



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

BLOGGING AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Engaging students

- ▶ Pedagogical innovation (physical and virtual locations)
- ▶ Innovative assessment...
- ▶ Blogs
 - ▶ series of short online posts
 - ▶ continuous and iterative
 - ▶ formative or summative
 - ▶ public or private
 - ▶ individual or collaborative
 - ▶ accessible and engaging writing style
 - ▶ intertextual and multi-modal

Changing nature of education

- ▶ redefinition of the role of the lecturer from ‘repository of knowledge’ to ‘facilitator of learning’
- ▶ redefinition of students as active agents of their own learning
- ▶ Shift toward more learner-centred forms of assessment
 - ▶ encourage students to be more reflective by encouraging them to seek connections between their personal experiences and the material covered
 - ▶ transforms knowledge from the classroom into the students’ everyday lives (and back again)
 - ▶ encourages individual to develop their own ‘voice’
 - ▶ individualises students’ learning

Methodology

- ▶ Principal's Teaching Award Scheme funded project to investigate the use of assessed blogs across the University of Edinburgh
- ▶ Four case study courses two of which were STEM-subjects
 - ▶ Course A - oriented toward the social sciences
 - ▶ Course B - oriented toward earth science

If you talk about different, novel ways of teaching, you get shot-down round here still. [...] People, sort of, go 'you can't do that, that's not traditional' [...] if you try new things you get told, 'oh, you don't have time to do that' or 'that won't work' [...] 'we've been doing this for years, why do you need to change it?' (B CO)

- ▶ Interviews with COs; student focus groups; Course Evaluation Surveys (CES)

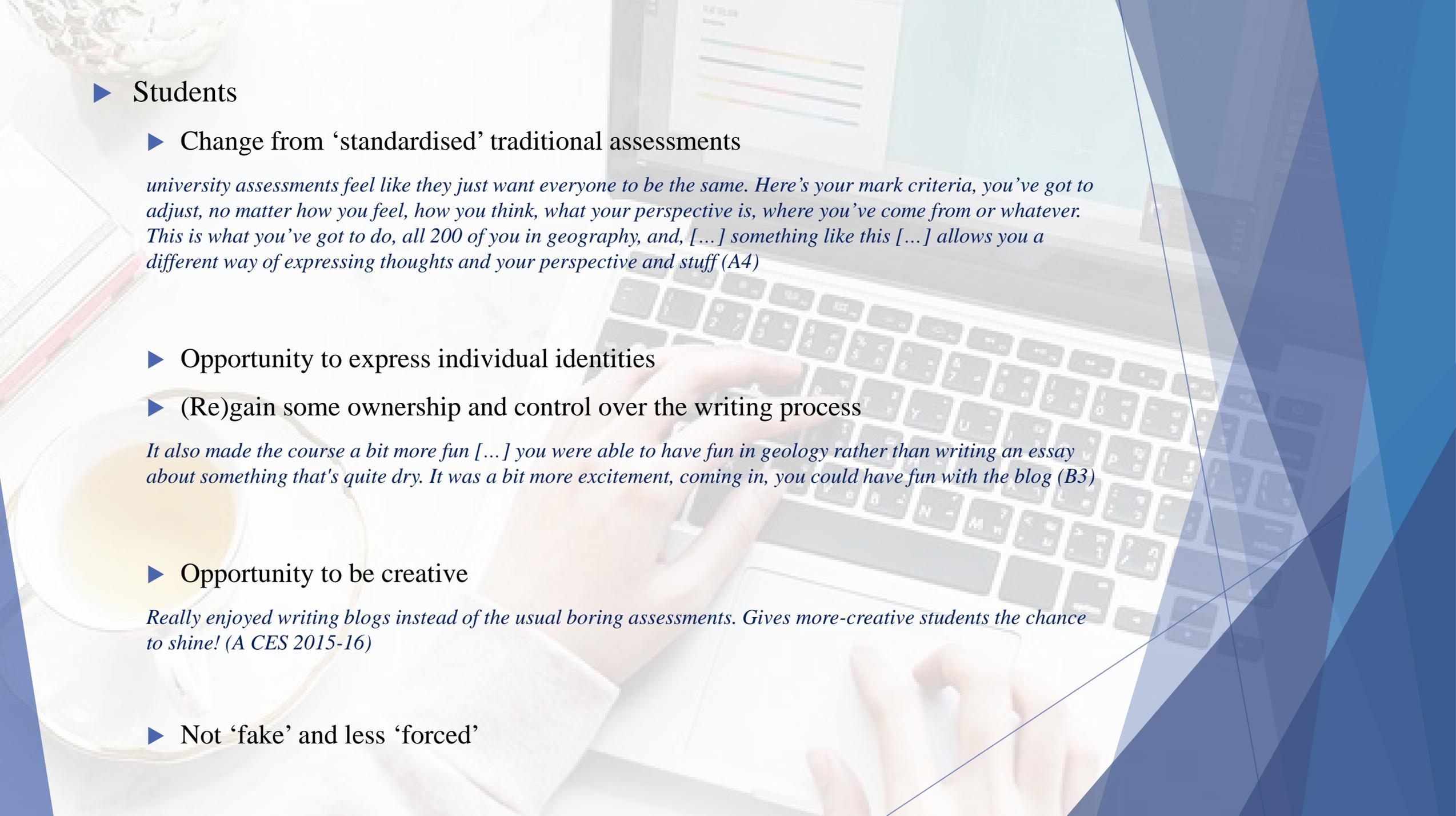
Developing personal connections

▶ Course Organisers

- ▶ Desire to move away from a traditional model of teaching/assessment
- ▶ Favoured an active and participatory approach
- ▶ Keen for students to make use of their own knowledge/experiences
- ▶ Giving students more control over own learning

a bit more of a creative way to do things [...] the blogs will allow the students to draw upon other sources that are not necessarily academic and linked to real world examples [...] I just feel like exam answers can sometimes be a bit dry [...] and sometimes just end up reiterating what the student has remembered the theorist has said (A CO)

It's definitely made them think a lot more [...] Instead of just writing down what they did today they now have to think about, 'Oh, we have done something new. How well do we actually understand it?' and I think they reflect a lot more on it (B CO)



▶ Students

▶ Change from ‘standardised’ traditional assessments

university assessments feel like they just want everyone to be the same. Here’s your mark criteria, you’ve got to adjust, no matter how you feel, how you think, what your perspective is, where you’ve come from or whatever. This is what you’ve got to do, all 200 of you in geography, and, [...] something like this [...] allows you a different way of expressing thoughts and your perspective and stuff (A4)

▶ Opportunity to express individual identities

▶ (Re)gain some ownership and control over the writing process

It also made the course a bit more fun [...] you were able to have fun in geology rather than writing an essay about something that's quite dry. It was a bit more excitement, coming in, you could have fun with the blog (B3)

▶ Opportunity to be creative

Really enjoyed writing blogs instead of the usual boring assessments. Gives more-creative students the chance to shine! (A CES 2015-16)

▶ Not ‘fake’ and less ‘forced’

Fostering student engagement

- ▶ Iterative and continuous nature forced engagement in class and across the course

The way they were set out in five [posts] allowed you to reflect on each lecture [...] usually you just go to a lecture and then it's done with. The next time you think about it is either in exam revision or if you're using it for an essay, or even a lot of the time you don't have to think about it at all (A4)

I wouldn't [otherwise] have forced myself to read on mass spectrometry, or other techniques (B2)

- ▶ Invested more time

- ▶ Made connections across the course content.

because if it is the standard essay then you're having to ... technically you only need to have a good in-depth knowledge of two or three max topics. And you could do amazing in the subject, whereas this, it requires a bit of thinking around all the lectures and all the topics and that and interconnecting them (A4)

- ▶ Chance to interrogate the materials in a more engaging, contextualised, and meaningful way

for example, if we'd been writing an essay, we would have paid more attention to how precisely the instrument works. But with [the blog] we were [...] saying, 'oh, how old is this instrument', and 'how long has it been in the uni', and 'how did they build it', and 'what was it used for'. Just more interesting, and appealing facts (B1).

- ▶ Validity of the learners' own experiences as a basis for knowledge generation

it has made me think about academia in my everyday life and in my everyday experiences. So it's made me think about making those linkages every day (A1)

- ▶ Found themselves 'caring' more about the course material

I think it's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged with a course, like thought. Like I leave and I talked about it with people. [...] I've literally never done that. Even if I've enjoyed a course, I've never fully felt ... I don't know, like it's impacted the way I think fully. And I think the blogs definitely have helped that (A2)

- ▶ Greater knowledge 'footprint'

Fostering transferable skills

- ▶ Writing style – transferable skill

- ▶ Appreciation of differences between texts

you're so indoctrinated into writing in the academic style that it's really, really helpful to have that right, we're going to refresh, we're going to reset what you know how to write, which was quite good (A3)

it made me a lot more aware of how different the writing styles are, the academic and informal ones (B1)

- ▶ Importance of presentational standards

It's like, just, the aestheticisation of looking at stuff online. [...] if you go onto a restaurant's webpage, if they've got text everywhere and their photos aren't aligned, you're like 'oh, that's a bit scruffy looking'. You'd be more likely to go with something that looks a bit more professional. So I think it's just that idea that if it looks a bit misaligned or scruffy, it looks like you've not taken care of it or put the effort into the work (A3)

- ▶ Suggests that teaching academic conventions by rote is not enough; blogs can act as a ‘bridge’ to academic writing

I think it makes them think about what they've learnt and then have to think about how they will explain it to someone else who may not have the geological background. I think that focus helps them actually really understand what they're talking about. Yeah, I think it's another skill, because it's a communication skill that we don't cover in other aspects of their courses (B CO)

- ▶ Consideration of their audience and accessibility.

it allows you to, obviously, take a step back from, like the science. Because you're thinking, you're kind of like really honed in on what things are, but it allows you to take a step back from it and think about how you'd be able to communicate that to somebody that doesn't know that much about the science you're looking at. So it's really, it makes you think, wait, what are the basics, again, how can I actually tell somebody about that, because that's, I suppose, that's what science is about, it's about communicating stuff (B 3)

- ▶ Students were conscious of the written communication skills they were developing as part of the process of blogging and were able to comment on the value of these for their future professional selves

Key points

- ▶ Numerous positive teaching and learning outcomes associated with assessed blogs
 - ▶ Compelled students to engage more, not just in individual classes, but also across the course as a whole
 - ▶ Enabled students to personalise their learning and tailor the course content to suit their individual needs and interests
 - ▶ Provided students with the means to become active participants in knowledge construction and assume responsibility for their own learning
 - ▶ Allowed the students to (re)gain some control and ownership over their writing and an appreciation of writing for an audience