafts – as opposed to writing at the last minute? I needed to incorporate an appropriate and effective time-out-of-class structure that could address these questions. I therefore turned to online or e-learning approaches for answers.

Self-Assessment Rubric for Research Paper

Name of Student: ……..Student ID number: ….

Assessment Criteria	Target Performance	Student Comments Feb/2009	Score	Student Comments Mar/2009
Topic and Thesis 15pts	Introduction shows clearly defined topic (neither too broad nor too narrow) which is supported by a sound rationale for its study; topic is well-focused into a primary research question; writer clearly expresses own thesis/point-of-view about the topic; thesis is well-located within a conceptual framework			
Research Strategy and Development of thesis 15pts	Within the given topic there is strong evidence of coverage of relevant sources of data/literature of the field; clear acknowledgement and critique of differing points-of-view; clearly develops convincing support for thesis in body of paper; conclusion is logical based on evidence presented			
Documentation 10pts	Clear evidence of acknowledgement of material taken from others; citations are consistent with MLA style			
Writing Skills 10pts	Strong control over organisation of paper; paragraphs work together well; thoughts are clear; transitions between thoughts/ideas are clear; sentences have been checked for grammar, spelling, punctuation; language use is appropriate for an academic audience			

Figure 3. Self-assessment rubric for research paper writing. The rubric facilitates student comments and scoring at different points in the semester. Designed by author. Adapted from a scoring guide rubric by Stevens and Levi (2005).

AIMS

This paper is a proposal for the strategic and structured blending of online and face-to-face learning modalities in higher education. It specifically explores the possibilities for the effective use of web logs or blogs in combination with classroom sessions at the level of graduate study. The paper posits the application of blogging as a practice for enabling graduate research writing – as a practice for supporting the development of research writing skills among new/first-year graduate students. It describes blogging as a means of facilitating research writing outside the classroom; as a means of connecting graduate students with each other (a crucial element because graduate study can be a lonely journey); as a vehicle for posting drafts of research writing; as a means of reflecting on the writing process and; as a means of gaining peer feedback. The paper looks at a marriage of 1) blogging, 2) classroom active learning sessions that focus on research writing and 3) assessment for development strategies. In doing so, the paper makes a dual case: a case for using blogs, and simultaneously, a case for using B.L.O.G.S., that is, for the deployment of **B**lended **L**earning to **O**rient **G**raduate **S**tudy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Garrison & Vaughan (2008, p.10) observe that: “addressing the relevance and quality of the learning experience demands that higher education take a fresh look at how it approaches teaching and learning and utilises technology.” Therefore, in an effort to revisit my approach to teaching and learning; in an effort to incorporate the possible advantages of technology, I constructed a dual framework – one that draws on two concepts: 1) A Community of inquiry and; 2) Visible knowledge. Both concepts suggest distinct benefits of the use of technology in education and the potential for positive implications of embracing e-learning approaches.

The notion of a community of inquiry was created by Garrison and his colleagues in 2000. The use of technology facilitates “two ideas that are essential to higher education – *community* and *inquiry*. Community, on the one hand, recognises the social nature of education and the role that interaction, collaboration and discourse play in constructing knowledge. Inquiry on the other hand, reflects the process of constructing meaning through personal responsibility…” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.9). Inquiry involves action: exploration, application, practice and reflection. The incorporation of technology in teaching and learning gives the possibility of creating and preserving a community of inquiry outside of the classroom.

The notion of visible knowledge comes out of the visible knowledge project – a collaborative project of the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University. The project aims at improving university teaching by “focusing on both student learning and faculty development in technology-enhanced environments” (Visible Knowledge Project, 2002). Randy Bass, Executive Director of the Visible Knowledge Project, explains that the word “visible” has three definitions in the context of the project. Of these definitions, what are important for this paper are the ways in which technologies can make visible the thinking and learning processes of students as well as the ways in which technology can make teacher practice in the classroom visible.

Dovetailing the concepts of a community of inquiry and visible knowledge therefore offers a useful theoretical structure (see figure 4) in which “to shape [my] practice [and] reflect upon and make sense of outcomes” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.13).

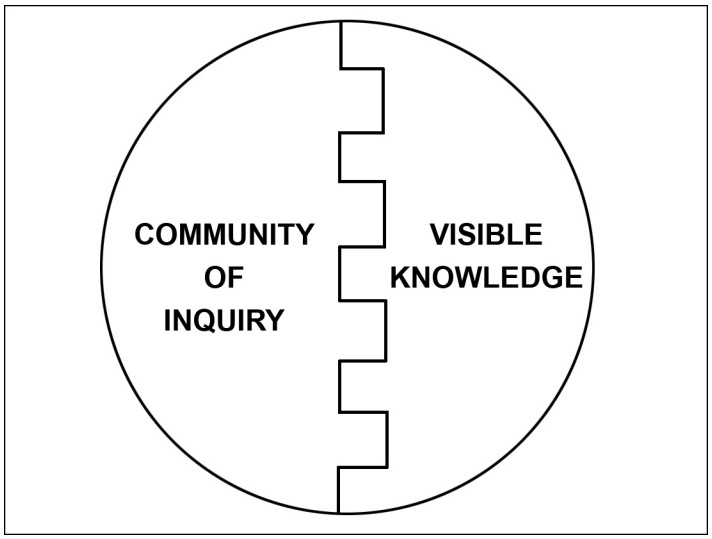

Figure 4. Theoretical Framework. Illustration by author.

BLENDING IN CONTEXT

I give attention now, to considerations necessary for blending in the teaching and learning context as I have already described it. Blended learning is the strategic "convergence of two archetypal learning environments" (Graham, 2006, p.5) – that of the traditional face-to-face classroom environment and the e-learning or online learning environment. "Blended learning combines the properties and possibilities of both [environments] to go beyond the capabilities of each separately. It recognises the strengths of integrating verbal and text-based communication…[of integrating] direct and mediated modes…" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.6). The practice of blending is more than enhancing learning; it is about enabling learning. This means that blending goes beyond adding course resources to the Web to involving the development of "challenging and engaging learning activities that occur within and outside of the classroom" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.177). Graham (2006) also identifies four levels at which blended learning can occur: at the activity level, the course level, the program level and the institutional level.

In my context, I see a blended design functioning at the level of a course and more precisely at the level of the research paper writing activity. What I am proposing here is a solution that incorporates the possibilities of the combined advantages of verbal and text-based communication; of direct and mediated communication as well as the integration of engaging classroom and time-out-of-class activities. With a want to facilitate the development of my students' ability to effectively communicate in the writing of a research paper, I pose the questions: What are the strengths of the classroom environment? What are the strengths of the online environment? And, how might I integrate these environments? Various studies (Weigel 2002; Meyer 2003; Heckman & Annabi 2005) show that online written communication facilitates reasoning, that is, written work is logical and well rationalised. Writing in the e-learning space promotes deeper levels of thinking. Written work in this space is also open to all classmates in a way not always possible in face-to-face settings – a factor that allows for peer feedback. The online learning environment also facilitates "reflection in a way that is not possible in…the face-to-face classroom [where] verbal agility, spontaneity and confidence to express oneself in a group settling" is required (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.31). In contrast, the face-to-face classroom environment is suited to verbal definitions, explanations or descriptions of topics and processes (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.36).

In response to such considerations, the web log or blog emerges as an appropriate online platform that can be integrated with classrooms sessions on research writing. A blog is a specialised website that functions as an online journal, keeping a log of dated entries. This journaling feature can accommodate the recording of drafts of segments of a student's research paper as well as a student's reflection on his/her own challenges, strengths and weaknesses in the writing process. Furthermore, the comments component of blogs allows for teacher and peer feedback. Blogs, therefore, make a community of inquiry possible and they can make knowledge visible. Blogs are also characterised by their "reflection of a personal style" (Downes, 2004). This inherent nature of the blog can facilitate student functioning in a personalised space; a space that can be useful to new graduate students trying to find their own voice within a larger context of other writings or statements about a subject. As such, the blog has the potential to foster independent and creative thinking among new graduate students who must learn to think critically, be evaluative and develop their own perspectives or original responses to a topic.

True blended learning requires that the activity of blogging be thoughtfully fused with face-to-face experiences so that student engagement is optimised. Classroom sessions are therefore conceived here as triggering and resolution events that take the student from the classroom to the online learning space and back to the classroom-learning environment. In the classroom, students can participate in active sessions were such topics as writing introductions, articulating thesis statements, citing and paraphrasing sources as well as critiquing relevant literature are explored. Classroom sessions can be designed to allow students to work collaboratively to critically examine and verbally discuss published research papers and journal articles. The online space of the blog can then become a time-out-of-class site where learning and development can be seen; a space where students can apply what they are learning in the

classroom incrementally to drafts of their research papers and to the assessment of their own work and the work of their peers. Challenges and unanswered questions articulated in the online space can then be discussed and resolved in the next face-to-face session. What can drive a face-to-face–online cycle are questions. “If learning is to be a process of inquiry, then it must focus on questions, not just on answers” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p.15). Classroom-generated questions can direct student action and inquiry outside of the classroom and questions generated in the online space can bring students back to the classroom for face-to-face clarifications and guidance.

This classroom and blogging cycle is envisioned as occurring within a context of assessment for development; in a context of self and peer review where not only written communication is developed but also where metacognitive skills can thrive – skills of self-awareness, self-monitoring and self-regulation to achieve desired results (see figure 5). In contrast to a summative assessment approach, which places emphasis on certifying final achievement, a formative assessment strategy – that is, one that focuses on development – is important for graduate students who must develop the skills necessary to function largely as self-directed researchers/learners after their first year of mandatory graduate-level classes.

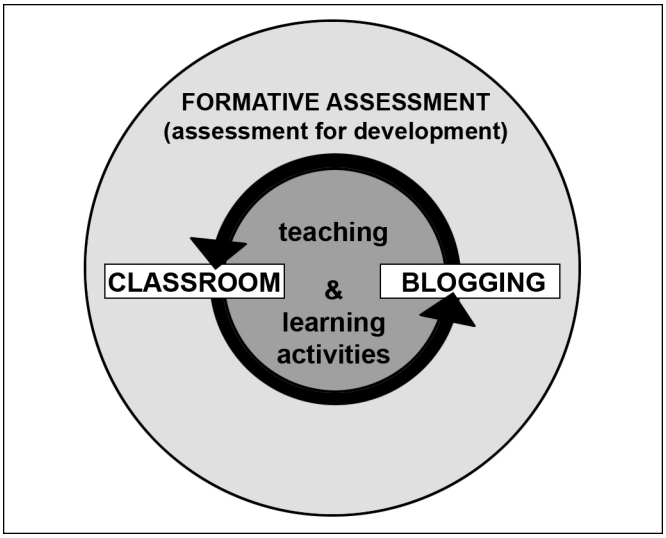

Figure 5. A blended design: Integrating face-to-face and online activities within a formative assessment context. Illustration by author.

CONCLUSION

Blended learning demands strategic design, implementation and evaluation so that the face-to-face and online learning environments are optimally integrated to create rich, engaging learning experiences wherein learning outcomes are realised. Expectations and structures for student performance must be articulated. In my conceptualisation of a blended design as I have shared in this paper, such structures would include an orientation to web logs, a blogging rubric that details the number and quality of blogs and feedback comments expected, as well as a self-assessment scheme to help students identify and solve problems in their work and the work of their peers. Ways to collect information about students’ perceptions of the blended learning experience must also be addressed. Above all, what is required is a commitment to teaching practice that entails constant investigation, analysis and transformation; what is needed is the courage to see problems not as flaws to be concealed but rather as opportunities to grow. The problem of facilitating the development of effective communication in the written work of my first-year graduate students has done more than lead me to explore the use of the web log or blog in teaching and

learning; the problem has also brought to light the possibilities of deploying, what I call, blended learning to orient graduate study: B.L.O.G.S.

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