

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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“Writing a draft paper” (Reflection 24.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Pat Thomson.

“What makes a good critical friend?” (Reflection 26.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Rebecca J. Hogue.

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CHAPTER 21

ENGAGING IN SCHOLARLY CONVERSATIONS ONLINE

Social Media

[To engage with social media is] to experiment with form rather than content, to find ways to make an academic concept accessible to a broader public. (Perry 2015)

Ten years ago, we would not have dreamed of quoting from a blog. Look at how quickly academic publishing norms have changed. Last year, Alison and Kelly co-authored an editorial with two students that directly cited tweets (Cook-Sather et al. 2018). And here we are now, opening a chapter with quote from David Perry's blog. Indeed, our reference list for this book reveals the many blogs that have shaped our thinking. That is because social media is a part of all our lives and offers opportunities for those of us writing about learning and teaching to reach a wide and varied audience, as Perry suggests above. While using social media in learning and teaching is common practice (Rowell 2019), we do not enter here into the debate about whether it is a genre in and of itself, or simply a platform to publish and share our writing. For the purpose of this book, we name it as a writing genre that has a specific purpose distinct from other genres. The key distinction is the capacity to self-publish in a way that is quick and easy and that bypasses traditional peer review.

In this chapter, we discuss what social media is, with a specific focus on blogs, Twitter, and listservs; which genres lend themselves

to being shared via social media; and why social media creates new opportunities for learning and teaching scholars.

What Is Social Media and Why Use It?

Media refers to mass communication. If we are a bit older, we might associate mass media with broadcast news, either on TV or in print—in the analog days. Today, mass media has gone digital, the internet has given us social media, and many print journals have moved online. In Reflection 28.2, Sally Brown recalls when peer review used to happen through the mail.

For Pat Thomson (2016b, 101), a prolific user of digital media, “Social media is an umbrella term used to describe websites and web-based platforms and applications that allow users to make, curate and share content, and to communicate with each other.” Now, through social media, we can share our work online directly without having to go through a peer-review process—we can self-publish. While you would not publish a full research article as a blog post on your personal website, you can share pre-published versions via ResearchGate or other academic social networking sites, as more and more scholars are doing (Meishar-Tal and Pieterse 2017) (for more on promoting your work [see chapter 29](#)). Yet, self-publishing that bypasses peer-review processes can raise concerns because a level of credibility and trust come from publishing in known and established learning and teaching outlets. Thus, deciding what to self-publish and what to send through peer review is important.

Social media offers a means of contributing to and creating conversations about learning and teaching as public scholarship (Chick 2019), as captured by David Pace in Reflection 20.1. Yet, we all know colleagues who feel that “social media has made scholars impatient, vicious, and dull” (Fraser 2019). Cal Newport (2016) makes a strong case that the constant distraction of social media and email diminishes the capacity for the deep work required of scholars. We do not need to be distracted by social media, however, if we use it purposefully. For Patrick Iber (2016), Twitter enables connection with other academics and people outside of the academy, particularly

journalists and editors. Lee Skallerup Bessette (2016) claims that Twitter changed her life for the better but also cautions that it “does very little to protect those who are the most vulnerable, amplifies the most extreme and hateful elements of our society, and keep[s] trying to monetize in ways that take away the core features that brought us all to the platform to begin with.” Using social media to contribute to ongoing learning and teaching conversations means being deliberate and thoughtful about what you say and how you want to interact.

David Perry (2015) contends that blogging enables you to reach a broader audience and, in particular, a non-academic audience. Inger Mewburn and Pat Thomson (2013, 1105) found that “academic blogging may constitute a community of practice in which a hybrid public/private academic operates in a ‘gift economy’” by contributing to scholarly conversations and peer learning. Tweeting and blogging about your published research *might* affect the impact of your research, as discussed in [chapter 29](#).

Regardless of reach or impact, blogging offers an opportunity to write in a style different from that of traditional academic journal and book writing. Blogging lends itself to sharing learning and teaching stories ([see chapter 20](#)). Blogging, according to the Textbook and Academic Authors Association website, can be a means of improving writing:

Whether it’s getting into a writing routine or just refining your writing, blogging can help you. Make sure to allow for comments (even if you moderate them before hand) on your blog so that you can receive feedback that will help improve your writing. If your writing contains too much jargon, your audience will tell you. If you’re trying to find your voice, blogging can help you form one. (Textbook and Academic Authors Association 2015)

Pat Thomson (2016c) argues that blogging makes you a better academic writer for seven reasons. She asserts that blogging:

- can help you to establish writing as a routine
- allows you to experiment with your writing “voice”

- helps you to get to the point
- points you to your reader
- requires you to be concise
- allows you to experiment with forms of writing, and
- helps you to become a more confident writer.

Furthermore, blogging enables rapid communication of teaching practices and analyses. The time frame to publish can be minutes (if it is your website or LinkedIn account), compared to publishing a practical case study in a journal, which may take 6–15 months.

Not only can you share and promote your published work through blogs, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, you can also include imagery, color, and audio in ways that are less common in traditional academic publishing (although this is shifting with video abstracts, for example). You can potentially reach new audiences as well as extend your existing academic communities, and you can engage with your existing scholarly communities in new or different ways, making your work easily accessible. And you can do it yourself, bypassing publishers and slow peer-review processes.

Although there are multiple benefits to engaging in social media, you might not want to, and that is 100% okay. Alison does not use social media and only recently wrote an invited blog post; Kelly uses both for professional purposes; and Mick is starting to use both, but prefers to share and read via academic listservs more than Twitter (see Our Perspectives 21.1). A listserv distributes messages to subscribers on an electronic mailing list. Mick, for example, finds the **Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) listserv** particularly valuable. Farhad Manjoo (2010) calls listservs “one of the most important things on the Internet.” There are many other listservs for learning and teaching in higher education (Corrigan 2010). John Lea, a well-published author and a frequent contributor to the SEDA listserv, reflects on his experience in Reflection 21.1.

Reflection 21.1**The experience of contributing to listserv discussions**

I'm not a fan of Twitter. I find its word limit restrictive, but I appreciate how useful it is in spreading information. I'm more a fan of the opinion piece, particularly those with a punchy polemic. But it takes time to polish that kind of narrative. For me, the listserv sits nicely between them, acting as a source of information but also as a forum for discussion. The unwritten rule is that an unpolished narrative is enough—perhaps containing some wit, perhaps with a sharp provocative comment. Yes, you can provide information, particularly in answer to a direct question, but this form of social media surely comes into its own when it provokes and compels others to join in a debate. It takes confidence to come in on a debate which is well underway, but, for me, it comes closest to the way that debate takes place in face-to-face situations, except that the audience can be much wider. And you can always come back to reflect on (or correct) what you said before. And I love it when somebody contacts me “off piste” to say that they are listening and lurking, or just to say hello!

John Lea is the research director for the Scholarship Project, UK.

For many people, particularly for writers who have grown up on social media, there is a “fear of missing out” or FOMO. Social media allows us to keep up with discussions of learning and teaching, to self-author, and to include voices of those who might not be as readily included in traditional publishing formats. However, if you are new to social media, the plethora of possibilities can feel overwhelming. We recommend starting with one platform, perhaps one that a trusted colleague suggests and is able to support you in learning.

Our Perspectives 21.1

What is your experience with and attitude toward social media?

Mick: Though I've used [LinkedIn](#) for some time to keep up to date with contacts, I'm a relative newcomer to most social media. On Twitter ([@MickHealey3](#)) I'm more a lurker than a contributor, as I find the 280 characters too limiting for what I normally like to say. I also read quite a lot of blogs (particularly in preparation for writing this book), but I've only written a handful of posts myself. I'm on several higher education listservs, which help keep me informed about learning and teaching events, new publications, and topical issues. I also join in listserv conversations from time to time and send details of events, publications, and resources that I think may be of interest to the community.

Alison: While I respond to invitations from others on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#), I do not actively use those social media platforms or Twitter because I already spend too much time with technology and I am introverted and easily overwhelmed by input. While some people might experience “fear of missing out” (FOMO), I experience the “joy of missing out” (JOMO). This choice to avoid social media has not appeared to affect my writing profile (although perhaps my social media-savvy friends who post and tweet about my work make up for my absence!). In my relative technological solitude, I am a prolific writer with an extensive record of scholarship and citation, which suggests that you can be an active participant in scholarly conversations without having your own social media presence.

Kelly: I use some social media professionally, which started as a requirement to “disseminate” as part of a funded grant application. I have come to appreciate social media but still actually don't like it much. I am active on Twitter ([@kellymatthewsuq](#)) and occasionally share posts through [LinkedIn](#). By sharing what I am reading via Twitter, I am able to support other scholars. By curating an

institutional blog and monthly “Teaching Community Update,” I can shape conversations around learning and teaching that offer nuance as a counterbalance to an increased focus (at my university) on “marketing-driven” stories that don’t always capture the full story of learning and teaching.

Your perspective: In what ways, if any, are you currently using social media to share your learning and teaching work, and how might you further leverage it?

What Genres Lend Themselves to Publishing through Blogs

Through social media, Kelly publishes—as words or videos—examples of practice, reflections, reviews of other published works, stories, conversations between herself and others, and guidance on everyday work practices, such as **managing emails** (Matthews 2019c) and **saying no** (Matthews 2019d). These publications speak to the range of genres suited to social media and the ways genres can be blurred through social media. By using a **poll feature with real-time results**, she is also enabling exchange, which is evident in a **blog post on email use** where over seventy colleagues from her university shared their approaches (or lack thereof) to managing their inbox (Matthews 2019c). In a literal sense, real-time interaction is possible through curated blogs and Twitter posts. Yet, these creations and contributions require time to curate and monitor in ways that a published piece in a journal or book does not. Particularly in social media with public comments enabled, “trolling” or hurtful comments that attack personally (usually anonymously or via fake accounts) are possible in ways that are not an option in a journal publication, for example. The capacity for back-and-forth online communication is possible with social media, but if you engage in such exchanges you will want to consider the implications and potentially avoid the comments option at the end of a blog post.

There are many examples of excellent blogs, both written and in video format, from learning and teaching scholars or organizations;

to find some, view Feedspot’s “[Top 100 Higher Education Blogs and Websites to Follow in 2020](#)” and *Geeky Pedagogy*’s list of blogs and podcasts. With the help of Kelly’s Twitter network, we have curated a list of blogs, which is available in the online resources: “[Curated List of Blogs and Multimedia Resources about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.](#)”

How Do You Go about Publishing a Blog and Sharing via Twitter?

If you are new to Twitter, consider these recommendations from Lee Skallerup Bessette (2017) for scholars wanting to get started on Twitter:

- Tweet links to what you are reading
- Share links to your own work
- Invite questions or comments on a topic you are pondering
- Promote the work of other scholars
- Offer insights from conferences or talks (welcomed by those unable to attend)
- Follow journals, societies, organizations, and scholars to stay up to date
- Use the “Like” function often, retweet, and follow others to grow your followers

There are also many ongoing learning and teaching in higher education conversations on Twitter that you can join. These can be found by searching hashtags, including: [#LTHEchat](#); [#EdChatEU](#); [#ecrchat](#); [#AcademicChatter](#); [#studentsaspartners](#); [#studentsuccess](#) and many more. If you are considering starting a regular blog—becoming an academic blogger—Tom Crick and Alan Winfield (2013) have ten suggestions that might be of interest and use to you:

1. Write about yourself and your life.
2. Find your blogging voice.
3. Be clear what your blog is for.
4. Blog as yourself.

5. Think about how controversial you want to be.
6. Remember: A blogpost is a publication.
7. Let your university know about your blog.
8. Think about how often you want to blog.
9. Use social media to promote your posts.
10. Blog because you want to.

We do not want to give the impression that sending a tweet or publishing a blog means writing freely with little attention to detail. For Mick, drafting a single tweet can take up to thirty minutes because he wants to link to the best websites, ensure that he tags the right people, and then communicates concisely with limited words. Kelly can send a tweet in a matter of minutes, but a blog post still takes anywhere from one to ten hours. Since the content of your blog post could be any of the genres we discuss elsewhere in [part 4](#), we suggest you consider the writing genre first and determine your word limit. Then follow the writing process outlined in the chapter on that writing genre, while also considering the blog platform you will use.

Social media encompasses a variety of writing genres, and articulating your argument matters. A strong tweet is an argument communicated concisely and is limited in length by the platform. If you are tweeting to share your published work, go beyond just naming the title with a link; quote the argument in a way that clearly captures your contribution to the scholarly community. Opening a blog post with the argument invites readers to read with purpose and follow your narrative flow. Writing for social media has to move beyond the descriptive to assert a position or argument.

In the Guiding Questions below we share suggestions to get you started on a blog post on learning and teaching. A version with just the questions is [available in the online resources](#).

Guiding Questions for Planning a Learning and Teaching Blog Post*

- 1. What do you want to share about learning and teaching via a blog post?**
 - Focus on a single key message or purpose in a blog post. As for any genre, your thesis or argument needs to be clear to you and clearly communicated to readers.
 - Blog posts tend to be short and sharp. If you are publishing through an organizational blog (e.g., *The Conversation*, a university blog), a word limit will typically be set for you. If you are self-publishing, set yourself a word limit.
- 2. Why is a blog the ideal platform to share your views about learning and teaching?**
 - Consider where you are in your career and the institutional metrics that count at your university. Perhaps publishing an opinion piece in a journal first is more helpful to your aspirations. Then write a shorter blog post to promote the published piece to bring more people to your work.
 - If you are seeking the quick interaction with readers that social media enables, what forms of interaction do you want (e.g., comments, quick polls)?
 - Are you writing about a time-sensitive topic where quick publication matters?
- 3. What writing genre (or combination of genres) is best suited to communicate what you intend?**
 - Are you sharing a reflective essay, an opinion, or a story? Then refer to chapters 18, 19 or 20 respectively to draft the piece.
 - Are you seeking to promote a published work through a blog post? If so, focus on the key outcome and write about why others should read your published work.
 - Have you tried a pedagogical practice that you want to tell others about? Consider framing it as a case study (chapter 15) or a story (chapter 20).

4. What blog platform will you use?

- There are many blog platforms. Will you use an institutional or professional learning and teaching society platform, or will you self-publish using your own blog site? Self-publishing means regularly posting and doing all the formatting yourself, but there are many easy options, as Patrick Dunleavy (2016) outlines.
- Do the features of differing blog platforms matter for how you want to communicate? For example, if you want to embed a short video animation or imagery, then you will want a platform that easily enables that (a quick web search on blogging platforms will reveal options).
- Are you able to code, or do you need a platform that allows easy formatting?

5. Who will read the contribution and offer feedback to you?

Whether you are self-publishing or publishing through an organization, someone needs to read your draft and offer critical friend feedback (see chapter 26).

6. When will you share it and how will you promote it?

- There is research on the best time of day (not midnight) and days of the week (Monday to Thursday) to make your blog public (Terras 2012).
- Will you use Twitter or Facebook to promote your blog post?
- If you are blogging through an organization, how will they promote your post? (See chapter 29.)

**As with other sets of guidance questions in this book, select those questions that are relevant to your context, add others as appropriate, and decide the order in which you will address them to communicate effectively with your audience.*

Over to You

Social media enables self-publication immediately to the web via blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and the like. You can curate what you want to share, when, and how. In doing so, you can write in one genre or embrace a mix of writing genres in a way that traditional publications might restrict or exclude. Publishing via social media still requires

the hard work of writing and editing, but it frees you from the constraints of academic peer review and enables connection that many scholars (though not all) revel in. In what ways might social media allow you to experiment with form rather than just content, as Perry (2015) suggests in our opening quote, and make an academic concept accessible to a broader public? Further questions to address about engaging in scholarly conversations on social media include:

- What social media platforms are you signed up for or would you be interested in joining?
- How active would you like to be on social media?
- How can you leverage social media to expand your learning and teaching scholarship?