

## Academic blogging: academic practice and academic identity

Gill Kirkup\*

*Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK*

This paper describes a small-scale study which investigates the role of blogging in professional academic practice in higher education. It draws on interviews with a sample of academics (scholars, researchers and teachers) who have blogs and on the author's own reflections on blogging to investigate the function of blogging in academic practice and its contribution to academic identity. It argues that blogging offers the potential of a new genre of accessible academic production which could contribute to the creation of a new twenty-first century academic identity with more involvement as a public intellectual.

**Keywords:** blogging; writing; academic practice; scholarly texts; identity; academic literacies

### Introduction: writing an academic identity

Work on academic literacies (Ivanic 1998) takes the position that all writing is a presentation of the self, in a postmodern framework it would even be described as a 'performance' of the self (Butler 1999). However the practice of academic writing is understood as problematic for both students and academics. For example, authors in a collection by Williams (2006) argue that the identities created through traditional kinds of scholarly writing styles embody values and worldviews that run counter to both the identities that students bring to higher education as well as the identities that a more diverse 'workforce' of scholars, researchers and teachers now embodies. What should constitute valid academic writing is being challenged, and it is into this landscape that blogging has entered.

The word 'blog', as a noun to describe a specific kind of website and as a verb to describe the process of authoring this website, is now in such common use that it needs no explanation for readers of this journal. The activity of blogging is mature enough for some of the early enthusiasts and promoters to argue that it has been co-opted into the mainstream media and consequently lost its power as a democratic and accessible tool for self-expression and community building (Lovink 2008). This may reflect the sentiments of those who value blogging as a radical oppositional activity, but for many including academics blogging has become more useful now that it is a widespread and widely understood medium.

Recent educational literature has given a long list of educational reasons why blogging is useful for students (see Farmer 2006; Kerawalla et al. 2008, 2009; these last two articles describe work that the author of this article was also involved with) these include: as a reflective journal, as a notebook to record events and developing ideas, as an aggregator of resources, and as a tool for creating community and conversation with fellow students. Blogging might provide students with alternative sites for academic identity creation that are less problematic than traditional ones, but blogging has been less enthusiastically embraced as offering alternatives for scholars and researchers.

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\*Email: [g.e.kirkup@open.ac.uk](mailto:g.e.kirkup@open.ac.uk)

A significant reason for this is that traditional forms of scholarly production do not recognise blogging as an academic product: 'For most academics, blogs are irrelevant because they don't count as publications' (Lovink 2008, 4). In the UK the importance for career advancement and institutional research assessment of printed monographs and publications in peer-reviewed journals has been a discouragement from investing time in the activity of blogging. A recent US book about digital scholarship, discounts blogging on the first page where it is listed with other "stuff" – the unverified and unverifiable statements of individuals, discussions on listservs... questionable advertisements for questionable products and services, and political and religious screeds in all languages' (Borgman 2007, 1), and contrasts this 'stuff' with 'the substantial portion of online content [that] is extremely valuable for scholarship'. Despite this, the academic practices of scholars, researchers and teachers are changing, it has become accepted scholarly practice to cite online materials of all sorts, and some scholars have even developed a professional reputation for their blogging.

Another reason for the wariness of academia for blogging is the subjective style of many blogs, a style which seems in opposition to traditional forms of academic text which value an 'objective' authorial voice: writing which focuses on the management and presentation of information above the management and presentation of self (Hyland 2002). Perhaps those academics described by the author in Williams' (2006) book who felt the most conflict between the identity available to them through traditional forms of scholarly writing and alternative conflicting identities (for example of race, class) will find that blogging offers them a form of writing which enables them to perform new, and less conflicted, kinds of academic identity.

This paper is a small-scale investigation into why some academics produce blogs and the perceived value of this activity to their academic practice and their academic identity. It builds on the work of Gregg who argues for 'blogging as conversational scholarship', which makes 'scholarly work accessible and accountable to a readership outside the academy' (Gregg 2006, 147–8) and Ewins (2005) who sees blogs as offering a medium for the creation of new academic identities.

### **Blogademia**

Blogging as an activity is not only about creating scholarly products, it is 'performative writing' (Gregg 2006). It creates identity through the production of what Giddens (1994) describes as a narrative about the self, but it also does this by providing an alternative medium through which to do it. Ewins (2005) argues that blogs contribute to the creation of what Gergen (2000) defines as 'multiphrenic' identity; that is, an identity not only created out of a variety of narratives, but performed and presented through a variety of media. This is part of what makes a postmodern identity different from the kinds of identities that have been available to scholars in the past: through the media of printed texts, letters and lectures. There is now potentially a huge range of media and kinds of narratives we can engage with to explicitly create both private and professional identities. A similar way of understanding blogging is as a Foucauldian 'technology of the self' (Lovink 2008); and since academics are professionals engaged in the continuous development of a professional 'self', blogging could play a useful role in this. Thinking of blogging in these terms gives it a much more valid and potentially powerful position than Borgman gave it credit for.

Saper (2006) was the first to categorise academic blogging as being a particular genre of blogging, which he labelled 'Blogademia'. Academic bloggers, he argued, did not see blogging as part of the production of knowledge in their disciplines because blogs did not go through any peer review or editorial process. Consequently he saw blogs by academics that 'often air dirty laundry, gripes, complaints, rants, and raves, what those blogs add to research seems outside

scholarship' (Saper 2006). This kind of writing, he argued, is engaged in discussing the social processes of knowledge production and it should be valued as 'a vehicle to comprehend mood, atmosphere, personal sensibility and the possibilities of knowledge outside the ego's conscious thought'. Blogs he asserted are one of the future tools of academia. But writing about the academic workplace – the back stage of academic performance – has its risks. Benton (2006) noted the concerns that people expressed about the sensitivity of employers to what was said about them, and about what an employee might be writing outside of their academic publications. McCullagh (2009) explored the issue of privacy and the professional impact of blogging with a large sample of over 1000 bloggers of all types. She noted: 'Bloggers' privacy boundaries in the workplace have not yet been clearly established, either socially or legally' (McCullagh 2009, 20). Academia is no exception.

Walker (2006) recognised variety in academic blogs. She identified three genres of academic blog: as well as Saper's pseudonymous blogs about academic life, she also indentified public intellectual blogs and research logs. She speculated about whether blogs were a good medium to popularise research. Ward (2006) began blogging as a graduate student and understood her activity as a form of ethnography of the academy. Gregg (2009) has more recently examined the public blogs of a number of postgraduate students and young academics using Walker's categories. She saw them as an expression of a subculture of people who were struggling to make a life in their chosen career as a scholar and researcher, while examining and critiquing the role and function of the academy and the employment practices within it.

Despite authors like Farmer (2006) asserting that there are 'numerous examples of academic bloggers taking advantage of blogs in order to engage with their peers and students and to reflect on their own learning' (96), given the scale of traditional academic production the number of academic bloggers seems actually quite small – and it is worth exploring the reasons for this.

### **The personal context for this study**

Like Ewins, Gregg, Walker, Ward and Saper, my own interest in blogging began when I explored it as part of my own academic practice. My own blog reflected on problematic work issues and I was interested in finding a community of people engaged with similar issues. I was also testing the limits of the medium to engage with this kind of material. I was in Walker's category of blogging about academic life but not doing it pseudonymously. It became clear to me very soon that blogging is a genre of writing with its own demands. Not only did I have to struggle with 'what' I could say in public, I had to develop a voice for the blog, decide the relationship between my public (blog) identity and other professional and private identities and think about my audience. After two years of blogging during which my blog demonstrated publicly a particular aspect of my professional identity, I decided to enquire more formally into the blogging practices of other academics to see what models of academic blogging were emerging that were professionally useful to those who created them.

### **The institutional context for the study**

There are now a variety of staff blogging activities being supported by the university where I work. The most publicised, and the most 'polished' ones, are those that the university runs as part of its public communications activities. There is a university institutional blog, which is open to the world and is clearly directed at a wide audience including students but also those who might stumble across this site while searching for the topics discussed there. This site aggregates posts by invited contributors, grouped under various headings, and university academic staff are

invited to write as experts on some aspect of national or international interest. The site functions to deliver trustworthy 'open content' and as a marketing channel for the university's products. It 'belongs' to the institution rather than to the individuals who write the posts. It enhances the identity or 'brand' of the organisation. This kind of blog is now a part of the websites of many companies since Scoble and Isreal published *Naked conversations: How blogs are changing the way businesses talk with customers* (Scoble and Isreal 2006).

The university also hosts a blogging platform for both individual staff and students. Initially the provision was focussed on students as part of the university's online learning platform. Staff began using it to host their blogs; many found it easier than hosting them on external platforms. Other staff continue to choose external platforms in order to create a sense of professional identity separate from that of the institution in which they work. The university lists, on the internal staff website, all the staff blogs that it hosts. Early in 2009 there were 60 of these and only one third of them were open to the public. A number of these internal blogs functioned as forums for discussion of internal working practices and consultation forums, some simply provided information. A surprisingly small number were authored by academic staff reflecting on their work and open for public readership.

## Method

### *Collecting a sample of academic bloggers*

I began searching for my sample of academic bloggers from colleagues in my own department (of educational technology). Eleven individuals out of a department containing 40 academics were listed in early 2009 as having blogs, eight of these were academic staff, and however of these only four were posting regularly. The others had created a blog but had not written posts for many months. This is not a lot of blogging activity, even accounting for the fact that some colleagues are keeping pseudonymous blogs that they don't want listed, and have hosted elsewhere. The fact that only about one in ten academics were actively keeping a work-related blog, suggests that in 2009 blogging is still a minority activity even among those most active in online technologies. This is about the same proportion as the 13% of the total US population reported by the Pew Research Centre as having at some time created a blog (Lenhart and Fox 2009).

I also used the university's list of institutionally hosted blogs selecting only those owned by academic staff and open to the public. From both these sources I created a list of 12 people who I contacted with a request for an interview. Of these I was able to interview six. Three of the six are drawn from my own department (educational technology), one from sociology, one from literature and one from biology (the latter working in another institution). They ranged in seniority from professors, senior lecturers, a lecturer and a post-doctoral researcher. Only one of them was a woman. In my own institution academic women are much less likely to be regular bloggers than men, even in the field of educational technology. Some of my sample had blogs with a large, regular readership; others (including my own) were read mostly by friends and colleagues. Such a small opportunistic sample cannot of course claim any statistical validity but despite their wide ranging subject areas and different levels of seniority common themes about the relationship of the blog to other academic activities emerges.

### *Data collection*

Each blogger was interviewed using a common interview schedule, but each interview was allowed to take different directions as I probed the particular practices and context of each blogger. Four of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, and two were done by telephone.

All the interviews were recorded digitally and I also took handwritten notes. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and an hour.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis was done using the audio files and transcribing only those parts of the interview that represented themes, or succinct ideas and concepts. The initial analysis used the interview questions as themes around which to group the data. A second analysis was then done to identify emergent themes coming out of the responses. This paper focuses on those themes to do with blogs as genres of academic writing as part of the process of performing an academic identity.

### **Themes**

#### ***A new medium to articulate ideas***

All but one of my interviewees had taken up blogging because they wanted to write about their subject/research area but in a different, less formal medium, but at least initially to the same audience of people who they normally engaged with. The two educational technology academics were aware that an educational technology community of bloggers existed before they joined it. They felt that blogging was an activity they needed to experience as a professional in their discipline. In this case the activity of blogging was one of practicing educational technology. Keeping a blog was a valid aspect of the identity of an educational technology scholar.

Even so, they did not find creating their own blog an easy task. 'Professor M' had friends who were active bloggers and he wanted to create a blog for himself, but it wasn't until his third attempt that he really got established:

I started it on study leave when I was writing a book. I had lots of content... It was a good way to explore some of the ideas that were in the book... Often the problem with a blog is getting enough momentum going – the book allowed me to do that.

'Dr K' started blogging when she responded to a request made to her department for volunteers to write something for the university's institutional blog. She was offered all the technical help she needed and she took this as an opportunity to 'have a go' at writing for a different medium. After this experience she began her own issues-based blog:

I do it about the issues I think other people aren't doing. I ask 'the other question'. I do what's missing [in an issue] mostly in terms of race and gender... I bring feminist theory to sport which isn't often done.

For Dr K the blog offered a medium for her to engage in critical ideas at the periphery of her discipline. Ideas that might not have been accepted in a peer reviewed publication.

'Dr D' also began blogging because he was invited to be part of a group blog. This blog involved authors from across a number of institutions who were working in the same scientific field. He was the most junior member of the group, but became the primary author of posts. His blog is about the 'ideas' that interest the authors – mainly issues to do with evolutionary biology – and unlike other blogs here one of its main functions is to provide a conversation about ideas but between the blog's authors.

'Professor R' was expert in a variety of written genres, he wrote and published fiction as well as scholarly publications and he kept a private journal for himself. He could be described as already having a multiphrenic identity. He set up his blog initially to replace his personal journal, but it became (he noted) 'violently professional', partly because he saw that was what others were doing. However the personal element remained and the blog enabled him to talk more

personally about literature – more than he would normally feel able to do in his other academic writing.

'Mr A' was the only person in my sample who was not blogging about an area of expertise. He had previously published a humorous column in a staff newspaper. He described that as 'pre-blogging'. It was an experience in which he 'found that I had a bit of a voice and liked writing humorous/provocative things'. When his column was stopped he felt that he didn't have an outlet for this voice, so he built an institutional website. However, because there was institutional sensitivity about some of his content he set up a blog that was not on the university's platform, and made it open to the public. He described his aim for his blog as having 'somewhere where any staff could talk about issues that there is nowhere else to talk about in the university'. It is a place where he can 'say things I felt (sounds a bit grand to say) ought to be said [when] something is nagging away, and I just get it out of my system'. For him the freedom to write what he wants in the blog is an important aspect of academic freedom. He was the only person in the sample to be primarily engaged in the kind of critical blog described by Saper (2006) and Gregg (2009).

No one had explicitly created their blog as an avenue for self-publicity. However, it might not be clear when a 'technology of the self' turns into the kind of 'technology of self-promotion' criticised by Lovink (2008). For this sample it was the satisfaction of the activity itself, which allowed them a new voice that kept them blogging rather than it being part of a career plan. 'Mr A' for example described himself as a quiet introvert who found his voice by accident, his blog had become for him maybe the most important professional voice in his multiphrenic identity.

### ***Blogging as one medium in a multiphrenic environment***

There was a strong indirect relationship between the writing people did in their blogs and other professional academic writing. As they became familiar with the medium of blogging they were surprised to find that it had its own rules, it was not simply a notebook, or a place for making drafts which might be turned later into full scholarly publications. When it worked well there could be synergy between blogging and other writing. But the entire sample described how blog texts were different from other texts, and demanded care and effort to produce at quality. 'Dr C' described this very clearly:

I fondly imagined that a blog would be a good way of getting ideas off the ground for papers and proposals and things like that – it doesn't do that... the initial draft of a paper often looks like a blog post and I could just post it... but I don't choose to because it doesn't feel finished.

He described how a paper is reworked with gaps and un-evenness, while a blog post has to have its own sense of being 'complete'. 'Dr C' also described what he calls the 'hierarchy of levels of reflection and thinking and effort' that go into creating texts for different media. He 'bangs out a tweet', but a blog takes a little bit longer. 'Professor R' also described how he composed his blog posts like 'little articles'. He considered their length (about 500 words) and tried to make them a 'rounded piece'. He estimated that it took him about two hours to create a blog post.

'Dr K' who has also published extensively in traditional academic media found that the blog fed into her other writing. 'Dr D' felt that the blog had helped him gain confidence and facility in his writing, he was learning academic practice through blogging:

I write posts faster and rapidly express things and not have to struggle to produce a whole published concept before I share it with someone. I am more confident about sharing my ideas with people. Being a young academic, I don't feel confident about the ideas I have.

However, he was well aware that the academic community did not value blogging as an academically credible activity, and he worried that the facility to 'publish' a blog gave a false sense of achievement:

... when you have finished [your post] there's a button at the bottom saying: 'publish' and academic publishing is *the* currency, the most important thing to do... up to a point [blogging] is parasitising the importance of publishing. Because you have pressed this button saying 'publish' and you feel great when you have done it... Stimulating me to think that I am publishing when I am actually not.

At the other end of the spectrum 'Professor M' who has published numerous books and scholarly articles found that his very active blogging had reduced the need he felt to do so much scholarly writing. The online 'conversations' he was involved in with a large numbers of 'followers' and other bloggers, satisfied his need to engage with others about new ideas.

[There is a] noticeable decrease in formal publications since I started blogging... I don't feel the need to publish formally so much. Secondly the ideas sharing you want to get from formal publication I get more quickly and more satisfyingly from blogging...

'Professor M' put significant time and effort into his blog. Like 'Professor R' he saw blogs as things that are finished and conform to a particular form and certain standards. But both 'Professors M and R' had reached a level of professional seniority that gave them the confidence to invest time in non-traditional academic production.

Only for 'Mr A', who was not writing about his subject area but about his working environment, was his blog writing not a development which had synergies with his other academic writing. He described his blog as the '*opposite*' of the kind of research writing he did. He was very critical of this kind of research writing which he described as very controlled and disciplined and somehow had the 'life sucked out of it'. Like the young academics in Gregg's (2009) sample his identity was not convergent with that of the institution where he worked, and he could only express this through writing in his blog.

Nearly all the bloggers used other online media for their work, as well as traditional print publication channels. Unsurprisingly the educational technologists were greatest users of and experimenters with new online applications, but there seemed to be no age correlation between using a great deal of online media and not doing so. In this sample they tended to use other online media to draw readers' attention to their blogs, some sending an email message or a 'tweet' to a list of contacts when they had published a new post.

### ***The role of an audience for academic blogs?***

None of the sample (including myself) was writing with students in mind as the main audience for their blog, and there was no direct relationship between their teaching and their blogging. The blogs were not performances of a teaching identity. Although 'Dr K's blog was related to the course she taught when she set it up, she now addressed a much wider audience, and the idea of this wider audience freed her up to use her blog to explore her ideas. 'Professor R' also felt that his blog was not a channel to talk to students, or to talk to his peers in his discipline (whom, he suspected, would think his blog was trivial); instead he like Dr K wanted to talk to those with common interests:

At first I thought that no one was reading [the blog], then people told me that they were. So when I found out that people were reading it I thought I should make it more accessible, and wondered how to get a dialogue going.

'Dr C' had a clear picture of his audience, because of the local feedback he got; 'it is made up of university and related "techy" folk. I make the assumption that they are reasonably

comfortable with technology'. As I note earlier 'Dr D' saw the main audience for the blog as his fellow authors but that did not stop him wishing it had a bigger following.

'Mr A' commented about his blog: 'If I enjoy doing it and like the product myself, why do I need to show it to anyone?', and yet he went on to admit that he was 'quite attention hungry, so it's funny that I carry on with this blog without feedback'. His attitude to his audience was very complex. He worried that if he thought too much about his audience it might inhibit his writing, and yet he used an email list of friends and colleagues to send his blog posts to them as emails.

The entire sample, even the most well known, got few comments posted by readers, and some of these comments were simply the verbal equivalent of applause, not the beginning of the conversation that most of them looked for. The bloggers in this study expected to have very few readers, but all hoped they could get more. But it seems that, in general, the idea of an audience is more important to these bloggers than an actual audience, and practicing a blogging identity, or voice for themselves was more important than having others listen.

### **The costs of blogging**

An important question for academic bloggers is whether there are any professional costs involved. Did blogging contribute to a higher profile academic identity? 'Professor M', it was noted earlier, felt that there had been a trade off between his formal publication output and his blogging which could be a professional cost depending on the career stage one was at. 'Dr D', who was the least well established in his career, felt his blogging was not:

... career advancing or self-interested... I don't think I have any reputation costs on the line. I don't particularly regard it as a plus point in my career... But reputation costs are not nonexistent; I don't tell everyone that I do it.

Two of the established bloggers had felt some negative criticism from the institution about the content of their blog. 'Mr A' remarked of his blog: 'There is no chance of a Chair once you start this kind of writing'. He had received comments from senior managers that some the content of his blog should be removed. He had responded to this criticism and worried that his blog has become 'bland'.

Even 'Professor M' had once received criticism from the institution about the content of his blogging:

When I was the director of a project with commercial sensitivity I had to be more sensitive about what I said. People higher up thought I was being too open about developments that were commercially sensitive.

These issues of reputation cost and impact on careers have to be taken seriously. As well as overt attempts by an institution to constrain the content of blogs some of my bloggers felt that others – peers in the discipline, or managers the institution would see their blog as not academically serious enough. Perhaps it should not be surprising that academic institutions can be as sensitive as commercial institutions about what their employees publish. It is professionally safer to perform an academic identity that does not bring you into conflict with your employer.

### **Conclusions**

On the strength of this small sample I would argue that blogging is an emerging academic practice, and a new genre of scholarly writing, which could become an important activity for a professional academic. The possibility exists of creating a significant intellectual identity through a blog. If the formal structure of academic value refuses to engage with blogs – and other media

– then academics will struggle to engage as twenty-first century public intellectuals. Writing for blogs needs to be awarded academic esteem as well as public esteem. This esteem would not be just to the individual but also to the institution where they work. ‘Professor M’ argued that academic institutions ‘should have some bloggers – [they should] engage in what is now a significant industry’.

This small sample of academic bloggers talked at length about the care with which they constructed their blog posts and how they thought about their audience when they wrote. They all had similar ideas about the size, shape and voice that worked best for blogging, which suggested that the rules for blogging as a genre can be deduced and applied. This supports some of the early writing by boyd (2006) who argued that people initially understood blogging through the metaphors of journalism and diary writing, however these were metaphors which reflected the fact that people did not know what possibilities blogging had in its own right. The activities of this sample of academic bloggers suggest that academic blogging is a particular genre within the wider medium of blogging and that academic blogging is becoming a particular form of academic writing; a genre through which academics perform their scholarly identity, engage in knowledge production, and become public intellectuals, at least on the internet.

The most considered and successful bloggers in the sample were academics who had extensive experience with other forms of text production. This might change as young academics – such as ‘Dr D’ – learn to produce blogs alongside the other text production skills they are learning; however, academia would do well to encourage some of its best academic writers to take up blogging to provide models for multiphrenic academic identities.

### Notes on contributor

Gill Kirkup is Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, UK. She has published widely in the field of distance and online learning. One of her interests is the use of Web 2.0 technologies by academics in particular those technologies that support teaching.

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