



Developing professional skills in journalism through blogs

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Abstract: The curriculum for journalism is being forced to change because the traditional print-based and broadcast modes are being challenged by wide and easy access to online mass communication. Primarily, students need to develop proficiency in writing, editing and publishing. However, they are also expected to be skilled in the Web medium as they venture into their careers. To develop these skills in students, weblogs offer a dynamic platform. Based on a statistical summary of student comments on the performance criteria for a blog project, a focus group interview and survey results, this paper will discuss the findings from the introduction of a course-based blog to an undergraduate course in Hong Kong, including (1) the technical challenge of making web features, (2) the perception of proficiency in online publishing, (3) the evaluative skills developed through a peer-review process, and (4) the development of a learning community through writing in blogs.

Keywords: blog, assessment criteria, peer assessment, learning community, higher education.

Introduction

Traditionally, the two main forms of journalism had been print-based and broadcast until the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, Internet news is becoming more popular wherever the public has wide and easy access to the Internet, because news in this medium is updated dynamically (Yau and Al-Hawamdeh 2001). The curriculum on journalism education has changed as a result, and students are now required to develop cross-platform skills in universities (Castañeda *et al.* 2005). While the craft of writing and reporting is essential for success in journalism, graduates are also expected to be proficient in oral and written

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3 communication and technically competent in the digital newsroom when they move into their
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5 future careers.
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8 9 *Creating an authentic learning environment in class and through the use of blogs*

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11 Authentic learning experiences are an essential component of programmes that provide a form of
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13 professional apprenticeship, for example to become a lawyer, doctor or teacher. In the case of
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15 student journalists, academics need to provide such opportunities to help the development of
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17 professional skills, for example by simulating the process of news reporting: that is, allowing
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19 students to experience real-world practice before they practise in the profession (Nicaise *et al.*
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21 2000; Herrington and Herrington 2006; Lave and Wenger 1991; Brown *et al.* 1989). In order to
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23 acquire professional competence, students need to experience the process of news production as
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25 simulated 'news desks'. Such authentic learning opportunities can be provided by blending the
26
27 face-to-face and virtual learning environments (Garrison and Kanuka 2004). Theories of
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29 journalism can be introduced in lectures. To apply theories in practice, students can learn to
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31 source relevant information, make drafts and do final editing in the Web environment. They can
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33 also practise formulating questions for interviews and role-play interviewing skills in tutorials.
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35 The enriched opportunities in this mixed mode of learning can contribute to 'real-world
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37 authenticity' (Jones 2006).
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46 In the Web environment, the emergence of Web 2.0 has provided a bundle of applications
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48 that further promote interactions between peers. One such application, the weblog (blog), can be
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50 a useful tool for teaching students about online journalism. A blog is a dynamic web
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52 environment in which information, experiences and news can be written up by a subscribing
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54 author and published instantly, with comments presented in reverse chronological order. Real
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3 Simple Syndicate (RSS) feeds are a key feature in a blog; this automatic syndication of content
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5 can be aggregated if subscribed to, and they allow students to receive daily updates of content.
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8 Current news sites can be set as RSS feeds to the blog site, so students need not spend time
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10 searching for current practical examples (Martindale and Wiley 2005). They can also experience
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12 the process of publishing their work through writing in the blog site (Musser and Martin-Wolfe
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14 2007). Students can enrich the content of news writing by using multimedia, i.e. digital images
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16 and video, to report a case or interviews informants. By engaging students to actively practise
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18 news writing, academics can encourage students to develop critical reading and commenting on
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20 peer entries (Quible 2005).
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24 25 *Developing evaluative expertise through self- and peer review*

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28 Writing a story involves not only accuracy in writing and the ability to attract readers but also the
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30 requirement to adhere to a professional code of ethics that requires the ability to make
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32 judgements and decisions (Burns 2004). As students start their apprenticeship in journalism,
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34 academics may redesign assessment activities so that students have the opportunity to develop
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36 evaluative expertise. They may involve students in self- and peer review with a set of assessment
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38 criteria that assists students to identify a property or characteristics in which judgement is made
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40 (Sadler 1987). Such reviews may serve to raise awareness of standards and expectations, because
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42 students may internalize the standards when they use the assessment criteria to comment on peer
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44 work (Smith *et al.* 2002). It is hoped that this can become a transferable skill, so that students
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46 develop evaluative expertise in other courses and in the workplace (Sluijsmans *et al.* 1998).
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48 However, before they can exercise their evaluative skills, students need to see exemplars rather
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50 than verbal explanations (Sadler 2002). Alternatively, students can be involved in the process of
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52 developing the criteria (Falchikov 2005). Sivan (2000) claimed that students are more confident
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3 in using assessment criteria for self- and peer assessment when they participated in the
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5 development.
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9 As writing in the blog space may facilitate digital fluency (Witte 2007), there is great
10 potential to engage students in news writing and develop critical and independent thinking
11 through the review process. In the next section, the paper discusses the findings from a case
12 study of the learning experiences of a cohort of undergraduate students who studied 'English for
13 the Media' in a university in Hong Kong. This study was built on a pilot study from the previous
14 cohort, and evaluation of the student learning experience was positive when blogs were
15 integrated into teaching of the course. This year, self- and peer assessment were introduced to
16 allow students to develop evaluative skills. Using a statistical summary of peer comments made
17 based on the performance criteria on a blog project, a focus group interview and survey results,
18 this paper will examine student learning experiences, including perceptions of (1) the technical
19 challenge for them to make web features, (2) proficiency in online publishing, (3) evaluative
20 skills through the peer-review process, and (4) development of a learning community through
21 writing in blogs.
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40 **Background of the study**

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42 To provide multiple opportunities to develop proficient news writing and presentation in mass
43 media, the teacher used blogs for group tasks so that the cohort of 52 students could develop the
44 skills needed to author news in the Web medium and present news in a face-to-face environment
45 at a professional level.
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53 In the online environment, three news blogs were set up for the three seminar groups with
54 about twenty students in each group. Each blog was set up so that students could read the daily
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3 news from BBC News Asia-Pacific World Edition through RSS feeds. Postings for individual
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5 contributions for the news writing assignment were organized into different categories which is
6
7 not exhaustive: international news, local news, editorial, feature, and sports and entertainment, so
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9 that students decide what styles of new report they would like to practice.
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13 News blogs became a platform to practise news writing in English and learn from reading
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15 peers' contributions. Weekly writing exercises were assigned both as in-class drills and take-
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17 home tasks. These exercises ranged from drafting headlines, captions or the lead to editing of
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19 news to producing full versions of interviews or feature. Students chose to work in groups or as
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21 individuals, using their seminar group's blog as a digital writing pad on which their work was
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23 recorded and grouped under the 'exercise' category. They could track their own progress and
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25 learn from writings of classmates, who could also be from the other seminar groups. For
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27 assignments, they could post their write-ups as unpublished drafts on the blog for the teacher's
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29 comments.
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36 In class, audio and visual clips from the media were used for discussion and analysis to
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38 help students to understand the multimedia standards employed in the industry. Regular 'news
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40 group meetings' and simulated 'news desks' were set up to elicit discussions of selected news
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42 items and draft news stories. A reading of authentic news was assigned; students then simulated
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44 interviews and did the news writing in a computer lab. Peer groups of four to five students were
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46 then invited to take on roles as reporter, subeditor, photographer or chief editor and respond to
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48 questions posted online as a group. Mock interviews were then conducted, with one of the above
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50 roles played by a fellow student in the class.
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3 Following the interview, students chose to work in a group or individually to draft a news
4 report of 300 words based on information collected and post it to the news blog for comments by
5 another seminar group. In writing comments, students were encouraged to apply the knowledge
6 learned during the week about features and frameworks of news writing.
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13 Apart from practising news writing, students were encouraged to master production skills
14 with audio or visual aids. The written version would be turned into a script using clips recorded
15 earlier in the interview. Students could choose either an audio or a video format to present the
16 news story, reading from a prepared script and editing their news presentation using any other
17 audio-visual aids appropriate for their story. Their finished work would then be uploaded to the
18 news blog for sharing.
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28 Approaching the end of the semester, students formed into groups of three or four to
29 work on a news blog project. This was an assessed task, and initial discussions were conducted
30 for two weeks exclusively between group members. Each student chose a role as discussion
31 starter, provocateur or summarizer. At the end of their discussions, a division of work and
32 responsibilities was also agreed among the members. Interviews, news reports and editorials by
33 each group were initially uploaded to the news blog as drafts. Based on the assessment criteria
34 ‘content’, ‘organization’, ‘grammar’, ‘style and tone’, and ‘layout and display’, peer assessment
35 was conducted in class to make improvements (see Table 1). After receiving feedback from
36 peers, students were given two weeks to revise their drafts. They were required to reflect further
37 independently with the use of the assessment criteria on the quality of the project. A final version
38 with a self-review was then submitted for grading by the teacher.
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55 **Table 1** Assessment criteria on news blog writing
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3 To evaluate the effect on student learning of integrating blogs for news writing with self-
4 and peer review, a focus group of five students from the three seminar groups was arranged to
5 meet one of the authors to discuss their experience at the end of the course. An online survey
6 with twenty-three statements in a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly
7 agree) and five open-ended questions was conducted during the last week of the taught
8 component to investigate student perception of the use of blogs for learning. Of 25 respondents,
9 22 successfully completed the survey.
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20 21 **Learning experiences**

22 A supportive culture of peer-assisted learning needed to be established first through the actions
23 in class and in the blog. Building trust and confidence between peers is important (Boud 2001).
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25 As students were given multiple opportunities to practise writing news in class, they were
26 encouraged to post their work to the news blogs. To start, the teacher asked students to post a
27 summary of in-class activities to the new blogs, and samples of good contributions were
28 discussed when the class reconvened. Students were also invited to make further comments in
29 the blog. Because this was the first time for a number of students to write in blogs, they
30 encountered different learning challenges but had valuable experiences.
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43 ***Technical challenge***

44 This was the second cohort of this course that blogs had been implemented, so the lecturer had
45 already learned from the previous cohort that some students had no experience of writing in
46 blogs. To reduce the initial technical challenge encountered by students, there was an in-class
47 demonstration on how to access, write an entry and post a comment, and an online demonstration
48 link on how to use a blog was set up on the teaching website. This year, there was no problem for
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3 students accessing the blogs, and three students reported in the survey that they had set RSS
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5 feeds to read current postings.
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9 However, some students encountered initial technical problems. This was indicated as the
10 lowest mean (3.23, with a standard deviation of 1.02) in the survey results: when students were
11 asked whether they were very familiar with postings to a blog, eleven out of twenty-two 'agreed'
12 or 'strongly agreed', five were 'neutral', and six 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. Students
13 encountered various technical challenges. One student commented that 'I am not so familiar with
14 the skills of using news blog before lessons'; three students had problems in editing their work;
15 four students did not know how to insert digital images; two students had difficulty in inserting
16 video/audio links to the blog; and five students found it hard to format the layout. As reported in
17 the focus group interview, the students also mentioned that it was easy to type in text, but
18 inserting images into assigned columns and adding captions to images were troublesome in this
19 blog site.
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36 *Perceptions of proficiency in online publishing*

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38 With the aim of establishing objective interpretation of the criteria, students were invited to
39 create the assessment criteria for the newsblog writing project. The criteria included 'content',
40 'organization', 'grammar', 'style and tone' and 'layout and display' (see Table 1). It was
41 expected that the assessment criteria would serve to assist student understanding of the standards
42 so that they could then make reference to the criteria to do self- and peer review of the project.
43 From the survey, it was observed that: 'I had a better understanding of the assessment criteria by
44 assessing peer work (mean = 3.64; standard deviation = 0.73); 'The peer review process helped
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me to have a better understanding of the assessment criteria (mean = 3.82; standard deviation = 0.73).

Using four predefined proficiency levels, students perceived themselves as 'proficient' across all criteria and had high confidence in grammar, as indicated in both self- and peer review (see Table 2). As self-review was conducted with the revised final version, it seems that students gained in confidence, because there was a lower incidence of self-rating as 'novice' or 'apprentice'; some aspects of the quality of work were given the higher rating of 'proficient' for the criteria 'organization', 'grammar', 'style and tone' and 'layout and display', and some work was rated as 'distinguished' for the criteria 'content', 'organization' and 'layout and display'. Although, assessment criteria can provide some indication of areas of strengths and areas for improvement for students, one criticism is that terms and phrases described in the criteria may not be clear enough to students (O'Donovan *et al.* 2001). However, while the criteria may allow students to be aware of areas of weakness, they may not know what action to take in order to improve their work. Further comments or suggestions would be useful for learning.

Table 2 Self- and peer review on news blog writing

Evaluative skills observed in the peer review process

Researchers have found that written comments can be more effective than providing grades (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Black and Wiliam 1998). In addition to the assessment criteria for categorizing quality of work, peers can also post additional comments. The survey results show that 'I found that the assessment criteria were a useful guide to how to provide feedback to peers on their postings to the blog (mean = 3.77; standard deviation = 0.69). Comments provided by peer groups can directly indicate their understanding of the criteria, in particular their ability to

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3 articulate suggestions for improvement. Thirty-seven reviews provided positive comments or
4 suggested areas for improvement; two reviews offered only positive comments; and ten reviews
5 gave comments only about improvement. Of the comments suggesting areas for improvement,
6 51 were made on 'content', 28 on 'organization', 13 on 'grammar', 10 on 'style and tone', and
7 42 on 'layout and display'. Examples of specific suggestions made by some peer groups are
8 shown in Figure 1.
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18 **Figure 1** Suggestions made by peer groups on how to improve, based on the assessment criteria
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22 Based on how peers commented, students became more confident in commenting on
23 'content' and 'layout and display'. A number of comments suggested that students could
24 consider providing multiple perspectives by interviewing more stakeholders, or include photos to
25 enrich the news story. However, there were far fewer comments on 'organization' and 'style and
26 tone'. This may indicate that students were more competent in mastering some criteria, but not
27 all. Although it is easy for students to be aware of the appropriate use of images and videos in the
28 Web environment, it is more challenging for students starting an apprenticeship in journalism to
29 master different styles and tone in writing news, editorials and feature articles. Furthermore, it
30 was observed that some peers simply copied the descriptions from the assessment criteria in the
31 open comments. This may indicate that they lacked confidence or the ability to make further
32 comments or suggestions.
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49 Given that it was a staged project, there was a learning opportunity for students to reflect
50 on and revise their work even though the project was summative for grading. Comparing the
51 draft and final version, it was noted that students reviewed feedback suggested by peers and took
52 appropriate action. The teacher observed that the quality of the project submitted by this cohort
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3 was generally higher than that achieved by the previous cohort, the course for whom did not
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5 include such an evaluative component.
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8 9 *Developing a learning community through writing in blogs*

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11 Blogs can be deployed in such a way that they become a breeding ground for the development of
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13 an effective learning community that encompasses both meaningful and quality interactions
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15 between participants (Wenger 2000; Wang and Fang 2005; Lankshear and Knobel 2006). To
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17 extend blogs from individual contributions to a collective and collaborative learning environment
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19 so that learners share common interests, that is to build a learning community, it is necessary to
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21 establish group goals and to hold individuals accountable for their contributions (Slavin 1989).
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26 In this case, students were provided with opportunities to develop professional skills in
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28 online journalism by practising in class and writing in blogs. Overall, it was generally perceived
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30 as positive in this cohort. According to the survey results, the top three statements responded to
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32 were: 'The online news blog enabled me to learn more from reading the work of peers (mean =
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34 4.09; standard deviation = 0.53)'; 'I welcomed group members sending me comments on my
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36 postings in the blog (mean = 4.09; standard deviation = 0.53); 'Feedback from peers was useful
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38 for me when revising my final work (mean = 4.05; standard deviation = 0.65).
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44 As discussed earlier, students encountered both technical and learning challenges.
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46 However, they learned to resolve these challenges through peer support. According to the survey,
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48 70 percent of respondents had some experience of writing in blogs. Thus, students could provide
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50 technical help for each other. However, none of the interviewees had experience in academic
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52 writing in blogs, which provided an extended learning space in which they could practise
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54 writing, share resources and receive peer feedback. As advocated by Diane Laurillard (2002),
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3 conversations between peers is a critical component in engaging student learning. The blog
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5 environment seamlessly provides a channel for students to demonstrate their performance and
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7 exercise evaluative skills. Consequently, by reflecting on comments that were referenced
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9 according to the assessment criteria agreed by peers, students in this cohort were able to
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11 understand their strengths and how far they needed to go to bridge the gap between their current
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13 abilities and a distinguished level of performance in their profession. They could then take
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15 appropriate action to improve the quality of their work. In the interviews, interviewees also
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17 stated that writing in blogs had a number of advantages: peers could learn from one another as
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19 they observed different ways of reporting news, and could make comments and suggestions; they
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21 found that it was equally valuable to learn not to repeat mistakes made by peers. Furthermore,
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23 they could learn to use multimedia appropriately and creatively by practising in the blog.
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31 However, there was limited time for them to practise writing and working as a team in
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33 the blog environment, so students did not establish full collegiality, as indicated in the survey,
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35 where 'Writing a blog gave me a sense of belonging when working on the group project' (mean
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37 = 3.36; standard deviation = 0.85). As a learning community, students could interact in class, and
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39 they probably reached beyond the third stage of 'information exchange' and were in the next
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41 stage of 'knowledge construction' described by Gilly Salmon (2002) in a five-stage model of
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43 online activities. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to see if students could eventually
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45 reach the final 'developmental' stage, in which they may extend their evaluative skills for their
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47 university study and future career.
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51 52 **Conclusion**

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3 In preparing for a career in journalism, students need to be fluent in written and spoken
4 communication and technically competent in the digital newsroom. The majority of this
5 generation of university students have some experience in using computers and skill in searching
6 for information on the Web (Junco 2005). The technical barrier is a challenge to some students,
7 and this should not be overlooked when teachers integrate blogs into the learning management
8 system. To build professional competence, students first need to build confidence and develop
9 critical evaluative expertise when sourcing information, conducting interviews and writing the
10 news. They need to be provided with learning opportunities to practise in class and through the
11 online environment.
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25 In this case study, the blog was introduced as a medium for developing a learning
26 community. Students could experience the situated learning in class and through the blog (Lave
27 and Wenger 1991) and develop proficiency in writing and other professional skills through the
28 process of providing constructive feedback between peers. However, they were still apprentices
29 in the field of professional journalism. While the students were in the stage of knowledge
30 construction and could internalize some of the assessment criteria, many students demonstrated
31 that they were capable of articulating valid and useful comments and suggestions. Because they
32 were based on trusting relationships, comments made by peers invited students to reflect on their
33 work so that they could take action for further improvement. Nevertheless, it is still not certain
34 whether they reached the standards required by the profession. Although students may be able to
35 model good news writing by accessing current live online journals via RSS feeds and having a
36 positive perception of their performance, it may be of value for practitioners in the field to be
37 invited to provide professional comments in the learning community. To benchmark professional
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3 practice and standards, it would be useful to conduct further research into collaboration with
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5 professionals via the blog.
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	Examples of suggestions for improvement
Content	<p><i>It would be nice if some figures or statistics of the price index are given to support your article.</i></p> <p><i>It would be better if you talked more on this Japanese culture affecting HK youngsters.</i></p> <p><i>But it is better to include also the opinion from students' parents and the reason behind why schoolteachers are not 'loved' by their students.</i></p> <p><i>Besides, I think it would be better not just only mentioned the events held by HKPU but also those held by other universities in HK as the topic is about how HK youngsters embark the Beijing Olympic, but not just the HKPU students.</i></p>
Organization	<p><i>The first paragraph is too long, you should try to divide it into small paragraphs.</i></p> <p><i>The organization of the whole article should be rearranged. More paragraphs with subheadings and better linkages between them are needed.</i></p> <p><i>The 2nd paragraph seems fail to link with the 3rd paragraph. To improve, you may mention how teenagers addicted to the online games.</i></p>
Grammar	<p><i>Some sentences are not grammatically correct, for example, some sentences with parallel structure got different tenses in the clauses.</i></p> <p><i>Past tense and present tense are both used in paragraph 2. It should all be present tense to state facts.</i></p>
Style and tone	<p><i>You have put too much personal expression about the news. The news would become more subjective.</i></p> <p><i>Some conjunctions/linking words can be used to enhance the coherence.</i></p>
Layout and display	<p><i>You can improve your layout of your final version by adding some pictures or sidebar if appropriate.</i></p> <p><i>But it'd better if there are captions.</i></p> <p><i>Should better include the sources of the news as references.</i></p> <p><i>Some links to explain technical terms and special nouns can be used.</i></p>

Figure 1 Suggestions made by peer groups on how to improve, based on the assessment criteria

Category/indicative grade	Novice	Apprentice	Proficient	Distinguished
Content (Authenticity, Originality, Timeliness)	News story includes few facts or no sign of understanding of subject matter.	News story includes some recent facts and shows signs of understanding subject matter.	Entry includes important and recent facts that show understanding of subject matter.	Entry includes in-depth information that adds freshness and profound understanding of subject matter.
Organization	Information is not organized, and audiences have trouble following.	Information is somewhat organized, and audiences have little trouble following.	Information is organized, and audiences have no trouble following.	Information is very well organized, and audiences have absolutely no trouble following.
Grammar	More than 10 errors.	6 to 10 errors	2 to 5 errors	2 to no errors
Style and tone	No consistency in word choice and minimal control of sentence structures.	Limited word choice and control of sentence structures that inhibits voice and tone.	Use of a variety of words, sentence structures and a consistent voice and tone adapted for the readers.	Precise use of a variety of words and sentence structures to create a consistent voice and tone adapted for the readers.
Layout and display	No thought in format and layout or no effort shown.	Some thought in format and layout but little effort shown.	Some thought in format and layout with good effort shown.	Format and layout are attractive, with major effort shown.

Table 1 Assessment criteria on news blog writing

	Novice		Apprentice		Proficient		Distinguished	
	Peer review	Self-review	Peer review	Self-review	Peer review	Self-review	Peer review	Self-review
Content	0.00%	0.00%	9.43%	8.57%	79.25%	74.29%	11.32%	17.14%
Organization	0.00%	0.00%	15.09%	5.56%	69.81%	75.00%	15.09%	19.44%
Grammar	0.00%	0.00%	7.69%	2.78%	55.77%	66.67%	36.54%	30.56%
Style and tone	0.00%	0.00%	1.92%	2.78%	76.92%	83.33%	21.15%	13.89%
Layout and display	5.88%	5.56%	13.73%	5.56%	70.59%	77.78%	9.80%	11.11%

Table 2 Self- and peer review on news blog writing