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The WordPress Workshop: Blogging as a Method for Theory Development

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Abstract: *Blogs have proven to be a useful tool for academics as a tool for education and outreach in the Digital Age, with much written about their effectiveness in the classroom and as alternative means of publishing research. However, less consideration has been given to utilising the blog format for developing theory, particularly for graduate students and early career researchers.*

This paper will draw on both recent literature and personal experience to explore the potential of blogging as a means of introducing and developing unconventional and radical theory and research prior to more “formal” publication.

Keywords: Blogging, Theory Development, Publications, Research

I. Introduction

The general perception of blogging has undergone drastic changes in the past two decades. What was once considered a niche hobby for those technically-savvy enough to be online in the early days of the World Wide Web has now become such an easily accessible platform that many are able to make their blog a full-time occupation. More recently, the blog format has also been adopted by academics as both a means of outreach to general public as well as an interactive and educational tool amongst their students. Much has been written about the “Academic Blog”, as a form of digital scholarship (Fox 2012; Maitzen 2012), as an extension of one’s academic identity (Kirkup 2010; Estes 2012), and its usefulness as a method of education (Chong 2010; Potter and Banaji 2012; Sun and Chang 2012).

For this paper, however, I would like to focus specifically on the blog as a space for theory development. I believe that blogs can provide the space necessary for academics, particularly those who may be early in their careers or similarly marginalised by the great academic body, to develop new and radical ideas through peer support and the freedom of expression that the blog as a platform can provide.

II. A Brief History of Academic Blogging

Early versions of the blog format have existed since the World Wide Web was opened to the public, although they mostly consisted of online diaries or lists of interesting links to other websites. By the early 2000’s, millions of blogs existed on the Internet in a variety of forms (Walker Retberg 2014: 6-13), including what I refer to as the “academic blog”. For the purposes of this paper, an “academic blog” is any educational blog written specifically by those in the academy, such as professors, lecturers, and students.

Early academic blogs were first categorised as a distinct variation of blogging by Saper (2006), who originally referred to these as “Blogademia”. This category was not limited to the more educationally-directed blogs, but also included those that were more personal and opinionated in tone, with posts on institutional gossip and complaints. However, for this discussion, I will not be focusing on these blogs, which I believe may be more classified as “blogs by academics” rather than “academic blogs”.

Academic blogs can be divided into two major groups: blogs for outreach, where the author is writing about their field of research for a non-specialist audience, and blogs for education, where the author is usually a student who is utilising the blog as a means of demonstrating their knowledge of a particular subject.

With regards to outreach, blogs are a way for academics to discuss their work on more informal terms to a broader audience, without the gatekeeping boundaries such as journal access or conference attendance. Academic blogs also allow for interdisciplinary discussion amongst researchers across the world, allowing both specialist and non-specialist alike to provide their own perspective and exchange information (Mortensen and Walker 2002: 251).

Blogs have also found effectiveness in the education, where students are able to use the format to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. For example, some lecturers have found that the blog format is useful as a tool of supervision and evaluation due to the comment system (Chong 2010); others seen the blog as an informal space for students to practice their language skills (Sun and Chang 2012). In a similar vein, many academics have created blogs geared specifically towards students, providing lessons and advice for things such as doctoral writing (Guerin et al. 2015).

Despite their demonstrated usefulness and widespread adoption by many academics, blogs as a whole are not considered by the traditional academy as on par with publications such as journals or books (Kirkup 2010: 76). This is a disappointment, as I think the blog, while wildly different in character and concept from more conventional methods of publication, has its place as a legitimate and vital component of academia in the Digital Age. With this in mind, I propose that perhaps the best way to view the blog with respect to academia is from the perspective of a workshop, of sorts.

III. Proposing the Blog as a Development Space

Clearly, the blog format has shown promise as an educational tool, particularly for students at the secondary and higher education levels. It is also clear that there is a growing emphasis on the flexibility of the blog for self-expression. In proposing the blog as an ideal development space, I will draw from both of these statements: that it is the **accessibility** and the **flexibility** inherent within the blog format that makes it a valuable tool in theory development.

The accessibility of blogs has certainly improved over time; it is no longer a prerequisite for bloggers to be fluent in coding and other technical languages. Anyone can start a blog, regardless of technical expertise, and there are now many platforms available that can host your blog for free. Unlike the more traditional forms of academic publication, blogs allow academics to write in a jargon-free, informal way that can expand the sort of audience that your writing is accessible to. Finally, blogs are an equal ground for academics and non-academics alike; this can allow for a wider and more varied range of perspectives on your theories and ideas.

As for the flexibility of blogs, I have already mentioned that there is a freedom of expression inherent in the blog format; without the standardisation that is associated with conventional academic publishing, authors can express their thoughts and ideas in various ways. This is not limited to text, either – blogs can make use of both visual and auditory media as well. Developments in a blog, such as updates and new posts, are made at the discretion of the

author. This allows for a less stressful development period without time restraints or deadlines. Most importantly, blogs can be as informal and personal as one would like, allowing the author to also be self-reflective at times and comment on their thought process throughout their theory development, which may be helpful to both the author and their readers.

IV. Some Personal Reflections

To end this paper, I wanted to include some personal reflections from my own experience as an academic and blogger. In 2017, I took some time off from my PhD studies after a nervous breakdown. It was necessary, but I also found myself needing to have some kind of connection to the outside academic world. As an informal way to continue writing about my research – as well as archaeology in general – I began a blog using the WordPress platform (www.animalarchaeology.com). I wrote very basic posts on zooarchaeology (the study of animal remains in the archaeological record), with photos to help others learn how to easily identify bones.

Over the next year, however, I found my blogging evolve from these standard “Introduction to Zooarchaeology” posts. As a way of better organising my work (as well as providing more inspiration for myself), I experimented with “writing series” – collections of posts based on a specific premise or topic. However, I made a point to make each series rather unique by attempting to make connections between archaeology and popular culture (recent video games, big name franchises, theme parks etc.). Not only have these proven to be my most popular posts on the blog, but they have also challenged me to really think out-of-the-box in order to connect it to my field of research; for example, writing about the archaeology of theme parks has forced me to question my preconceptions about archaeological landscapes and how we interact with archaeology beyond what we consider “ancient artefacts”.

Today, I have fully embraced my blog as a sort of workshop for radically different perspectives on archaeology as a discipline. Many of my latest posts are part of the development process for creating new and different frameworks to consider archaeology. For example, I’ve recently been working on developing anarchist approaches to archaeology (Fitzpatrick 2018a) and exploring various facets of this praxis through a combination of blog posts and conference papers for feedback from anarchists and archaeologists alike. Another example is my current work on exploring the concept of ethics and emotion with regards to animal remains (Fitzpatrick 2018b), which I’ve played with on my blog and hope to eventually develop a fully-fledged paper based on these posts.

I wholeheartedly believe that blogging has changed my process as an academic for the better; my blog gives me the space to tackle difficult concepts, with a dedicated readership that has often provided useful comments and suggestions that have inevitably evolved my original concepts into something even better. I do not think I would be as engaged with research and academia as I am today without this space available to me in the first place.

V. Conclusion

As we rapidly progress through the Digital Age, it often feels incredibly easy to miss opportunities to adapt to new methodologies within the digital space; after all, you can argue that even academic blogging is now passé and has been made obsolete by more popular platforms for digital engagement such as Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

And while I would, of course, encourage fellow academics to utilise these platforms, I still maintain that the simple blog still holds advantages for those who are interested in developing their theoretical and methodological frameworks, particularly for early career academics. Putting oneself “out there” has its disadvantages, but from personal experience, I have truly valued the support network that has become established across fellow academic bloggers who engage with my work (and I with theirs, of course) and have helped me develop the perspective from which I now utilise in more “formal” outlets, such as conferences and journals. Other academics have echoed this sentiment, particularly within collaborative blog projects that utilise forums as a method of research communication and networking (Maitzen 2012: 350).

Having this informal space to workshop my more unconventional and radical ideas has led to further collaborations with similarly unconventional and radical academics without the need for engaging with a more traditional and conservative academic sector, which gives me hope that perhaps one day we can organise into an unconventional and radical new form of academy.

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