



EDUBLOG

Don't waste student research!

Thousands of student papers and theses are written each year. They are checked, graded and archived. The research work by students can be useful not only for the learning process but also for society. Think, for instance, about a short explanatory text on a case or a table comparing past and present laws. Blogging offers an opportunity to give 'further life' and usefulness for the research work of students in their papers or theses. This could enhance the incentives of students in their research and writing and could benefit education programmes, individual academic courses, teachers and the society. Yet, several attention points need to be considered and discussed by teachers and students before research can be published online and made available worldwide. With these ideas in mind, this manual discusses a number of points concerning opportunities, possibilities and risks interconnected with using blogging in education of university graduates to aid teachers who consider using blogging in their courses.

WHAT IS A BLOG (POST) AND WHAT ARE BLOGS USED FOR?

A weblog – hereinafter a ‘blog’ – is a webpage containing a collection of entries, often referred to as posts. Blogs are increasingly used in professional settings. Many companies have a blog, on which they can communicate directly to interested people, for instance, to share updates about products and services, apologize for mistakes, or otherwise share news. Journalists are known to blog as well. For instance, Dutch journalist Joris Luyendijk maintained a blog on banking at [The Guardian](#). A recently [new](#) phenomenon is ‘live blogging’, which is a blog that provides rolling updates (text, pictures, etc.) on a particular ongoing event.

Some law firms or legal professionals maintain blogs on developments in the specific domains that they are active in (e.g. to announce a new law or discuss a recent court case). Others offer more topical posts (e.g. “Am I liable for my employee’s blog posts?”). Both types of posts demonstrate the firm’s expertise and can be seen as a form of advertisement for the firm’s services. There was also one [Dutch judge](#) who blogged about the cases she heard and about other issues related to her job as a judge. Some Dutch regulators have published blogs as well. For instance, Dutch privacy regulator *Autoriteit Persoonsgegevens* (AP) has published [a blog](#) to inform citizens about how Microsoft collected personal data using its Windows operating system. Likewise, the Dutch competition regulator, the *Autoriteit Consument en Markt* (ACM), has published blogs to share opinions and information with the public.

Academics are known to blog as well, either on their own initiative, or as a part of a broader team. Academic blogs can have a multitude of different functions, including: to inform the general public, to inform professional practice, to inform other academics about research, and to demonstrate expertise to those who may be interested in commissioning research.

BENEFITS



ENHANCING STUDENT RESEARCH SKILLS AND MOTIVATION

Blogging facilitates the development of a number of skills. In light of the [classification of Bloom](#), blogging demands higher order skills from students: application, analysis, evaluation and/or creation. Blogging is a complex authentic task, which requires active processing of subject material and competences and gives the learner the possibility to build on previous knowledge and add to that. Because students are motivated by solving real life problems, by doing rather than listening, authentic learning activities have the potential to improve student learning and outcome. In this light, it is a good additional tool to courses where students have been asked to write papers or a (master) thesis. Blogging allows research results from academic papers to be translated to and used by the public. The possibility of having an online publication could enhance student motivation to deliver higher quality work (research and final papers). Having an online publication can enrich their CV's and enable them to showcase their talents.



TEACHING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Students can also develop their technical skills through blogging. Installing and/or working with a blog itself can be a way to learn more about internet publishing. In our information societies, a general understanding of how the internet works and what it can be used for seems indispensable. Students can also pick up skills like coding, and image and video editing. Developing these skills can be valuable for, for instance, the legal professionals of the future who will be working with 'legal tech', artificial intelligence tools and smart contracts.



PUBLICITY

A student-written blog (if put online) can also enhance the online visibility of the programme or the university as a whole and enable potentially interested new students to get a glimpse of what studying in these programmes entails. The blog itself can also enhance the teacher's online presence and visibility. It may cause the teacher's profile to show up in search results related to the blog's topic and establish or strengthen his or her research reputation as an expert in the field. The teacher can use blog posts written by students as reading material in future courses and build up knowledge from one year to another. For that, the teacher should ensure the good quality research and blog post by students.

PREREQUISITES



A SMALL GROUP OF (MASTER/ADVANCED) STUDENTS

The question whether or not to use blogging in a course and how (including as part of an assessment criteria) must be considered in connection with the learning objectives of the course. Blogging requires that the student has some prior experience in writing and research. It should therefore only be used with a group of *master or advanced* (e.g. legal research master) students. Moreover, writing a publishable blog post requires one or multiple feedback rounds and involvement of the teacher, who is responsible for work that students do within the context of a course. It is therefore advisable to blog with a small group of students only.



TEACHER EXPERTISE ON BLOG TOPIC AND TECHNOLOGY

Teacher's expertise on the topic of the blog is important when assessing whether the post is actually publishable. Being an expert on the topic also limits the time and effort that is needed in guiding students in their writing.

Some technical experience of the teacher with online technologies is a plus, as students may have questions about how and on which platform to publish. If there is a tech-savvy student in the group, that student can be given a leading role with respect to the technical aspects of blogging. In any case, it is advisable at least to provide students with clear (technical) instructions on blog posting and the possibilities of platforms for blogs, especially if a blog page creation forms part of the assessment criteria.



CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS

Students should be given clear instructions. Take time to discuss with students the purposes of blogging and the requirements that they should meet. *What kind of 'language' (narrative) do I have to use? Who would be the targeted readership? Where shall I publish my blog?* Students should be given instructions on:

- The substantive topic of the assignment (e.g. translating the main findings of a paper/thesis into a blog post for the general/specialized public or writing a case-note);
- 'Procedural' requirements: number of words (1000 words is an average limit), assessment criteria (see below), benefits (see above), and responsibilities for the content and risks (see below);
- Technical issues related to the construction of a blog page if necessary.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

In assessing student writing, teachers usually consider aspects such as structure, argumentation, gathering of information, style and layout, etc. These criteria are relevant for blog-writing as well. However, to write an engaging and publishable blog post, some of these criteria require further clarification.



STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENTATION

A blog post usually is shorter than the average academic paper (app. 1000 words). The structure of a blog post should therefore be more linear and contain only a few subheadings. The point that the student wants to make, must be made in the span of only a few paragraphs. Digital publishing offers greater possibilities to visually support the argumentation. Pictures, graphs, schemes, video, GIFs, and other visual aids, significantly influence people's readiness to engage with the blog post, and should also be valued.



PLAIN LANGUAGE

The accessibility of the language of a blog post to the wider audience is an important element to assess. The skill set that is required for writing a good blog post may differ depending on the public that one is writing for. A blog post can be a high-level academic analysis that is geared to other scholars in the field. Blogs can also be used to inform (a subset) of the general public. In particular, this latter aspect requires blog authors to take a step back and think about their public and to translate complex concepts and academic research examples to a language that anyone would be able to understand.



CREATIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT

To write a blog post that internet users may want to read, students must write creatively and in the way that engages readers. Use of visual aids is important here. Also, other aspects are valued, such as a catchy title, an enticing introductory paragraph, and a link to current events.

Tips for drafting an engaging blog post (for your students)

- **Title:** A blog post should start with a short and catchy title (e.g., less than 60 characters) as people often decide based on the title whether they want to keep reading the blog post.
- **First paragraph:** A blog post should start with a good and appealing sentence, which introduces what your blog is all about. The first paragraph has a decisive influence on the willingness to read.
- **Sub-titles:** In order to enhance the readability of your blog post, you should also create a few sub-titles. They should be concise and properly guide the reader through the blog post.
- **Reference:** A blog post should not contain footnotes, but hyperlinks or a reference list at the end of your blog post.
- **Visual effects:** A suitable picture capturing the theme of your blog post, tables, schemes and graphs can enhance the readability and value of a blog post.

MAYBE NOT



BLOG ON SENSITIVE TOPICS

Bloggning on sensitive topics is not advisable. Teachers may consider prescribing writing a more explanatory blog post, rather than a critical/judgmental post. Students must be made aware that the blogs that they write may be published and will be available for the whole world to see for a long time. The effects of blog posts cannot always be anticipated on.



PUBLISH ONLINE OR NOT?

Not all students may want their blog to be posted on the open internet though. A protocol should be developed that enables students e.g. to not publish their blog posts (or publish under a pseudonym), or to remove these posts later in time. If a blog is removed, it might still be available in Google's cache or on websites like archive.org, which make periodic archival copies of (parts of) the web.

A paper, thesis or blog post is the result of a learning process. The teacher and the student need to be aware of this when deciding on whether the result is publishable online or not. Teachers are advised to check the content of a blog post carefully. The question of who is responsible for the content of the blog post should be discussed before anything is posted: is it the student, the teacher, or the editorial board? If you let students refer to you and your role as their teacher, then make sure you are fully comfortable with the content of the blog post. Responsibility for the posts should be clearly communicated to readers as well. A disclaimer can be included that clarifies that the blog posts are the work of students and that the posts may not be a reliable source. Enabling a 'comment section' is not advisable as it opens the door to inappropriate comments from the public (and spam), and incorrect replies from students.



COPY WITHOUT APPROVAL

Students may use materials that are copyright-protected. That generally means that copying text and images from other sources requires the permission of the copyright owner. Quoting from other works generally is allowed but does require that the source is mentioned. To prevent copyright infringements, students can search for pictures and other materials that are covered by a so-called 'Creative Commons' license. Such materials can generally be used freely as long as the author is credited. Google enables to search for Creative Commons licensed pictures via: [Google Image Search](#). A system like Urkund can be used to check whether certain materials already appear online elsewhere. Requiring students to refer to their sources (also for pictures) can also help to prevent potential infringements.

MORE INFORMATION

In addition to this introductory manual on the opportunities and attention points in relation to using blogging (as assessment tool) in education, we offer an introduction video clip, a technical instruction on how to create a blog page and a guideline for teachers as to which learning objectives blogging could enhance. All the materials are stored at: <https://educate-it-rebo.sites.uu.nl/projecten/bloggen-als-toetsvorm>.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Blogging has been increasingly used in education, so does blogging have been increasingly investigated by scholars with the aim to figure out to what extent it facilitates student learning and how it can be used in education. Positive impacts on learning and advantages of using it have been widely reported ([Kuo et al. 2017](#), [Andergassen et al. 2003](#)). Such impacts and advantages have so far been largely seen and studied from a perspective, roughly put, 'blogging as education tool'. It can enhance information sharing, knowledge building, idea exchange and collaboration among students and between students and teachers, to name but a few ([Kerawalla 2009](#), [Kuo 2017](#), [Andergassen et al. 2003](#)).

With this project, we would like to add to the existing practice and research on blogging by bringing the focus to use blogging as an 'assessment tool', which can be used in education, especially at the University (research) master level and in the courses where writing of a paper or thesis is involved. Prescribing blogging as an additional (assessment) criterion or requirement could enhance developing additional skills, open up students' research findings to the society and enhance visibility of (master) programmes, individual courses and teachers. Blogging offers a number of advantages for students, teachers, universities and the society, though some risks need to be considered and mitigated, too.

This project has been executed in the 2017-2018 academic year thanks to the financial support of the Utrecht Stimuleringsfondsonderwijs. The team included Ms. Hanne ten Berge (Educational Advise & Training, FSS, UU), Dr. Machiko Kanetake (Assistant Professor of Public International Law, REBO, UU), Mr. Stefan Kulk (Assistant Professor of Law, Innovation and Technology, REBO, UU), Dr. Otto Spijkers (Assistant Professor of Public International Law, REBO, UU) and Ms. Nanette Verhulst (Educate-it). Dr. Miroslava Scholten (Associate Professor of EU law, REBO, UU) led the project and you can contact her with your questions about it: m.scholten@uu.nl.

All in all, the purpose of the project and this manual has been to provide an overview of using blogging for educational purposes. The manual does not claim to be an exhaustive source of the issues that it discusses, including potential risks that could arise when using (online) blogging in education. Rather, it is a starting point, and as such it raises issues that teachers should consider when using blogging as an educational tool.