

## Exploring the Effects of Blogs on EAP Students' Journal Writing

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This paper is a report on the findings of a study exploring the effects of blogs on students' response journal writing in an EAP context. It provides the rationale for why a blog was the chosen medium for this study, based on some key affordances of this tool. The blog was trialled on an advanced level English class for 5 weeks in the spring of 2016. A range of qualitative data was collected throughout the study, including student artefacts (i.e., blog posts). Moreover, student and teacher perceptions of the blog were captured through semistructured interviews. Results showed that the blog had a positive effect on students' writing. After analysis of the results, some of the key affordances of blogs that emerged from the results of this study are discussed. Finally, further modifications to the blog site that was used in this study are recommended.

本論文では、EAPコンテキストで学生のレスポンスジャーナル作成におけるブログの役割を探る研究成果を報告する。主要なアフォーダンス理論に基づき、本研究のためにブログ媒体が選ばれた根拠を説明する。本ブログは2016年春より5週間、上級の英語クラスで試行した。本研究を通じて、一連の定性的データが収集された。これには試用期間中、ブログ投稿形式の学生の成果物が含まれている。更に、半構造化されたインタビューを通じて、ブログに対する学生の認識を捉えた。研究結果は、ブログが学生の文章に良い効果をもたらしたことを示していた。調査結果の分析の後に、本研究の結果から明らかになったブログの主要なアフォーダンス理論について議論する。最後に、本研究で使用されたブログサイトのさらなる修正箇所を紹介する。

Journals are not considered a new phenomenon within academic settings, as they have been used for several decades in a variety of disciplines (Litzler, 2014) and are often referred to as “learning journals,” “reflective journals,” or “response journals.” Creme (2008) defined them as “a form of writing that when used in academic courses have the aim of helping students come to an understanding of their course ideas and

own learning process” (p. 53). Similarly, Pavlovich, Collins, and Jones (2009) referred to learning journals as “a way of organizing students to become better connected with their academic subject and, more important, their own self-awareness” (p. 38). These definitions highlight two common components that make up learning journals: engaging with the course content via reading responses and understanding one's learning progress via reflections.

The university where I teach uses the term “response journal” (RJ), which forms part of the upper-intermediate and advanced level English curriculum. Students are required to respond to course material and reflect on their development in a notebook. Despite the perceived benefits of RJs, they have not been very well received at the university, and I have found that many of my students have been reluctant to complete them. What has been particularly surprising is that students have often been unable to draw on their reflections and responses to course material in class discussions and tutorials. The students' apparent lack of engagement with the RJ task is alarming, particularly because, as Absalom and De Saint Leger (2011) pointed out, if a learning journal task is to serve its purpose, learners' engagement with and perception of the task is paramount. In its current format, the RJ task at the university does not seem to be able to serve its purpose of helping learners move towards higher levels of critical thinking and personal insight (Chang & Lin, 2014). To make the RJ task more engaging and meaningful, I set out to change the medium through which it is done. As Absalom and De Saint Leger (2011) noted, blogs are one such alternative to the traditional paper-based journal. In fact, Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) argued that traditional tools, such as pen and paper journals, can be combined, or bettered, with a blog. In this paper I look at the effects of blogs, which I designed, developed, and trialled, on the RJ writing of a class of EAP students.

### Emergence of Blogs

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2004) defined blogs as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (p. 1). Bloch

(2007) further added that in the English classroom, blogging is a “means of discussing issues related to their [students] classroom work and their lives” (p. 128). Within higher education settings, the use of weblogs is fairly recent, which means that our understanding of their impact in supporting reflection is incomplete (Xie & Sharma, 2005). Nevertheless, the affordances of blogs in educational settings have been well documented and tend to lend themselves to journal writing. The main reason for the surge in the use of blogs in educational settings is the effects on writing. Richardson (2010) stated that blogs facilitate connective writing and encourage those who publish to read critically and carefully. Moreover, they have potential to reach a wide audience and provide readers with links for easy access to archived posts. This connective writing genre means that the emphasis is taken away from the publishing of the post, (i.e., the end product) and is placed more on drafting, editing, anticipating responses, and testing it against the audience (i.e., the writing process; Richardson, 2010). Lin, Li, Hung, and Huang (2014) found that blogging provided better writing conditions for their students, who were able to revise and restructure their text. Therefore, their text could be composed with relative ease. This function makes blogs an appealing medium for students to write with, consequently increasing the quantity of student writing (Warschauer, 2010). Although it could be argued that other online mediums also provide the same affordances regarding process writing (e.g., wikis, online word processors), what perhaps truly separates blogs from the others is the emphasis on reading. Richardson (2010) pointed out that the writing process starts with reading and referred back to the origins of a weblog, which started out as a list of sites that someone had visited and read. Not only do bloggers self-select texts for pleasure reading (Knutson, 1997), they learn to read critically because they are constantly looking for ideas to write about (Richardson, 2010).

### Purpose of Study

The primary aim of this paper was to explore the effect of blogs on EAP students' RJ writing. This study took on a practical focus, with much attention given to the design and development of the blog. Following the introduction of the blog, students' and teachers' perceptions of the blog were explored. Analysis of the data gathered may inform the design of the blog for future classes. Thus, the study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

- RQ 1. What are students' and teachers' perceptions of using blogs as the medium for a RJ task?
- RQ2. What are the considerations for future designs of such blogs?

### Methodology

#### Participants

The study was conducted with an advanced level English class on an EAP program at an Australian-based university in Vietnam. There were 11 students in the class, all who were continuing students at the university and had completed the upper intermediate level, which is equivalent to an IELTS band of 5. All students had experienced the RJ task in a notebook in the upper intermediate class. For this study, students were given the same task requirements as when doing their RJ in a notebook but this time had to do it on a blog. They were expected to write two types of journal entries on their blog: reading responses and reflections. Each week they were asked to post three reading responses and two reflections. Reading responses often came after an in-class reading from the course book. Reflections usually occurred after a productive task, such as in-class tutorials. The teacher usually assigned RJs for homework, so students often posted them outside of class on their personal computers.

The research was conducted on a class that was not my own. The decision to do this was based on my observations and reflections on a previous small-scale study I had conducted. In that study, I interviewed a group of students I was currently teaching and observed that the respondents might have been influenced by what Brown (1998) referred to as the halo effect, which postulates that respondents are more likely to respond positively to someone they like. I had built a good rapport with that particular class while teaching them, which seemed to influence their responses. This time I wanted to avoid the same issues, so I chose to interview a class that I had no experience of teaching. Because I was using another teacher's class, I also used this as an opportunity to interview the class teacher.

#### Instruments

When dealing with perception, Mason (2002) noted that the emphasis lies on “depth, nuance, complexity and roundness of data” (p. 65). Semistructured interviews offer certain affordances, including the ability to allow the researcher to explore feelings and motives by following up ideas and probing responses (Bell, 2010). Gillham (2005) suggested that in a semistructured interview, the interviewer does not need to ask a large number of questions but should use carefully selected probes and prompts so that responses can be followed up. In total, I asked respondents six questions (Appendix A). To triangulate the data, a second research instrument was used in the form of students' archived blog posts. This instrument seemed like a natural choice as all their archived posts would be readily available to me, and I could analyse the content of what they had written.

## Coding the Data

Data analysis began with transcription of the interviews, which was done using N-Vivo, a qualitative data analysis tool. For confidentiality, it was decided to use pseudonyms instead of real names. The next logical step of data analysis involves coding the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) defined the coding process as “attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement” (p. 202). I created and used data-driven codes, which are not predetermined and only emerge as the researcher reads through the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I read the units of text and assigned inductive codes to them. I then reread the transcripts to make sure that each statement had a code attached to it. Finally, I rechecked the codes to make sure that they were assigned correctly. I then counted the number of sources (interviewees) who referred to each code and the number of times they referred to it (references). These totals and all other data collected will now be discussed in the next section.

## Findings Online Format

References to the format of the online RJs formed the largest code category. In total, the format was referred to a total of 45 times amongst all students and the teacher (Appendix B), and the majority of the responses were favourable towards the new format. Although one of my interview questions did prompt respondents for the benefits and drawbacks of the online format, the majority of participants chose to focus only on the benefits. For example, when asked this question, Amy replied,

Yeah it's easier to add more information. When I write, I write a lot of information and when I want to add . . . like I have two parts, and I want to add more information in one part, but in the paper I have no space to write but here I can do it.

This particular student found that the online format allowed her more freedom to revise her text due to increased space on the webpage compared to a notebook and the ability to add more text easily. This finding supports my previous observations, in which students generally found the format of the paper-based RJ to be constraining. Besides, some students showed awareness of the environment when using too much paper. For example, when asked to compare the online RJ with the traditional paper-based RJ, Tracy said,

Yes, with paper journal, in the lesson . . . I am a little dissatisfied with this because I think it wastes money . . . because I see in my class, has a huge amount of paper for . . . paper journal. But after that [it] goes to rubbish.

Blogs were also perceived to be a creative medium; several students made references to this. The teacher also supported this view and when asked whether he was satisfied with his students' RJs, he answered, “Yeah, quite satisfied. It seems like they're putting a fair bit of effort into it. Maybe more creatively than the previous versions of the RJs.”

An example of an RJ using some creative templates can be seen in Figure 1. Here we can see that the student has done a reading response and summarised an article she has read using a tree diagram, with the premise of the article at the bottom of the tree, and the main/supporting ideas coming out of the branches. Her response to the article can be seen in the right-hand margin. Here, the student has stated why she has agreed or disagreed with the author's arguments.

Entry number: 11      Date: 13 April 2016      Week: 2

Title: Globish? It just doesn't make sense

Source (book or link): Student book

Page number: 50-51

Author: Peter Jackson

Premise: Globish is inadequate

Globish? It just doesn't make sense

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graph BT
    A[Globish can not a mean of international communication] --> B[Language carry cultural meaning]
    A --> C[Inadequate vocabulary]
    A --> D[The use of non-grammatical features]
    A --> E[Communication breakdown + misunderstanding]
    B --> F[Subtleties and nuances of language]
    C --> G[Business negotiation?]
    D --> H[Official language for solving global problems]
    
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The author's arguments are strong:

- It is clear that adequate vocabulary can help speakers express their ideas accurately and directly.
- Vocabulary is a creative product of human mind, we should expand the amount of vocabulary instead of limiting them.
- Idioms present culture and behavior of people who use a language. Stripping culture and ignore idioms just make people find it more difficult to study deeply a language.
- Grammar is the way people set up their ideas in communication. Complex grammar shows different meaning of speech. Without reliable grammar, perhaps people can take misunderstanding and communication breakdown.
- Culture is the beauty of language. The way we use vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation describe your view, your ability and sure your culture. Culture encourage language to develop!

Figure 1. A screenshot of a student blog post.

## Engagement With Course Material

Another recurring theme was the perceived usefulness of the blog. In particular, it was considered to be a good source of information for students, which meant that they were more engaged with the course material. The majority of students interviewed in this study said they were able to use the information from their blogs posts, and those of others, for discussion in class. For instance, when Linda was asked about the positive or negative effects the blog had on her English studies, she commented,

I think it's positive because I look at other people's work to find the [tutorial] question, sometimes I forgot it. And, umm, moreover, I can look through the ideas of our students to prepare my tutorial. Like against them or support their idea.

The teacher also made a similar statement when asked if the blog site benefited his students, responding positively with regards to in-class tutorials;

Yeah definitely! I think one of the areas I'm pretty sure they're actively sharing on is for the tutorial questions. You know, students are posting videos and extra articles to give themselves and each other some extra talking points for the tutorials.

Looking at the student blog posts, it is clear that students were actively making the link between their blog posts and their weekly tutorials. Students regularly posted their initial responses to tutorial questions set by the teacher at the beginning of the week and linked to external material to give themselves extra talking points for discussion. After the tutorials took place, students documented their experience of this and reflected on their performance, as well as considered improvements to make. An example of this can be seen in Figure 2.

## Effect of the Audience

Having an immediate audience was perceived positively when blogging. Students in the study commented that they actively viewed other students' online RJs and found this beneficial; seven students and the teacher referred to this. Moreover, the fact that there was an immediate audience seemed to benefit students in different ways. For example, Dan found that the audience made him think more critically about his ideas. When asked if the blog brought about positive or negative effects on his critical thinking, he responded;

I think that it helps me in some cases, because I can see another person's idea. Each person has their own idea, right? So I don't have to wait until the time in class for sharing ideas. I can see their ideas and I can rethink about me idea.

<p>Title: Tutorial reflection</p> <p>Source (book or link): Textbook/ Tutorial discussion</p> <p>Page number: p.2</p> <p>Author:</p> <p>Premise:</p>	
<p>I feel more comfortable with tutorial than last term. But, i did not prepare well about each topic. Some students such as Trang, and Minh anh bring a lot of good information and sources. I hope that next time, i will searching more specific examples and data about topic. And i think i need to learn and practice more about tutorial language, for example, when i want to talk about the last point from other's or give some examples which convince my opinions. And students who are in tutorial group face some difficulties that many students want to say their ideas at the same time. At that time, they do not know who is gonna be first. So i want we make a rule that who's gonna be first and then use it in tutorial. Furthermore, we need to consider about some students who do not speak as much as others. Because this is a group discussion so we should also share ideas with them and give opportunities for them to speak. Then, we can hear more ideas and gather it. Finally, i prefer without table. Because i feel more nervous when do discuss with tables. It seems like a big conference!!!! I really don't want it. And i cannot see everyone easily, sometimes, i cannot hear other's opinion too because they sit on too far from me. So i hope we will change the tutorial rule? a little bit.</p>	

Figure 2. A screenshot of a student blog post.

Besides, students generally showed awareness of the audience and perceived this as having a positive effect on their writing. This observation is in line with Richardson's (2010) view that bloggers will take greater care when writing on a blog site and will make more editorial decisions before publishing their work. His view can be exemplified by the following reaction from Sally:

I feel when I write RJs on my own notebook, it's only me and teacher will see this. But now the other students can see immediately. So I focus more on grammar and some sentences also. So, the quality of my education, umm, gets better than before.

The class teacher also shared this opinion and when asked whether his students were actively viewing each other's posts, responded favourably:

I think so . . . and those that are, are greatly benefiting from it, more so than before. Because before, I don't think they were looking at each other's RJs in any capacity, except to be a bit dishonest about the process <laughter>.



## Issues With Accessibility

Besides the positive perception of the blog, some negative perceptions emerged during the interviews. One of the major issues that many students faced was regarding accessibility. In fact, 80% of those interviewed stated that accessibility was an obstacle for them at some point when using the online RJ. Two students made repeated references to accessibility and were frustrated by this. They commented that they would have preferred more opportunities to access the online RJ in the classroom. For instance, when asked about the benefits or drawbacks of the blog, Phoebe responded by saying “I think just one drawback is that when you want to review something in online RJ, especially when I study in class, it’s difficult for me to open my phone, open online RJ. Yeah.”

Other students seemed to imply that class rules meant they were not able to access their online RJ on their phones, whereas perhaps they could access it with tablets. For example, Linda stated that

Some students suggest that, maybe, they should have like, a tablet to use in class. When they are doing the RJ or some discussion, they can look into the tablet and review their RJ [...] Because in the class, we cannot use mobiles.

The class teacher also had a negative perception of the blog with regards to accessibility and also seemed to imply that mobile phones were not the best devices to use: “Umm, that’s an issue in the classroom as well, if we don’t have access to computers or tablets, we’re not able to use it effectively.” This issue could have resulted from the teacher’s personal preference and his policy on the use of technological devices in the classroom. Or perhaps it was because not all students have personal devices that they can bring to class. When prompted further, the class teacher then offered a solution: “Umm, the thing I think we need to do, or we need to find a way around it is making sure every student has some appropriate device with them at all times in the institution.”

## Limitations and Challenges

Limitations of the study should be recognised as they could serve as caveats to the findings. A minor limitation concerns the scope of the research. The number of students in the study was limited to 11, which is relatively small sample size. Moreover, only one class teacher was interviewed because he was the only teacher involved in reading, commenting, and marking the online RJs for this particular class. A sample size of at least two teachers would have yielded more data on teachers’ perceptions. However, this was beyond my control, because there was only one advanced class running at the time of research.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the effects of blogs on students’ journal writing. It is clear that the effects of the blog were mainly positive when used as a medium for journaling. First, students found that the online format allowed them to write more conveniently and creatively. Moreover, the online format meant they were able to revisit, revise, and edit their entries more easily. Second, students were more engaged with the course material when using a blog and were able to make stronger connections between their RJs and class discussions. Third, the blog had positive effects on students’ writing due to the immediate audience. Students took greater care with their ideas and language, knowing that their posts could be viewed immediately after posting. Finally, by viewing each other’s posts more frequently, students spent more time reading about the subject, which lead to increased opportunities for learning.

Despite the positive effects, one of the biggest obstacles students faced with the online RJ was related to accessibility. Students believed they would have benefitted from having more opportunities to access their blogs in the classroom, particularly before they took part in weekly assessed tutorials, where they were expected to discuss questions on topics they had covered in the week and to draw on their reading responses. The class teacher echoed this view and also felt that students needed more opportunities to access their RJs in class. To overcome this issue, in future trials, the class teacher may try to fit in more regular opportunities during class time for students to access their online RJs on their personal device. In particular, it is recommended that the teacher set aside 15 minutes before class discussions or tutorials begin for students to review their online RJs. Students should be encouraged from the beginning of the course to bring a device to class and told that they can access their RJs in class. If students do not have their own personal device, it is recommended that the teacher open up the blog and project this to the whole class, highlighting some of the strong posts from the week.

A second area that should be considered for future iterations of the online RJ involves improving student familiarity with the concept of blogging. As Howland, Jonassen, and Marra (2012) pointed out, students would benefit from familiarising themselves with blogging before becoming bloggers themselves. It is recommended that students be introduced to reading blogs at lower levels in English programs. Once they are ready to embark on their blog writing, they may benefit from being gently eased into it and starting off small. Initially, this could be done via a class blog, where small groups of students post on the same page (Richardson, 2010). They could then be encouraged to view other groups’ posts and leave comments. Getting more practice at viewing other posts and leaving comments may provide more opportunities for them to progress to

what Richardson (2010) termed “complex blogging,” which involves “extended analysis and synthesis over a period of time that builds on previous posts, links, or comments” (p. 31). Once blogging is integrated into multiple levels of an English program, future studies should look at the impacts this has on journal writing. This could include research into the use of more self-selected and personal topics for students to write about, as well as purely academic topics, since this is said to have a positive effect on student engagement (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008).

## Bio Data

**David Berresford** is a senior educator and educational technology contact at RMIT University Vietnam (Hanoi). He has recently completed a master's course in educational technology and TESOL at the University of Manchester, England.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

Question	Prompts
1) Are you satisfied with the RJs you have posted on the blog site?	- Quality - Frequency
2) What were the benefits and drawbacks of using the blog?	- The format - Your effort - Accessibility
3) What effects on your English studies did the blog bring about, positive or negative?	- Writing - Reading - Reflection - Ideas
4) Can you compare the blog with the paper-based RJ that you've done previously?	- Similarities - Differences - Preference
5) What improvements could be made to the blog?	- Design features - Format
6) Would you like to continue using the blog for your subsequent RJs?	

## Appendix B

### Final Codes for Interview Analysis With Total Number of Sources and References

Code	Sources	References
Audience	9	31
Awareness of	5	9
Commenting	3	3
Motivational	3	5
Viewing others	8	14
Autonomy	4	7

Code	Sources	References
Finding own materials	4	6
Format	10	45
Constraining	4	7
Creative	3	4
Freedom	2	5
Modern	2	2
Paperless	3	6
Plagiarism	5	7
Saves time	6	9
Wastes time	2	4
Good source of info	8	20
Class portal	1	2
Preparing for tutorials	7	14
Reviewing progress	2	2
Linking	7	10
Obstacles	10	35
Accessibility	9	29
IT Literacy	3	6
Skills	9	44
Benefits	8	38
Critical Thinking	6	7
Language	5	8
Reading	2	2
Reflection	1	3
Researching	7	7
Writing	6	11
Drawbacks	3	6
Language	2	2
Writing	2	4