

CHAPTER 20

BLOGGING TO CREATE MULTIMODAL READING AND WRITING EXPERIENCES IN POSTMODERN HUMAN GEOGRAPHIES

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In this chapter we outline the creation of a “blog” as an emergent textual practice, designed to promote reading and writing for human geography students in their final year of undergraduate study. Aware that students on the “Postmodern Human Geographies” module were frequently challenged by the complexity of key readings, and, conscious that students appeared to read too little, we made significant changes to our practices in order to shift student conceptions of the role of reading and writing in this course. We introduced three strategies: a reduction in the reading expectation via the use of focused reading lists; the introduction of a blog where students were encouraged to respond by writing and contributing images and/or video links; and participation in a field trip to a contemporary art exhibition where the students, as readers, became observers of contemporary art work. This chapter will focus on the development of the blog as a means of encouraging students to develop their understanding of key texts by creating pieces of short writing and connecting these with found images. The creation of an explicit focus on reading and writing practices in this module offers a starting point for us to explore the transformative nature of the production of this collaborative online text for tutors and students.

EXPLORING READING AND LEARNING

There is a concern with encouraging students to “get their heads into their books” (see also Good, Chapter 3 this volume). The clear relationship between reading and writing practices is recognized in the development of academic literacies approaches (Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006, p. 102). Reading in the academy is acknowledged as a complex and creative process where the reader actively contributes to the making of meaning (Saranne Weller, 2010). There is an acknowl-

edgement that attention should be paid to making the connections between reading, writing and thinking explicit to our students (John Bean, Virginia Chappell & Alice Gillam, 2011) and Bean (2011, p. 161) advises us that students “need to be taught to read powerfully,” moving beyond reading for meaning to an understanding of how the text works. Such literacy based practices are recognized as forms of social enterprise where “spoken and written texts—do not exist in isolation but are bound up with what people do—practices in the material, social world” (Theresa Lillis, 2001, p. 34). In order to promote students’ understanding of how a text works it therefore seems appropriate to encourage them to lift their heads occasionally in order to connect what they read and write with their experiences in the world. For us this has involved manufacturing a series of shifts between language, image and experience by encouraging students to combine, words with found images in response to their key readings in the form of a blog.

Before we go on to discuss the blog in more detail it is worth considering the connections between reading, writing and learning and the blog as a strategy to enhance our students’ understanding. A central concern of this chapter is with the combination of word and image via the blog. We will now, therefore, explore the complexities of reading in the academy (Weller, 2010) by referring to two images; *Dusty Boots Line* by Richard Long (1988) and *City Drawings Series (London)* by Kathy Prendergast (1997).

Dusty Boots Line (Long, 1988) can be found at <http://www.richardlong.org/Sculptures/2011sculpupgrades/dusty.html>

Long’s image, a photograph of a straight line in the landscape, is a simple scuff from A to B, from anywhere to nowhere. If we conceptualize reading as this “Dusty Boots Line” it is a means of moving from one point to another, a simple and clear line in an anonymous landscape. It would be a brief brisk walk, perhaps reading for information, moving through the text in a predetermined way. This might represent a simplistic and instrumental view of reading “as a means to an end” discussed by Weller (2010, p. 89) or “surface” reading (Roberts & Roberts, 2008).

City Drawings Series [London] (Prendergast, 1997) can be found at http://www.quodlibetica.com/wordpress/wp-content/files_flutter/1285879161CDLondon.jpg

The simplicity of walking a clear and unobstructed line contrasts with Kathy Prendergast’s complex image, a hand-drawn map of a city with obliterated and erased lines. Although aspects of this landscape may be familiar (the River Thames in the London city map, for example) it is largely unclear and complicated. There are recognizable elements to which we might be drawn but some obscured pathways and a lack of clarity reminiscent of some of the tutor conceptions of reading identified by Weller (2010).

We argue here that reading for transparent objectives and predictable outcomes may not always be the most productive for promoting powerful reading and writing. The module “Postmodern human geographies: Space, Technology, and Culture” en-

courages students to read and apply the work of key postmodern theorists (e.g., Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard) to their understanding of space, culture and technology. The material is acknowledged to be complex and students are encouraged to understand the contested nature of the relationship between technology, power, and knowledge in contemporary culture via their reading. Students acknowledged that attempting the reading for the course was problematic and had disrupted their understanding of what it meant to read effectively. In the initial sessions, students were introduced to readings from a key text, Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (2002), in order to enable them to make connections between postmodern theory and human geographies. They were asked to explore what they already knew about space, culture and technology and the relevance of this to human geography. We discussed the uncertainties of the topic and many students found the elusiveness of definitions of postmodernism disconcerting. One of our students commented on their initial experience of reading one of the key texts:

Lee: I hated it [reading], the first couple of weeks—a lot of it was my misconceptions. It wasn't like your straight line oh this is the book, by the time I read this book I'll be able to sit down and write an assignment, it wasn't like that ...

A lot of it was very theoretical—on the whole the texts that you read for some of the modules it's black and white you know there's an end result there's an essay to write there's an assignment to do so I can read and I can copy and paste my way through.

Here Lee identifies a different kind of expectation in relation to his undergraduate reading, recognizing the differences in the type of material he was asked to read and his previous experiences of reading and writing at university. In describing his former experiences of writing he can track a clear and direct line between reading and writing. He describes a certainty in working to an end result that can be clearly defined. However, the reading expectation for “Postmodern Human Geographies” demanded that students work with uncertainty. Although potentially disconcerting for students, we recognize the possibilities of working with readings that might promote this different type of learning experience.

The work of Dennis Atkinson (2011) has been useful in exploring these ideas about uncertainty in the processes of learning and this has helped us to think about how we might encourage students to read and write with uncertainty. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, Atkinson describes real learning as an ontological shift involving the potential of a new state “that-which-is not-yet” (2011, p. 14).

Atkinson says:

If we conceive of learning as a move into a new ontological

state, that is to say where learning opens up new possibilities, new ways of seeing things, new ways of making sense of what is presented to us in our different modes of existence, then this movement involves, “that which is not yet.” Accepting such new states involves accepting new states of existence as learners. This idea would indicate a space of potential.

“Dusty boots line” represents “that-which-is” or that which is predetermined where the potential for real learning is closed down. Prendergast’s map, in this context, represents “that-which-is-not-yet” where uncertainties about the nature of the text can offer “a space of potential.” Uncertainty appears to offer potential for “real” learning but this can also be problematic. In previous iterations of the module there was an implicit expectation that students engage with complex reading but little work with students on the ways that they might do this. There was also no explicit reference made to the role that writing could play in enhancing students’ understanding of the course. There appeared to be a mismatch between a module that embraced an engagement with complex reading yet offered no explicit teaching of strategies to do this effectively. We will now explore the blog as a strategy that offered an opportunity for students to open up a space for reading and writing in order to explore these uncertainties.

THE BLOG

The use of a blog, although new to us as a teaching and learning approach, is not particularly new or novel but part of an increasing range of technological approaches (Churchill, 2009; Will Richardson, 2006). The abbreviated “web-log” offers the potential for connectivity and collaboration via “micro-publishing” (Jeremy Williams & Joanne Jacobs, 2004) with the ability to share ideas and potentially reach a wide audience. This use of technology has strong associations with democracy and accessibility but this is off-set against concerns regarding a flood of low-level trivia. For us, the blog was an accessible platform where students could share their experiences of key texts via short pieces of exploratory writing. We considered these opportunities to write as particularly important since the module was assessed via spoken contributions to seminars and a final oral presentation. We were concerned that there were no formal opportunities for students to develop their thinking via writing about the texts and the blog provided a significant platform for the students to engage with “thinking-writing” (Sally Mitchell et al., 2006). The blog was created as an interpretative space where students could work with uncertainty via “low stakes” exploratory writing (Peter Elbow, 2001). We opted for a “closed blog” only accessible to our group of students and tutors to support this comparatively risk free approach.

Importantly, the blog emphasized visual as well as written contributions, and as tutors we aimed to encourage students to bring something to their emerging understanding of the text. We wanted to use the blog to support the students' understanding by their development of text/image combinations. For example, students were asked to consider the seemingly impossible task of defining postmodernism (Figures 20.1 & 20.2). They were able to draw on architecture, fashion, literature, and film in order to question difficulties of definition and express confusion at their first engagement with their reading. We designed the blog in order to promote a collaborative approach to understanding between students. In addition, tutors modelled their own thought processes via short pieces of writing and uploaded images that would resonate with key readings. Students were able to read each other's ideas and see images that others had connected to their readings. This next section explores the significance of the role that the image can play in deepening our understanding of language and outlines some of the key ideas that informed our practices in this respect.

VIOLENCE AND THE IMAGE

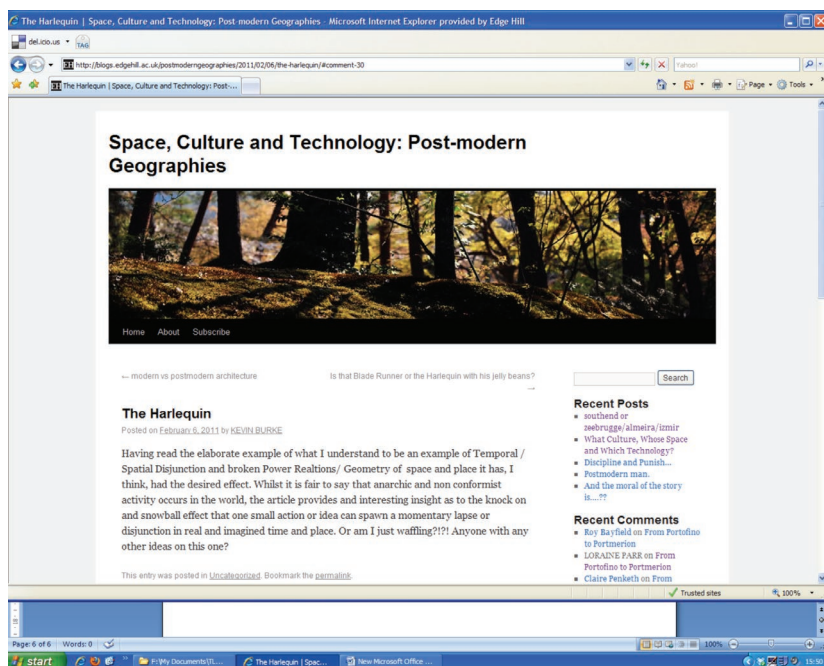


Figure 20.1: Initial Responses (1)—exploratory writing and image finding in response to defining postmodernism.

The essayist tradition as the dominant mode of teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education, prioritizes particular language-based practices. In designing the blog to visibly connect reading and writing, students constructed their own writing in response to the writing of others. Gunther Kress (2011, p. 206) discusses the centrality of language in learning and teaching where it is accepted as the “major route and vehicle for learning and knowing.” He suggests that the routes we take through a word-based text can be “taken care of” by established traditions of interpreting reader or author meaning (Kress, 2003, p. 50). However, he encourages us to think about multimodal experiences, acknowledging that there are other vehicles or modes for learning, which can enrich the ways in which language is experienced. He suggests that the image, creates a reading path which is not “automatically given or readily recoverable.” It is not only “difference” in mode but the “violence of the image” which “punctures” the language-based system (Jean-Luc Nancy, 2005). Nancy’s description of violence as “a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes” reinforces the significant differences between language and image based systems. It is possible that the use of a multimodal approach, combining images and observation within the reading process, could be employed to productively disrupt usual reading and writing practices.



Figure 20.2: Initial Responses (2)—exploratory writing and image finding in response to defining postmodernism.

An emphasis in the module on the relationship between knowledge, power and technology encouraged us to draw on these resources in order to explore the creation of multimodal texts to promote learning. This could be described as the creation of a range of semiotic resources informed by Shirley Brice Heath's description of a web or ecology of learning environments (Brice Heath, 2000). Students engaged with their key reading and were encouraged to respond by introducing images and or video links that resonated with their understanding of their reading for that particular week. The inclusion of images was a deliberate attempt to create alternative spaces for interpretation and exploration, by resisting fixed responses (Elliott Eisner, 2004).

As a shared space, the blog was designed to be both democratic and accessible. Following the taught seminar sessions, students were able to use the blog to discuss various visionary and experiential geographies, uploading relevant postmodern architectural photographs, for example, and links to other literature, whilst making connections with the writing of peers, tutors and a guest lecturer. The blog appeared to be a useful space for creating multimodal texts as interpretive tools for making sense of the key readings. For example, one student uploaded an image from the film *Bladerunner* in response to a piece of science fiction that had been

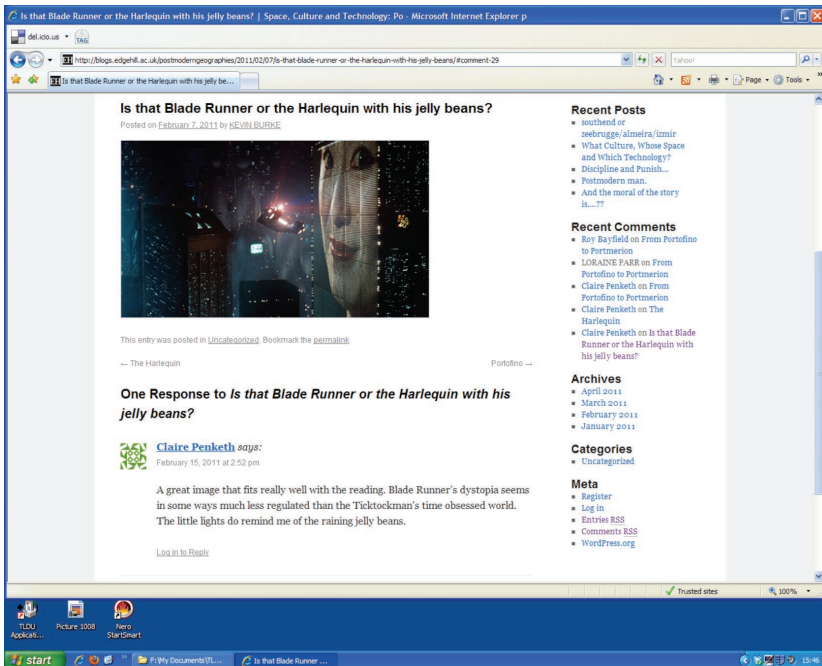


Figure 20.3: A student's response made to "The Ticktockman" in *Dear and Flusty*, 2002.

set as a key reading (the “Ticktockman” shown in Figure 20.3). The posting of this image and the related comments prompted a later discussion between tutor and student via the blog. This took place outside the usual “face to face” teaching time and provided useful material for discussion with other students in the next session. It provided a useful extension of the face-to-face taught sessions and also prompted interaction with the key reading as students responded to their reading by bringing images and text to the blog.

SUMMARY

The use of the blog provided opportunities for regular short bursts of writing of comparatively informal texts with opportunities for student participation. Explicit connections were made between reading and writing from the outset and there appeared to be a greater level of interaction with key readings, evidenced, for example, in increased levels of participation in the seminar sessions. Students were active in their participation and contributed to written and visual resources for the module via the blog. We perceived a disruption to the reading paths experienced by this group in comparison to previous cohorts and we would attribute this to the ecology of reading and writing environments that were co-created via the blog. Importantly, students contributed to the production of these environments, rather than their consumption, and the responsibility for working towards some form of understanding was shared by tutor and student. The blog also created a space for writing to be reintroduced. Although there was no requirement to write for assessment, the blog created a forum where written and visual sources were valued for their contribution to collaborative meaning-making. In working with a new text form, and one that enabled creative combinations of text and image, the blog made us, as tutors, re-think the role and purpose of writing to enhance reading, transforming our own as well as students’ practices in this respect.

There is an expectation that students in their final year of study will be confident in their understanding of academic practice. However, students are working with changing contexts and shifting expectations and there is value in making reading and writing practices visible for students at every point in their learning. In working with the blog as an emergent textual practice we were forced to revisit our own practices, making our own uncertainties visible to our students through image and text.

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