BLOGGING AND INTERCULTURALITY: INVESTIGATING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF A BLOG TO SUPPORT A COHORT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
Blogs are a 'Web 2.0' technology that have demonstrated their potential to improve writing and reflective practice in academic contexts (Burgess, 2006; Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Informed by this research, English language tutors at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) set up a blog on the university's Virtual Learning Environment as a means to help international students develop their writing skills. When designing a learning environment around an online tool such as a blog there is a need for educators to be mindful of "hidden dimensions in their pedagogical activity" (Bélisle, 2008, p.1) if a fully intercultural learning experience is to occur. This case study investigated the appropriateness of the blog to support a cohort of English language students at UCA, and revealed that while students found the blog to be beneficial to their learning the failure to identify and address intercultural issues reduced the potential effectiveness of the blogging activity.
Keywords: blogging, interculturality, teaching online, reflection

INTRODUCTION

The University for the Creative Arts (UCA) has identified the internationalisation of its student body as a strategic business objective (UCA, 2013). This has led to the introduction of short English Language courses intended to help successful applicants raise their standard of English to the level required for Bachelors and Postgraduate study. While improving students' overall level of English comprehension is important, it is essential that their written skills improve to a standard at which they are deemed able to meet the academic writing demands of a university course. To support this objective, the university's English Language tutors set up a course blog to provide a space where the students could practice their written English. Although the blog posts were not formally assessed, students were encouraged to share photos and other personal information on the blog and to comment on each other's posts.

This study aimed to investigate whether the use of a blog with a cohort of predominantly non-European students raised unforeseen intercultural issues in attempting to enhance their learning experience. The study was informed both by the belief that effective eLearning environments should enable students to develop their 'intercultural competence' (Bélisle, 2008), and by the understanding that this requires students to develop 'multiliteracies' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Qualitative and quantitative responses were gathered from students on the English Language course using questionnaires and interviews. The data was then interpreted using Green's three dimensional model of literacy (Green, 1988) to determine whether the UCA course blog enables students to develop multiliteracies, and identify any issues that might impede the development of intercultural competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'globalisation' describes the process by which the global network of trade, communication, immigration and transportation has led to increased integration of cultures, societies and economies (Financial Times, ND). Globalisation continues to provoke debate regarding equality of access to Higher Education (Zondiros, 2008) as the UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education states
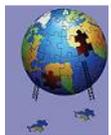
that access should be based on merit, with no discrimination permitted on the basis of an individual's race, religion, language, or economic, cultural or social situation (UNESCO, 1998).

The global growth in demand for Higher Education can be seen as both driving and being driven by technology (Duderstadt, 2002; Van Damme, 2001), and significant expectations have been placed on the ability of technology to facilitate equitable access to Higher Education via online and distance learning. However, a growing body of research argues that an increasing reliance on the use of technology to deliver programmes of Higher Education risks reinforcing the very inequalities that the technology aims to reduce (Bure, 2006; Carr-Chellman, 2004; Clarke, 2002; Selwyn, 2002).

An impact of globalisation on Higher Education has been to increase the focus on internationalisation as a strategic objective for universities (Taylor, Machado, & Peterson, 2008). As universities strive to broaden global access to their programmes of learning through the use of technology, students and teachers from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds are brought together in online environments. This requires educators to develop an awareness of students' individual learning preference resulting from their national, ethnic or religious background (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009a). To facilitate this transition, Bélisle (2008) suggests that there is a need to shift from a predominantly knowledge-based approach to learning towards one where students are encouraged to develop their skills in cultural analysis. Providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own cultural beliefs helps them to develop their intercultural awareness, a key element in enabling them to interact appropriately with different cultures (ibid.). Such an approach can also be interpreted as helping universities educate globally fluent citizens who are able to function effectively within the global economy (Vanides, 2011).

In the context of online learning, helping students to develop intercultural awareness requires designing eLearning environments and activities that help students develop 'intercultural competence' (Bélisle, 2008). This can be defined as the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality (Michael Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002).

To understand how the design of eLearning environments can support the development of intercultural competence it is useful to consider the concept of multiliteracies. This concept has evolved as a result of the impact on learners of increased linguistic and cultural diversity coupled with new digital communication technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). To succeed in an increasingly globalised economy, learners require "new operational and cultural 'knowledges'" which enable them to develop the 'languages' or skills needed to succeed in the new world of work (ibid. p.16). However, in a context of rapid and continuous technological change it is also important that educators do not simply focus on skills development, as students will also require the ability to "speak up, to negotiate and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives" (Kalantzis & Cope, 1997, p.6). Incorporating the concept of multiliteracies into the design of eLearning environments and tasks can therefore be understood as an important factor in helping students develop the skills and behaviours associated with intercultural competence (Bélisle, 2008).

The design of successful educational activities, and particularly those involving technology, is largely dependent on an understanding of theories of pedagogy that describe how the learning will taking place (Salmon, 2000; Sharpe, Beetham, & deFreitas, 2010). The theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) interprets learning as a process which occurs through dialogue between the learner and a more experienced 'other' (Chew, Jones, & Turner, 2008). The exponential growth of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking applications have made it increasingly easy for people to communicate online and construct knowledge through social interaction. This growth has presented challenges for educators, however, for although students' familiarity with communicating online can
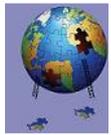
be harnessed for educational purposes their tutors may be less comfortable with designing appropriate learning tasks involving online communication and collaboration (Nunes & McPherson, 2003). The question of interculturality renders the development of appropriate eLearning environments and tasks even more complex, as traditional 'embodied' understandings of culture and identity are often significantly altered in online contexts (Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009b).

Given this complexity, a clearer understanding of how international students perceive and experience online learning is useful in helping to design appropriate tasks and activities that can improve intercultural competence. This study therefore aimed to investigate the intercultural implications of using a blog to support the learning of a cohort of twenty international students at UCA by asking the following research questions:

What are the intercultural issues that potentially affect international students' learning using a course blog?

How might a better understanding of interculturality and globalisation lead to the design of more effective learning activities using technology?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

If the development of multiliteracies is understood as proxy for helping students acquire intercultural competence, it is necessary to obtain a clearer understanding of how eLearning tasks and environments can be designed to support this aim. To facilitate the development of multiliteracies, Guth & Helm (2012) examine how the effective design of online learning tasks can help students develop both their practical skills and cultural knowledge. Stating the need to rethink traditional notions of literacy pedagogy in response to globalised, networked societies, the authors highlight the relevance of Green's 3-D model of the three dimensions of new literacies (Green, 1988) in providing a framework within which to understand literacy in terms of language, meaning and context. Green's model proposes that literacy should be viewed as having three linked dimensions of equal importance:

Operational dimension: refers to the "means" of literacy (Green, 1988, p.160), the practical skills required to develop literacy such as: competence with tools, searching for and sharing information, working collaboratively, and being able to read and write appropriately in a range of contexts.

Cultural dimension: concerns the "meaning aspect of literacy" (ibid.), and the belief that "besides being context specific, literacy acts and events are also content specific" (Lankshear, 1999). The cultural dimension involves "understanding texts in relation to contexts…and the meaning they need to make in order to be appropriate" (ibid.), and can be understood as the subject-specific knowledge required to participate in the task or discussion (Guth & Helm, 2012).

Critical dimension: ensures that students develop an awareness of whose interests are being served by the use of a given technology (Guth & Helm, 2012). To participate effectively in any social practice "humans must be socialised into it" (Green, 1988, p.162) through a process of social construction. If students are to avoid being "confined merely to participating in established practices and making meanings within them" (ibid. p.162) it is important that they are actively able to produce, change and transform a given literacy and not simply participate within it (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

To evaluate the effectiveness of the international students' blog at supporting the development of multiliteracies - and therefore their intercultural competence - the data from this study was interpreted through the theoretical lens of Green's 3-D framework. This provided a means of assessing the degree to which the learning activity aligned with Green's three dimensions of literacy, and made it possible
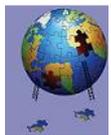
to evaluate the intercultural effectiveness of the activity.

METHODOLOGY

Choosing a methodology

As the intention was to investigate the specific context of the activity a case study approach was chosen, as it would provide a means of analysing and interpreting the "complexity and situatedness" of the students' experiences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p.85).

A case study approach was deemed appropriate as the intention was to investigate and draw conclusions from a single example of the phenomenon rather than attempt to compare the data against multiple examples (Arthur, Waring, Coe, & Hedges, 2012). While the use of a case study methodology limits the generalisability of findings, Sin (2010) highlights the debate in the literature around qualitative research regarding the extent to which generalisability is both desirable and a relevant criterion for evaluating its quality (Larsson, 2009). This debate rests in part on the argument that complex qualitative phenomena are wholly determined by their context and that meaning cannot be understood independently of this specific context (Schwandt, 1997). Nonetheless, the growing body of research around the use of blogs to support student learning provides a broader context of literature with the same or similar features against which the current study can be compared (Churchill, 2009; O'Donnell, 2006; Penrod, 2007; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Although this study focuses on a single iteration of the blogging activity the intention was that the findings and feedback be used to improve the activity, and as such this case study can also be viewed as the first stage of an action research cycle.

Data collection methods and tools

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect primary data from the students regarding their experience of the blogging activity. The questionnaire was designed to capture a mixture of quantitative and qualitative responses (see Appendix A), with the latter being included to enable students to elaborate on certain aspects of their experience. The purpose of Question 1 was to identify the cultural mix of the cohort, and the following table indicates the relationship between the remaining questions and Green's 3-D model:

Table 1: relationship between questionnaire and Green's 3-D model

Question	Relationship to Green's 3-D model
2, 3, 4 & 5	Identified students' prior practical skills and knowledge regarding blogging (Green's 'operational' dimension)
5, 6 & 7	Identified the extent to which students understood the act of blogging in relation to their context, i.e. being an English language student at UCA (Green's 'cultural' dimension)
8, 9, 10 & 11	Identified whether students understood whose interests were being served by the blogging activity. These questions also aimed to determine the extent to which students grew in confidence during the activity and were able to go beyond merely participating in it (Green's 'critical' dimension)
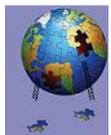
In addition to the questionnaire, three semi-structured interviews were also conducted with students. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit a richer level of qualitative data than was possible with the questionnaires and to capture data that might help interpret the questionnaire responses more accurately. By giving the interviewees the opportunity to describe their experience in more detail, the interviews yielded rich qualitative data which could be used to provide greater context to the questionnaire responses.

Ethical considerations

The blog itself also provided a potential source of data as it was possible to view all the activity that had occurred. However, the students had not been asked to give their consent to allow the activity on the blog to be used for research purposes and it was therefore not possible to say that they had been fully informed about the implications of contributing to the blog. Following the ethical principle of voluntarism (Cohen et al., 2007) the students' contributions to the blog were not included as part of the dataset.

The cohort that constituted the focus of this study was made up of students for whom English was not their native language, and an ethical concern arose regarding the degree to which the students understood the nature of the research being conducted. To mitigate this risk, the study was first discussed with the tutor and course leader whose levels of English were appropriate to determine that participating in the study posed no serious ethical implications for the students. The tutor then explained the purpose of the study to the students to make sure that they were happy to answer the questionnaires. The variance in students' English language ability was a key factor in identifying students to interview, and the tutor selected interviewees based on both their ability to converse in English and their willingness to participate in the study. This introduced an element of bias into the data collection as there was a risk that the views of the students selected were not indicative of the majority of the cohort. However, as the purpose of the interviews was principally to provide additional information with which to interpret the questionnaire responses it was felt that interviewing students who were more able to express themselves in English justified this decision. Although it was still sometimes necessary to reword the interview questions to facilitate comprehension, care was taken to minimise the impact of the interviewer in influencing the participants' responses.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A total of sixteen students completed the questionnaire out of a possible twenty. To obtain an understanding of the cultural mix of the cohort, the first question asked students to state their first language. As some students may no longer reside in their country of birth they were asked to identify their first language to provide a more accurate representation of the nationalities in the cohort. This question revealed that almost all students were of European and Asian origin. Before starting their course at UCA only twenty-five percent of the students had ever read information on a blog, with the reasons given for doing so including "entertainment", "doing research" and "visiting a friend's blog". However, forty-four percent of the students stated that they had created their own blog prior to starting at UCA, suggesting that students may be more aware of the value of a blog as a place to record personal thoughts than as a tool for accessing information posted by others.

In responding to the multiple choice question regarding how they felt about being asked to contribute to a blog, only two students indicated that they felt uncertain (see Table 2 below). This was encouraging, as a potential intercultural issue lay in the tutors' assumption that students would be happy to communicate and share their thoughts on the blog. However, while the questionnaires suggested that no students felt nervous in sharing personal information on a blog, one interviewee revealed that she was "a bit afraid at the start" of the activity as she had never used a blog before.
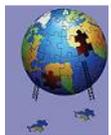
A second interviewee stated that she found it difficult to describe her work on the blog in view of other students because "everyone can see it". This highlighted the value of the interviews in obtaining a more accurate picture of students' feelings towards the blogging activity than was suggested by the questionnaires. The third interviewee stated that he was initially uncertain about blogging, but explained that this was more to do with never having used a blog before rather than a fear of sharing work openly with the cohort. The interview data also indicated that the students valued the ability to give and receive critical feedback on the work of their peers, and to be able to see how other students were approaching their work.
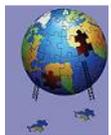
Table 2: questionnaire responses to 'how did you feel when you learned that you would be asked to contribute to the course blog?'

Happy	3
Curious	9
Uncertain	2
Nervous	0
Other (please specify)	Lazy Good to share experiences

Students were then asked to identify what they perceived as the reason for contributing to the course blog. Responses could be grouped into three categories: helping improve writing and language skills, sharing ideas with peers and tutors, and giving and receiving feedback. The interview data supported these categorisations by revealing that the interviewees felt their language skills had improved through blogging, and that their work had benefited from being able to give and receive critical comments on the work of their peers. Sixty-nine percent of students stated that the blog had helped them to learn during the course, with the primary reason being the ability to see how their classmates were approaching the work. For the thirty-one percent who had not found it helpful, reasons given included the problem of dwindling participation resulting in a lack of motivation to share ideas, and the feeling that the given objective of uploading and commenting on the work of peers was not sufficiently challenging. Seventy-five percent felt that sharing information on the blog had helped them get to know their peers better, but many of the final comments indicated that the social aspect of the blog could be developed further to increase participation. Only one student stated that they did not become more comfortable with using the blog as they went through the course. Table 3 below interprets the data using Green's three dimensions of operational, cultural and critical literacy.

Table 3: interpretation of data using Green's 3-D model of new literacies

| Dimension	Supporting evidence from questionnaires & interviews	Observations
Operational The 'means' of literacy	students communicating and collaborating with peers and tutor on the blog students developing competence with online tools students improving their proficiency in language writing and comprehension	blog provides opportunity to communicate in different contexts (i.e. formal voice vs informal / social voice)
Cultural the 'meaning aspect' of literacy	students giving and receiving critical feedback on work of peers	blog is providing a means by which students from different cultures can learn from each other and understand

	students describing the artwork and images they have created	text (and images) in relation to contexts
	students obtaining inspiration from the work of their peers	students could be encouraged to share more inspiration from their cultural backgrounds -current task is not sufficiently challenging for students
		diminishing activity reduces opportunities for students to understand texts in relation to contexts
Critical the ability to transform a given literacy	students understand that blog serves tutors' interests insofar as it is being used to help students improve their language ability	students (and tutors) only able to participate within established literacy practices
		VLE-based blog mainly serves interests of tutors - convenience and security prioritized over student ownership and ability to experiment

DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions this study has taken the development of multiliteracies to be a proxy for the development of intercultural competence, and by interpreting the data using Green's 3-D model it is possible to determine the effectiveness of the blogging activity in developing multiliteracies. The data has shown that although the use of a blog has enabled activity in the operational and cultural dimensions of Green's 3-D model, there is little evidence of activity in the critical dimension. Green states that to participate effectively in any social practice "humans must be socialised into it" (Green, 1998, p.162). However, Lankshear and Knobel (200?: 16) go further in highlighting the 'selective' aspect implicit in the critical dimension, observing that the socially constructed nature of all literacies leads to the inclusion of certain "representations and classifications" and exclusion of others. The lack of activity in the critical dimension suggests that students have not been socialised into the practice of blogging by their tutors. A possible explanation for this is that the tutors themselves were new to blogging and as such have perhaps even less experience of blogging as a social practice than their students. An implication of tutors introducing a blogging activity when they themselves are not well versed in the literacy conventions of blogging is that neither students nor tutors are aware of their ability to shape and change this literacy rather than merely participate in it. This significantly limits the potential of the blogging activity to maximise intercultural learning opportunities as both tutors and students are being "confined merely to participating in established practices and making meanings within them (Green, 1988, p.162).

Response to research question 1: what are the intercultural issues that potentially affect international students' learning using a course blog?

Bélisle (2008, p.2) states that the development of intercultural competence requires tutors to help students develop "skills in understanding, skills of discovery and interaction and behaviours expressing feelings, tolerance, respect, empathy and flexibility", and the data indicated that the blogging activity satisfied many of these conditions. Students were developing their skills in understanding by providing critical feedback on the work of their peers and were sharing and discovering new information on the blog. The interview data suggested that as the information on the blog was visible to all students it was necessary to for students to shape their online communication using respect and empathy. The issues affecting students' learning stemmed more from the
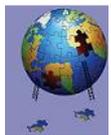
practicalities of facilitating and sustaining online discussion than interculturality. Students reported that the diminishing activity on the blog reduced opportunities to engage in intercultural exchanges, and that the tasks about which they were required to blog were not sufficiently interesting or challenging.

Response to research question 2: How might a better understanding of interculturality and globalisation lead to the design of more effective learning activities using technology?

In her explanation of intercultural competence, Bélisle (2008) draws attention to Byram's observation in 1992 that the dominant focus of foreign language education in secondary schools was to treat pupils as if they were tourists and holidaymakers. The result of this approach was that students failed to embrace and embed new values and cultures (Byram, 1992). The data in the current study revealed that while the blogging activity encouraged students to share information and communicate with each other about their work, there were few opportunities to obtain a "working knowledge of the target culture" (Bélisle, 2008, p.3). The aim of encouraging students to discuss their work did succeed in focusing discussion around a specific objective and provided a clear purpose for the blog, and from this perspective the blog satisfied a clear teaching and learning rationale. But in view of the belief that the development of students' intercultural competence requires a shift from an information-based strategy to one orientated around cultural analysis and communication (ibid, p.2), a clearer understanding by tutors of issues of interculturality could lead to the blog playing a greater role in helping students "decentre [them]selves from [their] culture and to deal with ethnic, social and cultural differences" (ibid, p.2).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Higher Education is operating in an increasingly globalised context and under mounting pressure to produce "global citizens" who are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the global economy (Stearns, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007). In recent years, approaches to literacy teaching have adopted a sociocultural perspective in recognition of the need to frame programmes of learning within an appropriate social and cultural context (Guth & Helm, 2012). This study has shown that the blogging activity used to support UCA's international students could play a greater role in helping them acquire the intercultural skills they will need to become global citizens. If students are to become "globally fluent" graduates (Vanides, 2011) they will need to leave university with the ability to operate effectively in a broad diversity of cultures using an ever-increasing range of online technologies. Analysing the data using Green's 3-D model revealed that the blogging activity could be modified to incorporate a more intercultural focus, helping students move beyond their own cultural context to discuss the target culture online in more depth. The lack of data attesting to activity in Green's critical dimension suggests that tutors' relative inexperience with the social conventions of blogging limits their ability to 'socialise' students into the literacy of blogging and online communication. This restricts both tutors and students to participating within established literacy practices. If the development of multiliteracies is understood as a proxy for intercultural competence, it is possible to assert that addressing the issues raised by the data analysis would enable UCA's international students to develop their intercultural competence and prepare themselves more fully for the demands of becoming successful global citizens.

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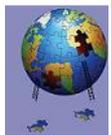
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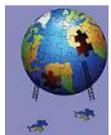
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