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Blogging as a pedagogy: The award-winning 'PsychLiverpool Blog' and how it is developing a community for meaning making

Sergio A. Silverio & Alexandra Forsythe

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A COMMUNITY FOR MEANING MAKING

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PSYCHLIVERPOOL is a bridge between student communities across universities associated with the city of Liverpool; both on campus and online. This psychology-based virtual platform is a place for students to come together and create meaning beyond their textbooks. PsychLiverpool provides students with a safe platform to acquire information about significant topics and debates, as well as a reliable place to obtain psycholog-

ical tests and other key resources. The PsychLiverpool 'blog-a-zine' has come a long way, winning the University of Liverpool's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Learning and Teaching Prize for 2015/16, and our Editor-in-Chief being commended for the Greatest Contribution to Student Experience in the annual Staff Awards 2016. Here we discuss the key aspects of blogging and its contribution to the student experience.

One student commented:

'I always have a little look at the articles and see what is going on. Keeping abreast of current trends and also what the students are doing. In particular, I noticed the report on the replicability of psychological studies last month, really interesting and made me think long and hard about my PhD and the research that is informing it.'

Underpinning evidence for practice

Educational and psychological literature is rich with reports on the benefits of blogging for student development. These include the ability to communicate complex topics to a general audience (Cox & Hollyhead, 2009; Chun, 2014), enriching language skills (Othman, 2014), self-reflection and self-disclosure (Bolton, 2014), stress management (Wang, et al., 2012), enriching employability (Longridge et al., 2016), team work and leadership (Chun, 2014), and also encouraging citizenship behaviours (Tremayne, 2011). For students, blogging is not bounded by psychosocial problems or cultural issues (Cox & Hollyhead, 2009) and very quickly PsychLiverpool became a powerful peer-to-peer learning tool, encouraging a safe place for both personal and professional reflection and academic freedom (see Silverio, 2015; 2016b respectively).

One piece of anonymous feedback stated:

'I just wanted to write to express how useful and interesting this resource is. It combines a lovely mix of shared experience (conference presentations), relevant and up to the minute 'hot topics' in psychology (responses to 'in the mind'), with helpful careers support and advice. It helps to facilitate debate and respectful curiosity, which, in my mind, is what helps drive psychological thinking. If only there were more resources like this! Thank you.'

Students engaging with PsychLiverpool freely share their experiences (both good

and bad), debate ideas, discuss their dissertations, describe campus experiences, and connect in a mutually supportive environment under the guidance of a diverse and inclusive editorial team.

Employability

PsychLiverpool bloggers grow into the roles of online content producers, and move away from just being consumers of the material available from online platforms. Students learn how to communicate complex topics and nuanced ideologies to lay audiences (Silverio & Stevenson, 2016), whilst expanding their digital literacy and all the time learning about online professionalism, appropriateness whilst working as a team in a safe and monitored environment. It has always been the philosophy of PsychLiverpool for students to have their individual blogs published online and learn from each other, and from the editorial team, about how to usefully apply the blogging experience to enhance their CV and also to be able to defend their online contributions as legitimate pieces of literature in the *quasi* 'open access' arena, mirroring the skills they will undoubtedly have to refine should they go on to further academic projects with publishable outcomes. Our ultimate aim, is that students learn to present themselves in a manner which will encourage employers to offer them a job, or land themselves their dream career (Longridge et al., 2016).

One student fed back to the team:

'I think it is important to raise the profile of the work that I do at university as it shows that I am conscientious, dedicated and determined to achieve my goals. Writing on the blog can help in my future career as it shows I have literacy skills and I am confident in sharing my experiences with others. I think it is also important for other students who may read the blog as they may feel more motivated to achieve their goals and work harder at university in order to gain more achievements on top of having their final degree.'

Impact

This initiative has received modest financial support from the University of Liverpool. It is largely a labour of altruism undertaken in the contributors' and editorial team's time. We are not associated with any formal, nor structured part of normal university study, but rather PsychLiverpool was created as a student community of practice. Evaluation has been largely reflective, iterative and ongoing between the team and the student contributors. If PsychLiverpool were not meaningful to students, they would be disengaged and the blog would cease to exist. Hit rates however, remain abundant (we are now top of Google rankings) and the surprise nomination by the University of Liverpool students is evidence that students find the interface meaningful to them, and useful to the wider psychology student community. Similarly, the upsurge from students from neighbouring universities to become Student Editors in 2016 is strong evidence the wider community is engaging and finding equal value in it. The PsychLiverpool Blog was never designed to capture 'intelligent usage' data. The utility, popularity, and subsequent success has been surprising, and at times overwhelming. The data we record as 'impact' is that of the reaction we have to our blog articles, and the shared inspiration which ripples between the psychology students sparking their interest and encouraging them to contribute. Some memorable moments for the blog have been a poignant commentary of 'surviving' at university as an overseas student (Gudinaviciute, 2015) and the candid reflection on the struggles of being a Student Representative Chair (Cole, 2014) despite her winning an award for being the best student representative at the University of Liverpool!

To access PsychLiverpool go to:
<https://www.psychliverpool.co.uk/>

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