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LARGE CLASSES, PARTICIPATION AND THE POTENTIAL OF EDUCATIONAL BLOGGING

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE
EXPRESS IMPRESS PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 saw the opening up of higher education to black South Africans who had previously been excluded from most of the country's institutions of higher learning. The racial segregation that was central to apartheid was also reflected in the university system, with separate institutions for 'coloured', Indian, black, English-speaking white, and Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans. At school level, the introduction of 'Bantu' education in 1953 had resulted in different curricula for different racial groups (Nkabinde 1997). While the transfer of academic knowledge was central in the education offered to white South Africans, Bantu education was a deliberately inferior system of education, based on the provision of technical skills through rote learning at the expense of critical thinking. One of the key aims of the 1996 policy document of the South African National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), entitled *A Framework for Transformation*, was to shift from an elite to a mass-based higher education system in order to redress some of the injustices that were part of apartheid (Higgs & Van Wyk 2006). The subsequent implementation of this policy shift resulted in a sharp rise in the number of black and female students enrolling at 'historically advantaged institutions' (HAIs) such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). While this university's total number of students comprised 17,884 in 1994, this had increased to 23,752 students in 2005, and reached 27,934 students in 2010 (Cross, Shalem, Backhouse, Adam & Hlengani 2010:54; University of the Witwatersrand 2010:2).

However, the democratisation of higher education was threatened during the 1990s by the increasing corporatisation of universities, which resulted in the implementation of cost recovery policies and an increase in tuition fees (Habib, Morrow & Bentley 2008; Pithouse 2006; Van der Walt, Bolsmann, Johnson & Martin 2003). These measures were implemented within the broader context of the South African government's policy shift from the relatively welfarist Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP),

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which came into effect in 1994 and was aimed at alleviating poverty and expanding access to social services, to the more distinctly neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan, which was introduced in 1996 and resulted in cuts in social spending. These neoliberal policies posed (and continue to pose) a threat to the quality and transformative agenda of higher education in South Africa, and have resulted in the racial inequalities inherited from the apartheid period continuing to affect higher education in the post-apartheid period. Therefore, large classes are not only a result of the so-called 'massification' of higher education in South Africa, but could also be seen as an outcome of cost-cutting measures, as large classes are often favoured by university administrators as a cost-effective way of providing higher education. In 2010, twenty-four per cent of all classes taught at Wits University comprised a hundred students or more, while twelve per cent of all classes comprised more than 200 students.¹

Large classes are by no means an exclusively South African phenomenon, but are a common model of education delivery worldwide, not least because of their cost-effectiveness. They pose a number of challenges to both staff members and students. In the educational literature, large classes are usually credited with a number of weaknesses in terms of their role in student learning, such as minimal opportunities for students to participate and a poor record in promoting critical, higher-order thinking and active learning. Time constraints and the high student-lecturer ratio obviously impose limitations on the number of students that can actually participate in a large class, and participation is further hampered by the fact that the prospect of speaking up in front of a large class can be daunting for students (Smith 1992). For their part, lecturers often find it difficult to keep track of who participates and who does not. Some authors have pointed out that, even when students do participate, "[r]esearch into the effects of large classes demonstrates that students are disadvantaged in terms of higher order learning, because interactions between teachers and students occur at lower cognitive levels" (Moulding 2010:151). Against a background where the general consensus is that "students learn better when their learning is active and involves talking and interacting [...] and when they have more opportunities for feedback" (Smith 1992:337), large classes are perceived to encourage rote/passive/surface learning, rather than critical thinking and deep/active learning.

However, research indicates that students do not always or necessarily consider large classes an impediment to their learning. For example, a study conducted at South Africa's University of the North (known as the University of Limpopo since 2005) concluded that large classes were not perceived as a problem by students (Papo 1999).² Similarly, Long and Coldren found that students felt that the most

¹ These figures were drawn from a presentation by Michael Wesch at the 'Coping with Big Classes Symposium', which was held at Wits University from 31 October to 1 November 2011.

² For more on large classes in South Africa, see also Jansen (1996), Stein and Janks (1996), and Snowball and Sayigh (2007).

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important factor impacting on their learning was not class size, but what the authors describe as “students’ perception of an interpersonal fit between themselves and the instructor” (2006:237). For lecturers, large classes are often unattractive, because they come with significant administrative burdens, depending on the level of institutional support and the availability of assistance from administrative staff or student assistants. Good time management and effective organisation are therefore crucial in education delivery through large classes (Crull & Collins 2004).

While it may be more difficult to encourage participation and interaction and promote active learning in a large class, it is not impossible. A number of strategies have been developed to promote active learning in large classes, such as the use of “in-class mini-investigations, robust multiple-choice exam questions, online quizzes or reviews, and cooperative learning, particularly during exams” (Yuretich 2003:40). More recently, technology has come to feature in a variety of ways as important tools to address some of the challenges facing large classes. First of all, lecturers have begun using ‘personal response systems’ (also known as ‘electronic response systems’, ‘audience response systems’, or by the brand name ‘clickers’) in large classes in an attempt to promote student-teacher interaction. These systems enable students to answer multiple-choice questions anonymously during lectures and allow the lecturer to provide immediate feedback. These tools have been reported as having a positive impact on student performance (Hwang & Wolfe 2010; King 2011; Mayer, Stull, DeLeeuw, Almeroth, Bimber, Chun, Bulger, Campbell, Knight & Zhang 2009; Mollborn & Hoekstra 2010; Morling, McAuliffe, Cohen & DiLorenzo 2008; Sevan & Robinson 2011).

Secondly, the introduction of a blended learning approach has sought to extend the physical classroom by means of an online class environment. Conventionally, this is done through the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE), often designed around a specific course and password-protected. Online learning has been credited with the potential to promote collaborative learning in small groups, an approach that is hard to implement in a large lecture class (Alexander 2006; Wright & Lawson 2005). An alternative approach to online learning is the use of blogs, which may be seen as a more open and flexible online environment that can be easily customised to suit the needs of both lecturers and students, in contrast to VLE software, which, as Nedeva and Nedev (2010:162) argue, “is often cumbersome and expensive – and [...] tends to be structured around courses, timetables, and testing. [...] [It] is an approach that is too often driven by the needs of the institution rather than the individual learner.” Similarly, Smith (2008:40) contends that, “[O]nline course management systems like Blackboard or WebCT, which are by nature restricted by a professor’s design and controls, do not come close to the expansive potential of blogs, which are open to broad audiences and shaped by both writers’ creative impulses and audience response. “As flexible, familiar platforms, blogs lend power to the author, and may especially empower inexperienced writers who often feel uncomfortable with academic discourse, but more at home with internet writing. While VLE environments are becoming increasingly user-friendly and customisable, students tend to associate them with formal learning processes;

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the infrastructure offered in such environments is not always visually appealing or sufficiently inviting for students to get involved. Blogs, on the other hand, have a different association in students' minds and are visually attractive; they also potentially allow students to own the space, as they may be involved in designing the project from scratch, thereby stimulating students to contribute. Furthermore, blogs may be made accessible to the wider public, enabling students to showcase their work to a broader constituency.

This chapter discusses the potential role of blogging in creating a virtual 'community of practice' among students in large classes, thereby complementing the physical classroom. I focus specifically on the experience gained from a magazine-style group blog, *exPress imPress*,³ run by Media Studies students at Wits University. I established this blog in 2010 in collaboration with a group of Honours students, and remained involved as coordinator of the project until the end of 2012, when I relocated to the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Master's student took over as coordinator. In this chapter, I reflect on the process of establishing this blog space, evaluate the main challenges and successes of the project, and explore the potential of blogging to promote and enhance critical thinking, participation and student-lecturer interaction in large classes. In a context characterised by a history of rote learning, I argue that blogging can assist in encouraging students to express themselves and develop their own voice with regard to both academic debates and current affairs topics. The *exPress imPress* case study presented here demonstrates how the flexibility offered by a group blog stimulated debates on issues such as gender, race and identity, all of which are crucial in a context where students often feel alienated from an institutional culture that they do not perceive as relating to their own background.

EDUCATIONAL BLOGGING AND ITS RELEVANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Blogging has been credited with a number of positive impacts on student learning, such as developing students' 'critical voice' (Collins & Kelly 2008; Oravec 2003); promoting critical thinking (Woo & Wang 2009); building research skills and stimulating reflective learning (Aylward 2004); encouraging reflection and self-reflexivity (Andergassen, Behringer, Finlay, Gorra & Moore 2009; Aylward 2004; Bouldin, Holmes & Fortenberry 2006; Hramiak, Boulton & Irwin 2009; Rabikowska 2008; West, Wright, Gabbitas & Graham 2006); helping to build an academic identity (Kirkup 2010); and breaking down hierarchies in the student-lecturer relationship (Chuang 2008; Liew 2010; Long 2010). Given these positive attributes, blogging has great potential to address some of the limitations of large classes identified in the introduction. A blog (or 'weblog') is an online journal that chronologically lists articles or thoughts, and frequently provides hyperlinks to other sources, such as videos and news or other articles. Unlike websites, which can often be quite static, blogs are generally frequently updated and can easily be amended and customised by users without any knowledge

³ Please see <http://www.expressimpress.org> for further details (last accessed 9 June 2013).

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of web design software. Many blogs use a highly personal, narrative writing style. In this regard, they could be seen as an online version of the diary genre. A key distinguishing feature of blogs is that they are interactive as their set-up enables readers to leave comments on particular posts.

Various types of blogs have been used to promote student learning in higher education. Firstly, blogs may be set up around specific courses in order to offer updates, share links and resources, and enable students to comment on particular aspects of the course content and/or organisation. These 'course blogs' resemble a more formal VLE set-up, such as provided through Blackboard or WebCT. However, two key differences are that a blog may be customised much more easily to suit the needs of a specific course, and there is more flexibility regarding access. While a VLE set-up can generally only be accessed by students enrolled in a particular course, a blog may be either public or private (password-protected). Secondly, small group blogs, aligned with tutorial groups, may be set up. This type of blog allows students to discuss course content, ask questions, and provide each other with moral support. Students may be given writing assignments that can be posted on the blog, or may be asked to comment on each others' posts on a weekly basis, while tutors can offer online feedback on both assignments and student comments. This kind of blog is particularly appropriate for large classes as it overcomes some of the limitations of large classes by enabling students to engage in dialogue and participate in smaller units. Thirdly, one may create individual student blogs. This kind of blog has been used successfully to help students reflect on their learning and to encourage them to share their thoughts (see, for example, Gleaves, Walker and Grey 2007). It is comparable to a diary or journal, inasmuch as it allows students to offer a personal account of their experience of being enrolled in a particular course. Individual student blogs may be password-protected, so that students share their thoughts solely with their lecturers or may be open to fellow students and/or the general public to allow for peer review and feedback. These blogs give lecturers the opportunity to obtain a better understanding of how students process course material and content, enabling them to adjust their courses accordingly.

The *exPress imPress* blog that is discussed in this chapter deviates from the three types described above in that it was set up as a creative, experimental space not formally linked to a course curriculum. It should therefore rather be considered as an informal learning space where students can freely express themselves and learn to develop an independent voice. A number of factors motivated me to launch this project when I first took up a position as Media Studies lecturer at Wits in 2010. First of all, I felt the need to get to know the students better in order to be able to offer them material and courses that would interest and engage them. Many of the courses I taught involved large numbers of students (around 200-300 students at first- and second-year level), and I felt somewhat frustrated addressing them without knowing who they were. Understanding students' needs, capabilities and educational backgrounds, and engaging as much as possible with their lifeworlds, is of crucial importance if one wants

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to be an effective teacher. A project involving a small number of students seemed to me an appropriate way of getting to know some of them better, so that I could adjust my lectures to match their interests.

Secondly, shortly after starting my new job, I was struck by the negative discourse on students prevalent among faculty members. While there are clearly many challenges in the transition from secondary school to university in South Africa – not least the fact that students are often insufficiently prepared for higher education – I was uncomfortable with the tendency to criticise students for these shortcomings. Instead, I saw it as a systemic problem resulting from both the historical injustices arising from apartheid and inadequate educational policies. I strongly believed that a student blog could contribute towards showcasing the diverse talents that exist among students and potentially help stimulate a more positive discourse on students among faculty members.

Thirdly, it seemed to me that blogging would be a particularly relevant tool for promoting learning among Media Studies students. The blog as medium is of course directly related to disciplinary debates in the field about the role of new media in challenging old media. Its particular features enable bloggers to engage in ‘rapid response writing’, that is, it allows them to quickly comment on current affairs and the coverage of particular issues on radio and television and in the press. I considered that the opportunity to develop their skills in both the technical aspects of blogging and the more writing-related ones would be especially useful for students aspiring to a career in media. However, using blogs to develop critical thinking and stimulate debate could of course be equally useful in other disciplines. For example, law students could use blogging to discuss particular court cases; students in architecture or engineering could use the platform to showcase their work in a creative manner; and education students could experiment with blogging during their internships at secondary and potentially even primary schools.

Finally, I felt that blogging could help students learn to develop their own voice in writing. I was particularly struck by a comment a student made in an Honours class I taught in 2010. While offering collective feedback on an essay assignment, I told students that I was really interested in hearing their own views as emerging Media Studies scholars and encouraged them to be bolder in future essays. One student responded by saying that they had been told they could only have their own voice at PhD level. I was disturbed by this comment as my own teaching philosophy very much revolves around the desire to build critical thinkers in an interactive, participatory classroom characterised by a relatively non-hierarchical relation between students and lecturers. In my teaching, I draw much inspiration from Etienne Wenger’s (1998) concept of a ‘community of practice’. What I hope to achieve in the classroom is to build confident and critical thinkers who are able to formulate clear positions on media theory and empirical case studies in South Africa or elsewhere. I approach my students as emerging scholars defined by a shared interest in the field of media and cultural studies, rather than as a group of passive recipients of knowledge. Chong’s

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distinction between distributed learning and traditional knowledge transmission is useful in this regard:

The paradigmatic difference between teaching/learning premised on distributed cognition (that is, “distributive learning”), and the traditional, knowledge transmission model lies in the learning culture. Unlike the latter where learning is very much determined for the students, who are presumed to lack the knowledge (or skills) and hence expected to passively and often solitarily take in what is taught, with distributive learning, the class becomes a community of active learners.

(Chong 2008:184)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the traditional knowledge transmission model was a crucial part of the system of Bantu education prevalent during the apartheid period. This model was based on rote learning (reproducing knowledge through repetition) rather than critical thinking (analysing and positioning), or surface learning rather than deep learning (Biggs 1999). Whereas the rote learning approach tends to penalise or correct students who fail to memorise concepts taught in class, the deep learning perspective adopts a more positive approach to students and tends to take into account “both what students know and the contexts within which the conventions of academic discourse have developed, [...] putting greater emphasis on processes and delivery systems and less on results and delivered products” (Smith 2008:56). Students are thus not treated as empty vessels but as budding academics with important views and opinions (about media in South Africa, in the case of my Media Studies classes), who need support in terms of formulating these ideas in an analytical, academic way. While significant transformations have taken place in both secondary and higher education in South Africa, the traces of rote learning have not entirely disappeared as was evidenced by the comment made by one of my Hons students referred to earlier in this chapter. Therefore, blogging seemed to me a particularly appropriate way to enable students to develop their own voice in an informal, creative and flexible environment and transform themselves from “passive consumers of knowledge to active co-producers; from being an outsider to being part of a larger learning community – and one that is networked beyond the classroom” (Chong 2008:191).

THE CASE OF EXPRESS IMPRESS

It was against this background that I set up *exPress imPress* in September 2010 in collaboration with a group of five Honours students who expressed interest in being involved in the project as members of an editorial team. Participation in the blog was entirely voluntary and no credits could be gained from being part of it. Through a participatory process and a series of meetings, the students discussed the remit of the blog. The name was invented by one of the Honours students. We decided to use a self-managed, public (not password-protected) WordPress.org blog, hosted outside the Wits server, and opted for an attractive, magazine-style template purchased from a separate provider. The students decided that they were interested in blogging about four

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main themes: current affairs, personal student experiences on campus, entertainment and lifestyle, and research (even if the latter was due to some gentle persuasion on my part!). And while I did encourage students to blog about media issues in particular, this condition was not strictly imposed as I preferred the blog to be a creative space and did not want to stifle student creativity. The five Honours students did not only write pieces for the blog but also commissioned articles from fellow Media Studies students. As indicated above, from the start of the project, all published articles were accessible to the public at large, thereby promoting debate and discussion among both students and members of the public. The project was opened up to Media Studies students of all levels in January 2011. In all, almost thirty students (first-, second-, third-year and Honours level) expressed interest in participating in the project as members of the editorial team, which meant that they would contribute self-authored articles, as well as commission pieces from fellow students.

Apart from offering a platform for writing and discussion, the blog included two additional areas: a student profile area and a links and resources area. In the profiles area, I encouraged students to present both their personal and academic identities, which, to a certain extent, forced students to think of themselves as emerging scholars with particular research interests in the field of media and cultural studies. It also gave them the opportunity to showcase themselves to a wider public, including potential future employers. The links and resources area included material that is frequently also shared through a VLE platform, such as Blackboard or WebCT, but with the difference that our blog was fully accessible to the general public. The links and resources area also contained hyperlinks to the websites of South African media institutions; job search websites; media and cultural studies academic journal websites; dissertations of Media Studies alumni; publications of Wits Media Studies faculty members; and a bibliography of books and journal articles on media in South Africa. In order to alert students and others to new posts, we set up a mailing list (subscribers would receive an e-mail notification on new articles posted) and a Facebook group (where a link was posted whenever a new article appeared on the blog). Students with Google e-mail accounts were also given access to Google Analytics to enable them to keep track of traffic to the blog and give them a sense of achievement.

After the project was opened to a larger group of Media Studies students early in 2011, I also presented a workshop (using a self-authored, customised manual) to the new editorial team on the technical aspects of blogging and the use of WordPress software. Each student was given a password to log on to the dashboard of the blog in order to submit articles for review. I proofread each article, provided comments using the comment and track change function in Microsoft Word, and subsequently published the article on the blog. As project coordinator, I reserved the right to publish articles in order to retain some control over what was published and what was not published on the blog (considering that it was a public website and somewhat representative of the Department of Media Studies, despite the disclaimer dissociating all content from the official views of Wits University), as well as the right to coordinate the spread

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of articles throughout the week. I also moderated comments in order to avoid spam comments appearing on the site. On a few occasions, offensive comments targeting one particular student were not published, as they defeated the aim of the blog, which was all about debating and promoting critical thinking.

Between September 2010 and January 2012, 156 articles were posted and over 600 comments were left by students and members of the general public. The blog attracted over 61,000 page views by over 11,000 visitors from 149 countries.⁴ The student blog team held regular meetings chaired by one of the students to discuss forthcoming articles as well as planned events. The sections that follow seek to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the project in terms of contributing to student participation and promoting critical, higher order thinking and active learning.

Student participation in the classroom and blog: negotiating freedom and disciplinary boundaries

With the exception of programmes ran entirely via distance learning or e-learning, educational blogs can complement a seminar or physical classroom environment but generally do not seek to replace it. This section seeks to compare student participation in the blogging project to student participation in the physical classroom. It offers a comparative analysis of debates and expectations about learning in the physical classroom and the blog.

One of the positive outcomes of the blog is that it succeeded in creating a 'community of practice', where students across different levels debated a range of issues: from the lingering effects of race on South African society to the poor working conditions of cleaners on campus; from the meaning of youth culture to the need for ethical consumption; and from the role of women in the South African liberation struggle to a range of international current affairs issues, including such diverse topics as various strikes in South Africa, the deaths of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 and Muammar Gaddafi in November 2011, and the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in April 2011. Some articles and comments attempted to integrate media and cultural studies concepts in their analysis as illustrated by the following comment⁵ on an article discussing the plight of journalists reporting from within dangerous conflict zones:

This article actually coincides with what we have been discussing in class. The implications that media ownership and the political landscape of a country have on the media.

(Comment made on *exPress imPress*, 12 April 2011)

⁴ Statistics provided by Google Analytics, <http://www.google.com/analytics> (last accessed on 22 January 2012).

⁵ All extracts from *exPress imPress* quoted in this chapter are reproduced more or less verbatim; small editorial corrections were made so as to improve readability.

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However, while many articles and comments demonstrated critical engagement with current affairs topics, with students frequently reflecting on the way in which issues were covered in the South African or international media, the majority of blog posts did not necessarily engage with key concepts in media and cultural studies discussed in the physical classroom, or deal exclusively with media issues. This may be partly explained by the fact that students at Wits University enrol for a general Bachelor's degree in the Humanities, rather than a degree strictly in Media Studies. Hence, they are exposed to a variety of disciplines, including political science, sociology, international relations, psychology, anthropology and psychology. This interdisciplinary background was reflected in their blogging, which at one time or another addressed key issues in all of these disciplines.

On the other hand, I also made the conscious decision that *exPress imPress* was to be primarily an experimental and open space, where students could literally 'express' themselves and potentially 'impress' others. Perhaps echoing anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko's motto 'I write what I like', I decided not to intervene in students' choice of topics, as I wanted to see what they were interested in writing about. I also felt that limited interference might encourage more students to voice their positions in particular debates. Given that the blog was designed to offer students an informal learning platform, I considered that essays and other class assignments provided students plenty of opportunities to learn in a formal way how to apply certain key concepts in media and cultural studies to empirical examples. Thus, in my view, the blog should be a space where students could indeed learn but in a more playful and less didactic way. However, while this may have promoted student creativity, it almost certainly did so at the expense of creating a disciplinary community of practice, that is, a space where students engaged with knowledge gained in their Media Studies lectures.

For their part, the students did not necessarily embrace this open, flexible approach. During one of our editorial meetings, some of them remarked on the challenges of not being given deadlines for articles and the need to demonstrate self-discipline in writing articles for the blog. In what could be seen as an interesting 'subversion' of the freedom offered by the blog, it was even suggested that the team should impose deadlines on students to ensure that they would write and post articles. Furthermore, when I asked students how writing for the blog compared to formal essay writing, they indicated that they often found it difficult to start an article and channel all their ideas into a coherent piece; and one of them observed, "In essay assignments, we are given a question, but now we have to come up with our own question."

While such remarks reveal that not all students were comfortable with the degree of flexibility offered by the blogging platform, they also suggest that the open and creative approach adopted in this particular project offers undergraduate students a 'taster' of what awaits them at postgraduate level, when they are no longer provided with ready-made essay questions but will have to formulate their own research problems, develop their own research interests and identity, and position themselves in a critical debate.

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These are essential skills required of researchers; skills that could be encouraged in modest ways at much lower levels. While doing research is challenging, it also comes with a certain degree of freedom, for example, the liberty to choose one's field of interest. Blogging can help students develop such an interest at an early stage and cultivate enthusiasm for research. In fact, developing students' academic identity and voice was a key aim of the profiles section of the *exPress imPress* project. To this end, students were invited to share their research interests there, while postgraduate students were also interviewed about their experiences in doing research and encouraged to contribute articles on their attendance of conferences. This helped to create more awareness among students from all levels about the often abstract nature of research and – one may hope – encouraged some to consider postgraduate studies.

Student motivations and hesitations to participate in classroom and blog debates

There is evidence that the blog managed to extend student debate beyond the physical classroom. While it was not necessarily formally linked to any Media Studies courses, there were a number of occasions when students seemed to feel more comfortable participating in a virtual discussion as compared to debating issues in the physical classroom. This section examines the possible motivations and hesitations of students to participate in either space, and how participation may relate to particular types of student-lecturer relationships.

Interestingly, the online space of the blog encouraged some students to reflect on their own participation in the physical classroom or, as in the case below participation in a public seminar on African female sexuality that was announced on the blog. After attending the seminar, a female student posted the following comment about her experience of attending the seminar:

I attended this talk only because I wanted to honour the Faculty of Humanities, as they have faithfully been sending me e-vites to these talks for so long, and I thought it would just be the right thing to do to go and see what all the fuss was about.

At first, when I saw that I was one of the very few actual students attending, I was a little apprehensive, and planned to skip out quietly if the academics started getting too 'hardcore' for me. I mean, what opinions could I possibly share with my Sociology I lecturers?

I was interested in hearing what exactly would be said about the topic at hand, though, so I stayed on [...]. It felt good to be sitting in the room with people who were so eager to share their opinions and gain some new knowledge around a topic which at first seems so controversial, but which Dr Bakare-Yusuf proved to be an important question of African women's identities and the expression of the many facets thereof.

(Comment posted on *exPress imPress*, 24 February 2011)

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While the student was intimidated by the audience and most likely did not venture to contribute during the seminar itself, she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts about it on the blog. This is not to suggest that the online experience could replace the physical space of the seminar (the student clearly expresses enjoyment at being physically present at the seminar), but the example does indicate that a blog can complement a seminar or classroom environment, an observation that is corroborated by Collins and Kelly (2008). Reflecting on their experience of using a blog in a primary school in London, the authors found that blogging gave pupils who normally sit quietly in class an opportunity to express themselves:

The blog offered a different communicative space, one removed from the face-to-face pressures of the classroom, in which normally reticent voices could be safely located.

(Collins & Kelly 2008:291)

The student comment quoted above also offers an interesting insight into the way students perceive different spaces on campus. For many, Wits University represents an intimidating place marked by sharp inequalities in terms of race, class and social capital. In the classroom, one will find students flashing their iPads and BlackBerry smartphones sitting side by side with students who are unable to afford three meals a day. Moreover, as concluded in a 2010 report, students often perceive a significant gap between the institutional culture represented by their lecturers and their own social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cross *et al* 2010). Language also remains highly politicised: in at least one of my classes, a group of students began to exact the use of a particular kind of (middle-class South African) English, mocking those not possessing the same standard of English. In such an environment, blogging allows students to participate in different ways than those associated with the conventional, physical classroom space.

However, students reported at meetings that publishing an article on the blog obviously also required a significant amount of courage (as compared to submitting an essay, which is likely to be read only by a lecturer and perhaps an examiner), particularly given the fact that *exPress imPress* was a public platform accessible to anyone. In their research about why students decide to blog or not, Andergassen *et al* (2009) found that a concern about the lack of privacy was a key reason for students not to blog. Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup & Conole, on the other hand, found that the desire to have an audience and receive comments from other students is the main reason why students contribute to a blog, as “they throw up other angles, other points you may have missed and give alternative views” (2009:35).

Students can learn a tremendous amount from engaging in a public forum. Moreover, exposing their ideas to a wider audience can build their confidence, while the interactive nature of blogging could potentially transform students into more confident, critical thinkers. As Smith (2008:35) explains:

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[T]he space of the blog, which is familiar to many students, opens up possibilities for risk-taking and interactivity that teach important lessons about the role of error and audience response in the composing process. As students rethink and revise their initial ideas, working off one another's comments, they develop more authority as critics with valued opinions and voice and let go of some of their fear about making mistakes that can prevent inexperienced writers from discovering and communicating their best arguments.

Smith similarly highlights the way in which commenting on posts boosts students' confidence. As she notes, "[s]mall gestures of support from their peers [give] students confidence and [push] them to reconsider their very familiar subject matter in a new light" (*ibid*:50).

Judging from the level of activity on *exPress imPress* between September 2010 and January 2012, the blog certainly managed to engage students in critical debates. While some comments (not infrequently posted by students' relatives and friends) merely praised authors, others demonstrated critical engagement with articles and offered balanced and constructive feedback to the author, and many openly disagreed and provided alternative points of view. However, despite the large mailing list and Facebook group alerting members to new blog posts, only a relatively small group of active blog participants regularly commented on posts. Yet, providing a platform where students could freely air their views by either posting opinionated articles or commenting on their peers' contributions helped to create or 'model' a culture of critical intellectual debate that students used to rote learning models could slowly adjust to. The mailing list effectively ensured that Media Studies students from all levels were exposed to a different learning culture, even if most of them remained silently observers rather than active participants.

Interestingly, some of the regular bloggers and commenters subsequently also proved to be the most vocal in class (in this case a large second-year class which comprised nearly 200 students), which suggests that offline and online participation are strongly correlated. However, since students' involvement in the blog often preceded their participation in my classes, I was not able to establish whether this was due to students feeling more comfortable with contributing to debates in the physical classroom because they had come to know their lecturer better, or whether they were simply naturally more at ease with speaking up. Despite the correlation between online and offline contributors, there were also a number of bloggers and commenters whose names I did not recall from class debates, suggesting that they at least felt more comfortable contributing online than offline. Participation in online debates may well help students along on a journey to become more outspoken in the classroom, and at the same time allow lecturers to identify talented students in a large class based on more than just their verbal contributions in class.

Given that I acted as moderator and project coordinator, and provided individual feedback on each article submitted for publication on the blog, students who contributed

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articles were able to establish a closer relationship with me as their lecturer, which also helped build their confidence. This ‘working relationship’ stands in sharp contrast to the general experience of students in large classes, who often perceive the lecturer as a distant and disinterested figure and thus often find the transition from a large class to a small one – where lecturers are “suddenly so up close” (to borrow the words of a fresh Honours student in a class of twenty during an orientation meeting in February 2012) – intimidating. In fact, for some, the transition from large classes (between 150 and 380 students in my Media Studies courses) at BA level to a small-group environment at Honours level appears to be more dramatic than the shift from high school to university, as being confronted with an up close and personal lecturer means that they are no longer able to hide in ‘a silent majority’ and are more likely to be called upon to actively participate and contribute in class. Blogging can help improve this situation in two ways: by fostering a relationship between student and lecturer (and students and their peers), it not only has the potential to render a large classroom environment less impersonal and anonymous, but also builds students’ confidence in their own critical thinking abilities, making them more likely to physically speak up when the opportunity does present itself in class, regardless of its size. In this way, blogging may be a means to a bigger end. This is not to suggest that blogging can remedy all of the various challenges associated with large classrooms, nor that it can replace the much more focused and personal attention that lecturers pay to students in small classroom settings.

As mentioned before, considering the large class size, the number of regular, active bloggers and commenters participating in the blog was relatively small. This may be ascribed to a number of factors. Firstly, there is of course the issue of confidence barriers. The *exPress imPress* blog was a public, non-password protected space, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, which arguably made it an even more intimidating space than the physical classroom, where students are exposed only to their peers and lecturer. The main motivation for making it a public space was to easily link up Media Studies students at all levels, including alumni. While this could probably also have been achieved on a VLE platform, the blog had the additional purpose of offering students a space where they could showcase their work to friends, relatives and potential employers, something that is not possible with VLEs which are private, password-protected spaces only open to enrolled students. This brings us to a second reason for the relatively limited active participation in the blog: concerns about privacy. The decision to make it a public blog may have discouraged some students from participating, as they may have felt uneasy about contributing to such an open space. Indeed, such concerns are not without foundation: employers are increasingly carrying out Google searches on potential candidates before recruiting them, so that publicly stating their views (especially on controversial issues) in an open forum might conceivably result in negative consequences for some students. For example, at least one student requested that an article in which she had expressed criticism of the government be removed from the site, as she feared that it might affect her chances

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of being employed as a diplomat. Of course, both of these aspects can be easily addressed by simply limiting access and turning a blog into a password-protected environment.

A third inhibiting factor was the fact that there was limited incentive for students to participate. While the project offered them a valuable opportunity to gain exposure within the wider Media Studies student community, and participation in it would make a useful addition to their CVs, it was also voluntary so no direct credits were to be gained by actively participating as bloggers or commenters – always an important consideration for students.

The fourth issue was Internet access which remains a challenge at Wits. While a reasonable number of computers are available to students, computer labs remain oversubscribed. This has implications for lecturers' ability to include e-learning as a compulsory element of the curriculum as doing so may ultimately reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities among students. Related to this were the varying levels of computer literacy among students, which means that while some students may find it easy to participate in a blog, many would probably find it extremely challenging.

The ascent of social media may also have been a limiting factor. Although blogging arguably never took off in South Africa in quite the same way that it did in countries such as Kenya and Iran, it appears that social media have more recently overtaken blogging as a means of sharing information and opinions. Facebook and Twitter, in particular, are extremely popular among South African students, possibly because they can be easily and conveniently accessed via the increasing number of smartphones owned by students, whereas posting an article on a blog via a smartphone can be challenging. On the other hand, carrying critical debate via social media has its own constraints, the key one being the limit on the number of characters that one may use in a single posting.

Defining collective identity: the revolution might be blogged!

As reported earlier in this chapter, students often had difficulty coming to terms with the flexibility of the blog as compared to the formal essay writing they carried out as part of their courses. Students not only negotiated the disciplinary boundaries of debates on the blog and their expectations around formal and informal learning but also actively debated the purpose and appropriate conventions of *exPress imPress*. This section examines how debates about both the form and content of articles on the blog helped to forge a collective identity.

In the first year of the blog, a fierce debate erupted on *exPress imPress* in response to an article about the Cameroonian origins of the official 2010 FIFA World Cup song 'Waka Waka'. The article, which was posted by an Honours student, drew quite heavily from Wikipedia, and the subsequent debate revolved primarily around the issue of appropriate writing styles on the blog, as is evident from the following extracts:

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[Student A]:

This is quite opinionated. I'm all for the 'express' part of this blog, but the 'impress' part is important and seems to be lacking. To 'impress' is to use our skills we've learned in media studies by applying it to these kinds of situations. This should be a step up from citizen journalism in being able to explain the media processes in stories like this ... What about the media questions? How are messages received by audiences? How are they constructed? The use of celebrity in gaining mass audience attention? A comparison between the videos, the lyrics? Codes? Signs? Semiotics? Political economy? Hegemony? Content analysis?

(*exPress imPress*, 10 November 2010)

[Student B]:

The articles on *exPress imPress*, and particularly this one, are not academic pieces. If you want to read an academic piece, a journal or a book is your destination. For anyone who took the time to read about the blog, it is "... a magazine blog". Criticisms and attacks are neither the aim of the contributors nor of this editorial team ...

(*exPress imPress*, 10 November 2010)

[Student C]:

Hey [Student A]

exPress imPress is not entirely academic. If [Student B] wanted to do a textual analysis or reception study of the song, there is a section titled 'research' where we can use the media studies tool. If you check the category of this post it is lifestyle and entertainment, so the media studies aspect of it is quite irrelevant. The post is just a commentary and an opinion. No need to be entirely academic. We tend to use less academic jargon and tools in order to accommodate those outside the field. Your suggestions are noted though. Howz about you contribute something using textual analysis and other media/cultural studies tools; will post it under research.

(*exPress imPress*, 24 November 2010)

The 'Waka Waka' debate unfolded only two months after the establishment of the blog, yet, this dialogue demonstrates that, right from the start, students were critically engaging with each other's writing, while at the same time defining the character, identity and boundaries of the blog. Already, they were showing clear awareness of the different writing styles used on the platform and encouraging each other to apply concepts learned in class to particular empirical examples (in this case the 'Waka Waka' song).

By the second year of the blog's existence, *exPress imPress* had obtained a clearer identity among students. When a colleague asked students in a third-year Alternative Media class to give an example of an alternative media project, several students referred to *exPress imPress* in their answers – the blog had come to be seen as

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providing an alternative to South African mainstream media. This is also apparent from the following message posted by a member of the 2010 blogging team to the incoming 2011 team:

A pleasant and warm welcome to you all. *exPress imPress* to me was, in fact is, a great platform for growth, to experience new things, a home away from home, and an opportunity to make new acquaintances, to network, to debunk myths and stereotypes, to challenge and revolutionise the often capitalistic and hierarchical media ... Ladies and gentleman, the list goes on and on. I sure hope that it will mean the same and perhaps even more to you. It is just not any magazine style blog; it is one of a kind ... this you will discover as you progress. Trust me, you are going to enjoy every moment of it. Always strive to express yourselves and always do so with pride, because you will never know who you are impressing. Enjoy!

(Comment on *exPress imPress*, 10 March 2011)

Students even began referring to the platform as “a revolutionary blog”, as in the following comment left by a student on the first anniversary of the project:

wow. it was on this day that a revolutionary blog was born. it's amazing how quickly tym flies.*tearsofjoy*

(Comment on *exPress imPress* Facebook page, 21 September 2011)

The collective identity of the project was not only defined by a certain imagined (leftist, progressive) political orientation but on several occasions was also expressed through what could be seen as a cultural positioning as ‘Africans’. South Africa’s place on the continent remains highly contested. The country’s isolation during apartheid was to some extent addressed by post-apartheid governments, for example, Thabo Mbeki’s ‘African renaissance’, which saw him and his government actively engaging with the African continent and clearly defining South Africa as part of Africa. However, many South Africans continue to have an ambivalent attitude towards the rest of the continent, and would not necessarily define themselves as Africans. Similar ideological contestations may be witnessed in higher education, with some strongly advocating for Africanisation of the curriculum while others express concern about the possible ‘limits to academic freedom’ that curricular transformation might bring. As compared to the more radical transformation agenda of some institutions (for example, the University of South Africa (UNISA)), one could argue that Wits has taken a fairly moderate route (potentially reflecting the institution’s ‘liberal’ political history), with some discussion about Africanisation of the curriculum but no radical attempts at transformation.

University students are very much caught in the centre of this debate, with some defining themselves proudly as Africans, while others attempt to assimilate into what arguably remains a highly Eurocentric education system. Pattman (2007:483) argues that South Africa’s education system tends to entrench dual identities, “[w]ith the affluent, middle-class, formerly white educational institutions [...] assimilating (educated) black African and Indian students, while much poorer educational establishments are entrenched

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as black or Indian.” Within this context, the blog clearly began to serve as a platform where students negotiated these different identities. In several articles and comments, students boldly identified themselves as Africans. For example, in an article on African media coverage of the Arab Spring, the student author sharply criticised Africa’s media for simply mirroring Western media:

For how long are we Africans going to remain gullible? Are we ever going to achieve the state of African solutions to African problems? I think not. For as long as we do not have truly African media that bring up questions such as these, we will not. For as long as the media in Africa perpetuate the same two-faced duplicity of Western agendas, we will not. For as long as in our media we copy and paste Western headlines on African stories, we will not.

(Extract from an article posted on *exPress imPress*, 19 April 2011)

In a similar vein, another student commented as follows on a critical perspective on the killing of Muammar Gaddafi:

Great piece and it is very true emotionally. We become controlled by our oppressors when we become just like them and think that murder is the answer. Human rights belong to all and the wheels of justice should be allowed to work for every person, tyrant, murderer, whatever the case each should go to trial. As Africans we should not debase ourselves like the West who create violence and war first and then try to make peace later. We should fight for our rights and the rights of all fellow Africans.

(Comment on *exPress imPress*, 26 October 2011)

Of course, the crucial importance of identity on university campuses in South Africa relates not only to the question of the country’s place on the continent but also to the continuing relevance of race. Several authors writing on higher education in South Africa have pointed to the importance of race in both student relations (Pattman 2007; Toni & Olivier 2004; Walker 2005) and relations among university staff members (Gwele 2002; Weber & Vandeyar 2004), as in this example from Walker:

What is clear is that all of these students’ lives are marked, whether acknowledged or not, by race, by racialised subjectivities, and by a past of racial separateness. Older categories of African, White and Coloured are recognisable and recognised. Yet, it is also straightforward to read off from the life stories of these young people simplistic connections between biography and structures of race. Attempts to fix or essentialise student identities are then made problematic.

(Walker 2005:53)

Similarly, in his research on student identities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pattman found that race came up as a key theme:

Although I had asked my students to research student identities in general, all the various student groups they identified were racialised, and it seemed almost impossible for my students to research and write about student identities at UKZN without addressing ‘race’.

(Pattman 2007:477)

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Race also emerged as a key theme in articles on the blog. Several articles reflected on the role of race in South African society, an issue which does not always feature very prominently on campus, as Walker (2005:50) concludes in her research on student identities: “race seemed to be nowhere and everywhere”. Few courses on race exist as part of the formal curriculum; and among staff members, explicit debates on race are rare, given the sensitive – if not taboo – nature of the issue less than two decades after the formal ending of apartheid. However, students often seem to find it a lot easier to discuss race, and in one of my classes we discussed it very openly in several class debates. One particularly memorable moment occurred during a discussion of the work of the Jamaican-British scholar Stuart Hall, often referred to as the founder of the field of cultural studies. In my first lecture teaching this particular Honours class, I asked students to read an old but seminal article published in 1982 by Stuart Hall entitled *The rediscovery of ‘ideology’: return of the repressed in media studies*. The following week, when I asked students their views on the text, they responded unanimously that they had found the article impossible to read. In the meantime, one of the students expressed interest in publishing a weekly cartoon on the blog, and decided to draw the following cartoon about that moment in class:

FIGURE 8.1 Cartoon published on *exPress imPress* on 11 March 2011

Several weeks later, I referred to Stuart Hall’s work again and showed a video in which he talks about the social construction of race. As I started the video, the class

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expressed universal surprise at the fact that Hall is black. Not only had it escaped them that Hall is originally from Jamaica, but their socialisation into an institutional culture where knowledge producers are almost always perceived to be white had led them to assume that Hall must be white too. The cartoon-drawing student subsequently drew another cartoon capturing this remarkable moment in class:

FIGURE 8.2 Cartoon published on *exPress imPress* on 29 March 2011

Interestingly, the students' new insight into Hall's identity completely changed their engagement with his work. They were able to identify with the author's ideas much more, as evidenced by the following comment made by a student in response to the second cartoon:

Hahahaha ... kwa kwaaa kwaaaa ... LOLEST!!!! Yes!!!! I have to say though that after the video we watched this week of Hall, I am giving him the benefit of the doubt ... I think he is a much better speaker than he is a writer. When I read him I thought he lived in the Shakespearean era and then when I listened to him I thought he can't be the same guy I was reading ... He is so clear in his speech and his examples are very practical ... Dr Willems, can we please get him to Wits before he retires? I'm loving him and the whole field of Cultural Studies ... just don't ask me to read his texts though ... hahaha thanx [Student X] ... this made my day!

(Comment on *exPress imPress*, 24 March 2011)

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As this last example demonstrates, the blog was able to extend debates beyond the physical classroom into a virtual space. But arguably more importantly, it enabled students to put issues that they felt were crucial to debate on the agenda, and these discussions sometimes fed back into the physical classroom. For example, an article that mocked the persistence of racial stereotypes in South Africa came up for further discussion in class, as did a piece on the impact of music videos on young people's identities.

The ability of the blog to stimulate student-led learning was further demonstrated in an article prompted by an initiative of a member of the 2012 blog team to screen the controversial Kony 2012 campaign video in class, a video that seeks to raise awareness about child soldiers in Uganda. Subsequent to the screening, a second-year student contributed an article critically reflecting on the reception of the video by students, linking it in a very perceptive way to theoretical approaches discussed in class, such as media effects and reception analysis.

As the above examples show, the blog provided a space where students negotiated the relation between knowledge production and their own identities and backgrounds. On some occasions, it enabled students to vent their frustration at the alienation they experienced in the classroom; on other occasions, discussions initiated on or by the blog spilled over into the physical classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has shown, blogs may offer an effective way of addressing some of the limitations of teaching large classes. This chapter has provided some evidence that blogs can promote and enhance critical thinking, student participation, and student-lecturer interaction. *exPress imPress* has contributed towards building a culture of intellectual debate in the Department of Media Studies at Wits and has stimulated student creativity and interest in the field of media and cultural studies. In an environment where there is often a negative discourse on students, the project provided students with a sense of community and collective identity. Blogging is a flexible genre that is not guided by academic conventions, and therefore leans itself well to the sharing of brief, initial ideas, which may then be developed into more 'academic' arguments. Moreover, it can assist students in developing their own voice with regard to conceptual arguments or empirical case studies. This is particularly important in a context where academic writing is beginning to shift as a result of the Web 2.0 environment, and in a milieu that bears traces of a system of education based on rote learning. One of the challenges that remain is motivating students to engage more closely with concepts learned in class. Due to the voluntary character of *exPress imPress* and its relative detachment from the formal curriculum, students were not sufficiently encouraged to integrate what they learned in class with what they wrote on the blog. The potential limitations to participation resulting from the public nature of the blog may be overcome by setting up a password-protected blog. While blogging

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demonstrates great potential to complement the physical classroom environment of large classes, it is crucial that we not celebrate technology as a 'cheap and quick fix'; instead, we should consider blogging as a means towards reaching the ultimate aim of producing confident and critical thinkers.