

University-run learning and teaching blogs: a benchmarking study

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Providing relevant information, professional development and just-in-time support to a diverse group of teaching staff is a challenge facing many modern universities. A ‘typical’ university instructor today is time-poor, relatively isolated and has a limited capacity to engage in professional development and/or community building. Moreover, most of the teaching in Australian universities is performed by sessional staff (May, Strachan, & Peetz, 2013; Rothengatter & Hil, 2013), who are often not remunerated for professional development. A contemporary approach by which universities seem to be addressing the above issues is the learning and teaching blog. Such publications are adopted by an increasing number of institutions in Australia and internationally, however, little has been documented about their practices. This benchmarking study presents a survey of 12 learning and teaching blogs from Australian and overseas institutions and seeks to shed light on common types of content and topics, as well as the purpose and authorship of such blogs. The findings can be used to inform planning and development of university-run learning and teaching blogs.

Introduction

Improving learning and teaching has been an institutional priority for most universities for several decades (Biggs, 2001). It is now widely recognised that subject matter knowledge alone is simply not enough to engage a diverse population of students and provide them with high quality learning experiences, and that a university teacher also needs to develop a solid understanding of learning and teaching approaches and stay abreast of pedagogical best-practices.

This recognition has led to an emergence of various learning and teaching services worldwide. In Australia and New Zealand, they are usually referred to as ‘academic development’ and ‘learning and teaching support’, while in other countries they are often known as ‘faculty development’ or ‘educational development’ (Lewis, 2010).

These services usually encompass individual and group consultations, pedagogy and/or technology-related workshops, learning and teaching projects, community events, etc., and are delivered via different models (see Hicks, 1999): many universities have a ‘*central*’ model wherein a strong central unit is responsible for supporting the entire university. Other institutions choose a *dispersed* model wherein different parts of an institution are resourced with their own learning and teaching support staff. There are also *mixed* and *integrated* models that combine the elements of the first two but to different extents/efficiencies.

One of the new developments in learning and teaching support, especially in the universities with the ‘central’, ‘mixed’ or ‘integrated’ model is staff-authored, institutionally supported learning and teaching blogs. These blogs emerged presumably in the hope of reaching a wider audience or providing the existing audience with a new means to access learning and teaching resources. This ability to communicate with diverse staff is particularly important for universities that have multiple locations and/or a considerable number of casual teaching staff (Lefoe & Meyers, 2006). These factors in particular are the reason that “[i]nstitutions are also seeing the benefit of institutional blog spaces that are semi-independent of specific courses, disciplines, and faculties” (Aitchison, Carter, & Guerin, 2017, p 9).

Indeed, the potential of blended environments in general, and the open, public-facing, rapid-impact blog in particular, to engage diverse audiences has been noted by scholars (Powell, Jacob & Chapman 2012). Such blogs have been recognized as a more social and less formal way to share research and scholarship in academia (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013) and have been seen as “a unique educational bridge between academia and the public” (Batts, Anthis, & Smith, 2008, p 1837). What is more, a blog is often viewed as a way to support or create a community of practice around an interest or discipline area (Ramsay et al, 2014; Guerin et al, 2014), or a more private journal that forms part of reflective practice (Sherry & de Haan, 2012). There may also be considerable professional benefits in starting a blog that covers a topic related to one’s work (Guerin et al, 2014).



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While there is a growing excitement about the potential of blogging to enhance teaching quality in the Australian and international tertiary sector, very little is actually known about institutionally supported blogs that aim to do this. Most literature on the subject examines blogs as a formal learning activity for students (for example, Deng & Yuen 2009) or simply mentions the potential of blogging for professional development of tertiary teachers (Lefoe & Meyers, 2006), so there is a real paucity of information about the types of content, topics, goals, authorship or frequency of such blogs. To the best of our knowledge, there is no existing literature that provides a current snapshot of different aspects of university-run learning and teaching blogs. The lack of this information is regrettable, as institutions and individuals considering leveraging the potential of blogs are often unsure how to go about this task, what type of content to focus on, or what topics to cover. The lack of documented practice also creates uncertainty about the legitimacy of blogs as a professional development tool or about the feasibility of conveying valuable messages via a blogging platform. It can also create unnecessary workload for blogging pioneers who must do their own research on existing blogs - a time-consuming and potentially onerous task. This paper seeks to fill in this gap by providing a current snapshot of university-run learning and teaching blogs from Australia and worldwide. We seek to shed light on the type of content commonly published in learning and teaching blogs, common topics covered, the seeming reasons for writing blog posts as well as the frequency of posts and typical authors who write for such publications. This information is valuable in its own right as it provides a baseline for documenting activities of learning and teaching blogs, and it can be used by various institutions to inform their decisions about blogging.

Methodology

To provide a current snapshot of institutional learning and teaching blogs, we performed a content analysis on all the university-run learning and teaching blogs we could identify at the time of the research. In order to be included in the analysis, the blogs needed to be official or at least institutionally supported sites of their University and be specifically focused on learning and teaching. We were interested in blogs that published a range of articles on learning and teaching topics. We excluded sites delivered via blogging platforms that were online learning modules rather than blogs *per se*, such as ANU Coffee Courses, and blogs that appeared to be inactive. We deemed a blog active if it had posts in the last 12 months (at point of capture) and had at least one post per month. These blogs were identified via a Google search using the following key words: 'learning and teaching blogs', 'university blogs', 'higher education blogs', as well as the researchers' prior knowledge of the existing learning and teaching blogs from our own and other institutions.

12 blogs in total were identified. The summary of the selected blogs is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Institutional learning and teaching blogs included in this study.

Blog name	Institution	URL	Country
Centre for Research on Learning and Teaching blog	University of Michigan	www.crlt.umich.edu	US
Futures	University of Technology Sydney (UTS)	futures.uts.edu.au	AU
Learning Technology & Innovation	London School of Economics (LSE)	blogs.lse.ac.uk/lti	UK
Realising Teaching Excellence at the University of Worcester	University of Worcester	rteworcester.wordpress.com	UK
Teaching@Sydney	University of Sydney	sydney.edu.au/education-portfolio/ei/teaching@sydney	AU
Teaching and Learning Blog	Loughborough University	blog.lboro.ac.uk/teaching-learning	UK
Teaching Commons Blog	York University	teachingcommons.yorku.ca/teaching-commons-blog-teaching-and-learning-at-york	CA
Teaching for Learning	McGill University	teachingblog.mcgill.ca	CA

Teaching Matters	University of Edinburgh	www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk	UK
Teaching Matters at LU	Lincoln University	tm-lu.blogspot.com	US
TECHE	Macquarie University	teche.mq.edu.au	AU
University Centre for Teaching and Learning blog	University of Pittsburgh	teaching.pitt.edu/blog	US

In order to answer the research questions, blog articles were coded using the following categories: (i) type of content; (ii) topics; (iii) a perceived intent; (iv) author role (if available); and (v) date.

Given different frequencies of blog posting in different institutions, 40 most recent posts from each institution, up to the end of May 2018 were coded. 40 was deemed a sufficient number for a representative sample of different learning and teaching blogs and resulted in the analysis of 480 blog posts in total.

A combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initially, a subset of 20 blog posts from different institutions was coded for the type of content, topics, a perceived intent and author role. This allowed establishing the initial deductive codes for the type of content, a perceived intent and author role. The 'topic' category was kept open-ended. Once the deductive coding categories were established, the whole data set was re-coded using the established coding scheme, utilizing the online descriptive analysis tool Dedoose.

Results

Type of content

Our analysis identified nine types of content (Table 2), plus a miscellaneous category. Of these content types, notices and announcements were by far the most common, followed by posts that explained various learning and teaching issues or posts where the author shared their own experiences (Figure 1). If applicable, more than one code was assigned to the same blog post.

When comparing institutions, it was clear that some had a higher proportion of certain content types in the selection of posts analysed for this study (Figure 2). For example, Teaching Matters from the University of Edinburgh had a large proportion of posts where academics were describing their own practice, while the blog from Macquarie University seemed to have no such content. At the same time, the Macquarie University blog had a sizeable number of interviews while the University of Edinburgh blog did not have any. Similarly, the University Centre for Teaching and Learning blog from the University of Pittsburgh had a large amount of content reposted from elsewhere, while blogs from UTS, Sydney, LSE, Loughborough and Edinburgh did not seem to use this type of content. Overall, however, most blogs seemed relatively well-balanced and used most of the content types identified in this study (Figure 2).

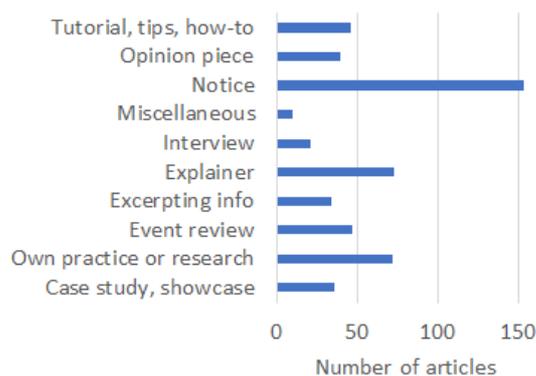


Table 2: Content types of learning and teaching blogs with examples

Content type	Description	Examples of article titles
Case study, showcase, profile	Describes someone else's learning and teaching initiative	"Rethinking the postgraduate learning experience: a case study from Law"; "Using Powerpoint to create engaging simulations"; "Three inspirational examples of technology enhanced innovations in learning and teaching"
Describing own research or practice	An author writing or reflecting about their own learning and teaching endeavours	"Flipping in the classroom: Evaluating an experiment in the humanities"; "The reason I teach grit to my students"; "Teaching and learning lessons from Turnitin"

Event Review	Overview or summary of a learning and teaching event	"Let's talk... about contract cheating"; "Authentic, inclusive assessment - takeaways from a workshop"; "Copyright, the future and Brexit - what does it mean for education?"
Excerpting information from elsewhere	Article that summarises, reviews, or otherwise highlights another article or piece of literature	"Smartwatches deemed least valuable technology in the classroom"; "A review of Carl Wieman's latest book on science education"; "How can we become better teachers?"
Explainer, concept overview	Clarifying or exploring a learning and teaching issue	"Connecting the dots in the new curriculum"; "Teaching with the case study method"; "How your students are using LinkedIn"
Interview	A conversational exposition of an initiative, person, or issue	"Top tips for tutors: Create a killer learning experience"; "Helping students communicate science - beyond the classroom!"; "A blueprint for peer-based and collaborative learning in a teaching laboratory"
Notice or announcement	Public or official notification relating to learning and teaching	"Launch of the immersive learning laboratory"; "Inclusive teaching: Registration open for May workshop series"; "Catchbox throwable microphones now available"
Opinion piece	Expression of professional judgement about a topic	"Teaching to the test - maybe not a bad idea?"; "Students these days"; "Blogging helps students AND professors to write more clearly"
Tutorial, tips, how-to	Practically-oriented guide for implementing a learning and teaching approach	"Designing effective educational videos"; "Why can't we be friends? PowerPoint and active learning"; "Delete and declutter"

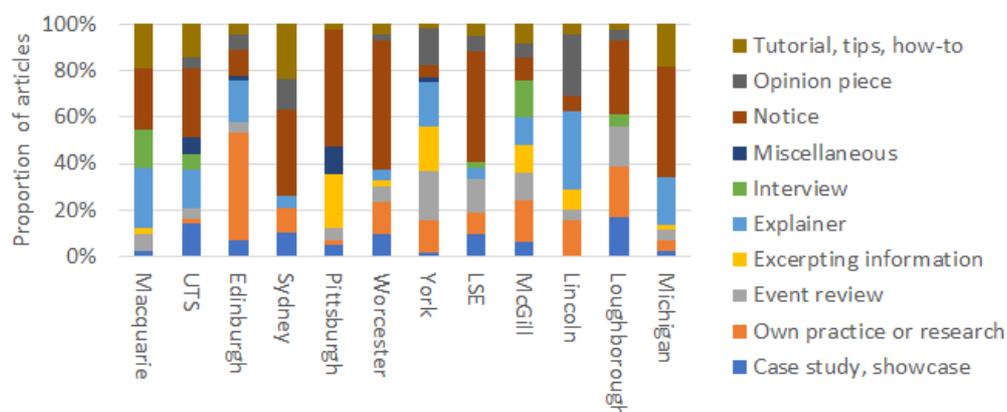


Figure 1: Distribution of content types per institution.

Topics

Our analysis revealed a wide range of topics. Specifically, we identified 147 individual codes, which we then grouped into 10 topics: (i) assessment; (ii) curriculum design and considerations; (iii) educational technology; (iv) learning and teaching approaches (pedagogies); (v) learning and teaching techniques; (vi) policy and governance; (vii) professional development; (viii) resource sharing; (ix) reward and recognition; (x) student transition and support and (xi) a miscellaneous category. Of the individual codes, the top 10 in terms of prevalence were (i) learning management system, (ii) awards and rewarding teaching excellence, (iii) professional development, (iv) collaborative learning, (v) employability, (vi) equity and diversity, (vii) student engagement, (viii) positive learning environment, (ix) students as partners, and (x) conference.

Across all institutions, the two most prevalent topics (Figure 3) formed from the individual codes were educational technology (including learning management systems, lecture capture, MOOCs, technology-enhanced learning, educational media, social media, etc), and learning and teaching approaches (or 'pedagogies',

including active learning, experiential learning, research-informed teaching, students as partners, work integrated learning, game-based learning, collaborative learning, etc). The next three most prevalent topics in the blog posts analysed were assessment (including assessment design, authentic assessment, academic integrity, feedback, peer assessment, marking, etc), curriculum design and considerations (including curriculum redesign, learning design, equity and diversity, employability, social inclusion, academic skills, etc), and learning and teaching techniques (including positive learning environments, storytelling, student engagement, inspiring students, blogging as a learning activity, large class teaching, etc).

In the blogs of individual institutions (Figure 4), educational technology was generally the most prevalent topic, although there were some exceptions. Loughborough, for example, had a high prevalence of reward and recognition posts, whereas Edinburgh had a relatively high number of posts on assessment and curriculum design, and McGill had a higher representation of posts on assessment and learning, and teaching approaches and techniques.

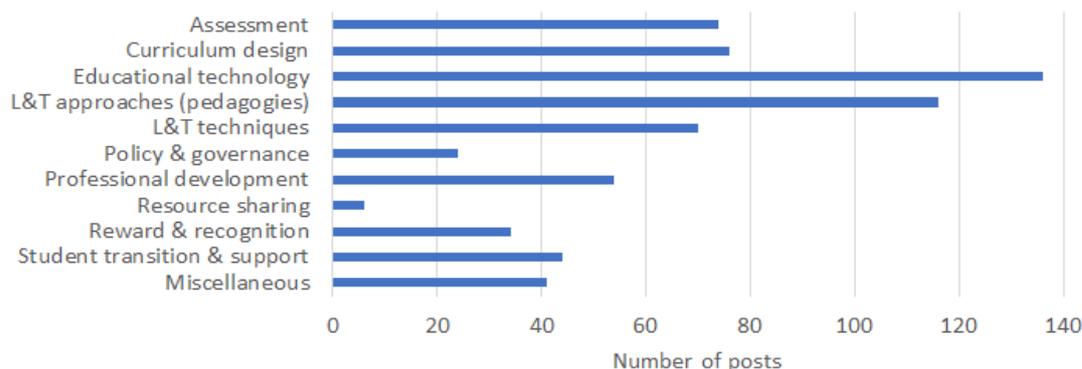


Figure 2: Overall distribution of topics across all surveyed institutional blogs.

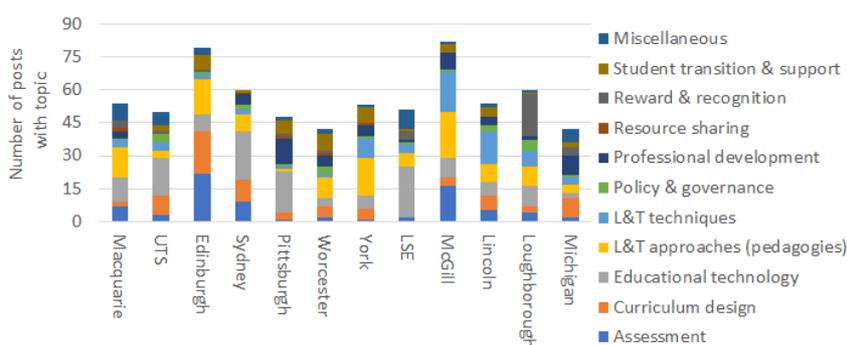


Figure 3: Distribution of topics per institution. Note that some posts were related to more than one topic.

Intent of the blog posts

Our analysis revealed a range of reasons why blog posts seem to be written. These 'intents' were interpreted from the posts themselves, based on the genres of blog posts, their call to action and other linguistic features. For example, a post that described an innovative application of educational technology would be characterised as 'more or better use of a technology', and a post that showcased previous grant winners and announced an upcoming grant round would be classified as both 'uptake of an opportunity' as well as 'awareness for an initiative that impacts teaching'. If applicable, more than one code was assigned. Based on this approach, the most frequently observed intent was increasing awareness for an initiative impacting teaching, followed by getting involved in an event/project (Figure 5). The next most prevalent intents across all institutional blogs were practical applications to teaching, more/better use of an approach, facility, technology, or service, and encouraging dialogue, conversation, or feedback.

Per institution, these intents were more evenly distributed than the topics or content types. There were some exceptions, notably Edinburgh, which appeared to have a higher prevalence of posts for raising awareness of an initiative that impacts teaching, and Lincoln, which appeared to have more posts aimed at eliciting dialogue, conversation, or feedback, at least in the posts that were analysed as part of this study.

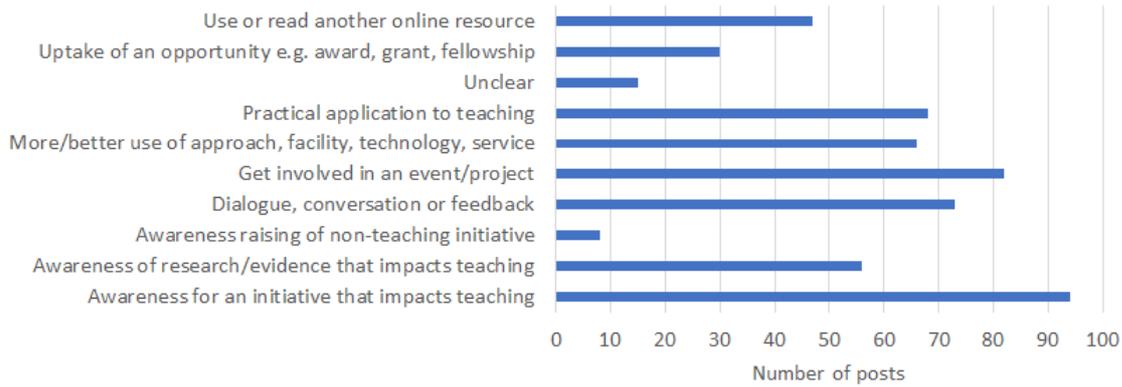
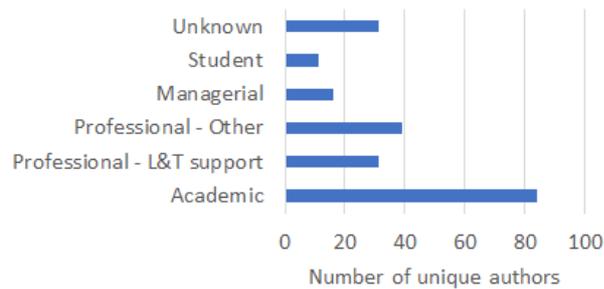


Figure 4: Overall distribution of interpreted intents across all surveyed institutional blogs.

Blog post authorship

Based on our analysis, some institutions had diverse authorship that included a range of academic and professional staff, as well as students, while other blogs seemed to be dominated by learning designers and academic staff (see Figure 4). Out of 480 posts, there were 212 unique author accounts, which were then grouped into five main institutional roles: academic, professional staff in learning and teaching support, professional staff in other roles, managerial staff, and students, as well as unknown or unidentifiable roles. In a small number of blogs, generic accounts were used to post so we were unable to identify the author and their role within the institution.

Somewhat surprisingly, the most prevalent author role type across all the surveyed blogs was 'academic', followed by professional in other roles, and then professional staff in learning and teaching support roles (Figure 6). Students were the least prevalent author role type overall. The institutional blogs at Edinburgh, York, and Loughborough had the highest proportion of academic authors, but also had the highest number of unique authors (Figure 7). Macquarie, UTS, and McGill appeared to have the most evenly balanced distribution of author roles, at least as represented in the blog posts that were surveyed as part of this study.



Interestingly (but probably unsurprisingly), the authors with academic roles were observed to write more opinion pieces and posts that described their own practice (Figure 8). This was also the pattern for student contributors. On the contrary, authors with learning and teaching support roles contributed a larger proportion of case studies, event reviews, interviews, and tutorial/how-to posts.

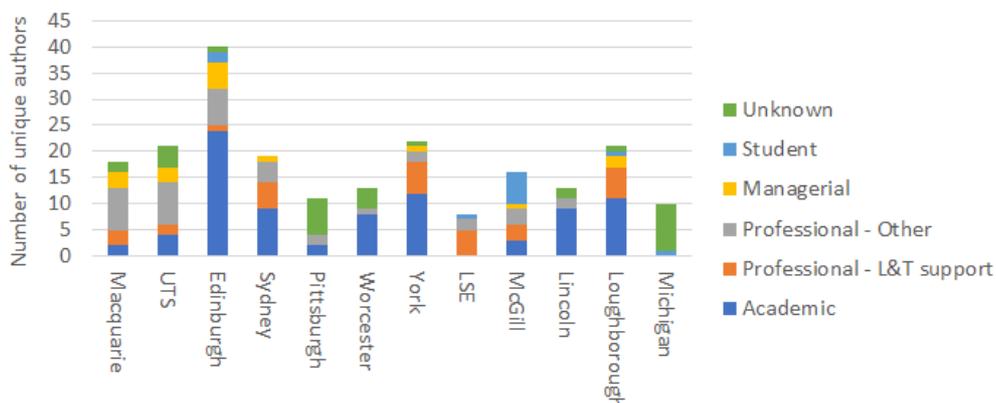


Figure 5: Distribution of author roles per institution.

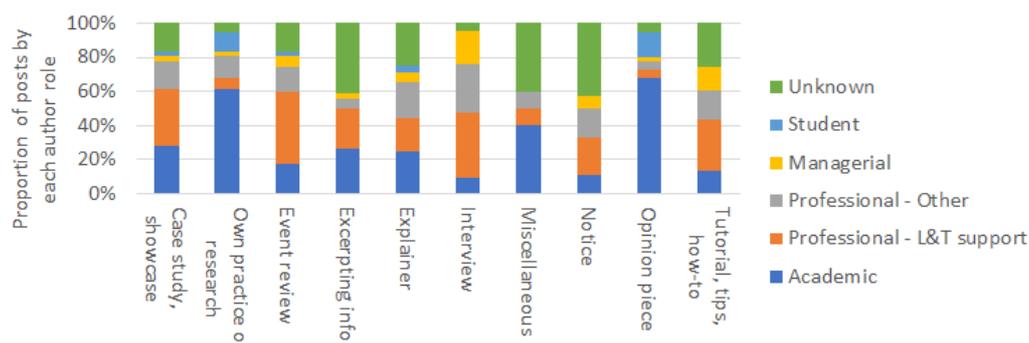
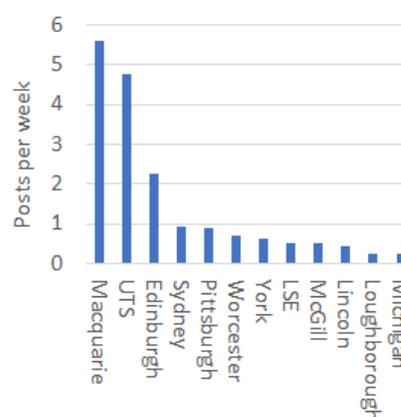


Figure 6: Distribution of author roles per type of blog content authored.

Frequency of contributions

There was considerable variation in the frequency of blog posts, ranging from 5.6 posts per week to one post every four weeks (Figure 9). The blogs from Macquarie and UTS had substantially higher contribution rates compared to all the other blogs analysed. All the other per-institution figures in this paper have been presented in descending order of frequency of contributions. From this, we observed that blogs that are more frequently updated tend to have a more balanced spread of author roles, and to have a higher proportion of professional staff authors (Figure 7). This may indicate that a distributed authorship that represents different types of role (academic, professional and so on) is important for sustaining blog output. From the data, the spread of these roles seems to be more significant than the actual number of authors publishing on the blog.



Discussion

As a newly emerging medium, institutional learning and teaching blogs have few (if any) formal guidelines or established genres. Contributors could presumably choose different topics, forms and goals, and one can expect a lot of variability among different blogs, especially when they come from different countries. However, our analysis found a range of striking similarities in types of content, topics and intent, which, we believe, reflect common values, concerns and challenges of learning and teaching teams worldwide, and go some way to explaining why these blogs were established.

It was interesting that out of many possible types of content, such as case studies, opinion pieces, describing one's own practice or research, etc., it was the announcements that emerged as the most common type of content. Announcements did not tend to be written in the personalised style that generally characterises blog writing, and the high number of them raises a question of whether blogs provide a good 'announcement' platform and are effective for informing an institutional community about upcoming events and workshops, or whether the popularity of announcements is symptomatic of something else. An alternative interpretation might be that the blog writers feel that they are limited in their communication options and they turn to institutional learning and teaching blogs because they are available and welcome their contributions. Further studies might look at the effectiveness of announcements via learning and teaching blogs in order to provide the learning and teaching community with valuable information about dissemination channels. However, regardless of the effectiveness of blogs as an announcement platform, the fact that institution-specific announcements were, in fact, the most popular type of content provides a reason for having institution-specific blogs and may explain why such blogs were set up.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain institution-specific preferences, such as the large number of posts from academic staff describing their own practice in the blog of the University of Edinburgh and a seeming absence of this content type from the blog of Macquarie University. However, it may be hypothesized that some

publications opted for different styles of posts in communicating similar content. For example, blogs with a low number of staff describing their own practice, like Macquarie University's blog, may prefer to convey similar information in interviews rather than posts written from the first person perspective, or they may have found this the most efficient way of eliciting contributions. Future studies could explore the reasons for such differences as they could reveal interesting editorial or cultural insights.

Be it posts describing one's own practice or interview-based pieces, there was clearly a strong focus on practical examples of teaching, which can be viewed as an attempt to fill a seeming gap between mostly theoretical academic literature and the practical needs of the learning and teaching community. Indeed, the discrepancy between teacher-educators' intention to provide practical information, and the new teachers' perception of it as too abstract and overly theoretical, has been noted in the literature (Loughran, 2013). The observed prevalence of describing one's own practice or research and writing about educational technology might also reflect the values of blog writers, who were often affiliated with the learning and teaching teams and/or learning technology teams. It may also reflect professional development approaches at some institutions, encouraging their teaching staff to engage in reflection and share their thoughts with the wider community of practice.

Another interesting finding was that raising awareness of an initiative that impacts teaching was the most common perceived intent of a post, followed by 'getting involved in a project/event'. Both reasons can be viewed as 'institution-specific' and further attest to the validity of having an institutional (rather than a general) blog platform. At the same time, the need to raise awareness of good learning and teaching practices can also be interpreted as a reflection of a 'lower' status often given to teaching in a modern university as compared with research (Young, 2006), and the need of learning and teaching teams to conduct 'awareness-raising' campaigns. Being an exploratory and benchmarking study, we are unable to provide a definitive explanation for the popularity of awareness-raising posts, and further interview-based research might shed light on these findings.

One of the questions that motivated this study was finding out more about typical authors of learning and teaching blogs. We found that some institutions have a diverse range of authors that included learning support and learning designers, students, career advisors, librarians, copyright advisors, etc., while other blogs were dominated by learning designers and academics. It is worth noting that the institutions with the most diverse authorship were also the institutions that most frequently published blog posts and had a higher proportion of professional staff authors. A high proportion of authors in professional roles is interesting, and it may be hypothesized that unlike academic staff, who often prioritise publishing in academic venues, professional staff may see learning and teaching blogs as an opportunity to publicly document their work and/or create a professional portfolio, or it may be built into professional staff workloads.

While 'the more authors - the more posts' is obvious from the 'output' perspective, the real question is what effect diverse authorship has on institutional blogs and whether blogs ought to strive towards a diverse authorship. It is currently unclear whether a diverse authorship creates a wider and more inclusive learning and teaching community, or whether it simply impacts the blog's output. Futures studies need to investigate the relationship between diverse authorship and the learning and teaching community.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study. There were several instances when we were not able to identify authors' roles, and 40 articles only represented a limited number of months for some prolific blogs. What is more, our study merely provides a snapshot of current practices, some of which may be effective or not. More in-depth studies are required to shed light on who reads these blogs, how readers engage with blog content, and what effect (if any) these blog posts have on individuals and learning and teaching communities. It would be also interesting to conduct a study looking at specific techniques used by blog writers to engage their audience and draw at least preliminary conclusions about the effectiveness of these techniques. This information could help to improve existing learning and teaching blogs and will be useful for those who are considering starting their own learning and teaching blogs.

We encourage researchers and practitioners to consider the abovementioned questions as the changing landscape of tertiary teaching makes community-building and just-in-time professional development increasingly important (James, Bexley, Davlin & Marginson, 2007). Learning and teaching blogs hold a potential to address some of the issues facing modern universities, and if used well, can contribute to enhancing the quality of tertiary education as well as creating institutional and cross-institutional communities.

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