

**STUDY ABROAD AND DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE
THROUGH BLOGS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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Biographical Notes

Giles Barrett is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK. He is the author of a number of published papers on ethnic minority business issues and is a recipient of an Emerald Literati Prize. He has a wealth of experience in evaluation research on issues as varied as befriending schemes for older people to counteract isolation and loneliness, through to cannabis use and cultivation, and black and minority ethnic communities satisfaction with policing. He has also lead a team in a major EU funded project around 'Reducing Reoffending' with local and international partners. Giles is a member of the Centre for the Study of Crime, Criminalisation and Social Exclusion (CCSE) at LJMU. Currently he is leading a team of researchers on a national evaluation of The Royal British Legion (TRBL) Breaks Services. In addition to being the nation's custodian of remembrance, TRBL supports the UK Armed Forces community through welfare services, companionship and representation. The project will provide an assessment of TRBL's holiday services, and how they contributes to overall well-being.

Anne Hayes is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK. Her research interests are socially engaged arts practice within the criminal justice system, drama-based participatory methodology, miscarriages of justice, women in the criminal justice system, and the sexual exploitation of girls in gangs. She has worked extensively with young people on the fringes of the criminal justice system and her most recent research in this area was for the Royal Court Trust, evaluating drama-based crime prevention for young people's affective engagement with performance. Anne is a member of the Artivism Research Group within the Centre for the Study of Crime, Criminalisation and Social Exclusion (CCSE). Her most recent research involved an 'alignment model', where criminologists worked alongside an artist, to work with men on licence to co-produce a board game to

represent the men's experience within the probation sector. This work will form part of a larger bid to explore the potential of 'serious games' within the criminal justice system, for both practitioners and offenders. Anne is also Patron of United Against Injustice, a non-profit making organization run by volunteers who have suffered a miscarriage of justice.

Jim Hollinshead is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK. His research interests are in 'Green Criminology' (the analysis of environmental harms from a criminological perspective; the application of criminological thought to environmental issues) and the social control and the policing of environmental protest. He also researches in landscape ecology, and is the author of a number of published papers on the ecology and biodiversity of pond landscapes in the UK and Northern Europe.

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Abstract

Blogs are seen as an important strand of social networking and a significant way of disseminating research ideas and sharing knowledge and perceptions with new audiences via digital platforms. The use of blogs within off-campus activities, such as study abroad field visits, have the potential to enhance students' social media skills and confidence about becoming active researchers in public through communicating field research experiences and reflections on what they see, learn, hear and do. Via a semi-structured questionnaire administered to UK based university students participating in a recent Criminology program field visit to Slovenia in Europe, we assess the extent to which blogging facilitates student reflective practice on their lived experiences of undertaking research in culturally unfamiliar environments. We show that blogging combined with the whole experience of international fieldwork has a 'learning gain' for students exemplified through a willingness to engage in reflective practice, self-awareness and transferable skills.

Introduction

The promotion and development of reflective practice among students is not new to higher education. A wide range of higher education disciplines consider reflective thinking to be critical for student learning, and strategies aimed at developing and evaluating this core skill continue to evolve, with a substantial literature having developed. The use of blogs, individually or collaboratively, as a vehicle for developing reflective learning has become a common feature of higher education courses and often of assessment practice, with online blogs promoted as a particularly effective and productive reflective tool in recent years (Krishnaiyer, Raja Mushahar & Ahmad, 2012; Yang 2009). Blogs, or Weblogs, originated in the 1990s, emerging from the explosion of peer-to-peer technologies that saw the development of online forums, personal web pages and email lists. They have since become a pervasive feature of online life. Blog use in higher education has developed rapidly, and a broad pedagogic literature has also developed. Studies are available, for example, from nurse clinical education (Ladyshevsky & Gardner 2008), occupational therapy (Wild, McCormack, Warren, Buckley & Cahill, 2013), teacher education (McGarr & Moody 2010), biomedical sciences (Ajeneye 2005), accounting (Ballantine & McCourt Larres, 2007), language teaching (Lee 2012), library and information sciences (Chawinga 2017), public relations (Wolf 2010), agriculture (Douthit, Schaake, Hay McCammant, Grieger & Bormann, 2015), and business education (Jackling, Natoli, Siddique & Sciulli, 2015; Wang, Li, Yeh, Cheng, Chiou, Tang & Tang, 2016).

This paper presents findings from a study of students' attitudes and approaches to reflective practice. The key research questions include: (1) how, and to what extent, does blogging facilitate meaningful reflection on one's own research realities and lived experiences; and, (2) what other learning gains might there be for students? To investigate these questions, we examine how a cohort of UK based Criminology students working in small research teams

write about and reflect upon their international fieldwork experiences in Slovenia. We also analyze whether blogs provide an appropriate vehicle to document and reflect upon their lived experiences nurtured during fieldwork. Moreover, does democratizing the research process (Novak 2010) via blogging and asking students to become the providers, consumers and mentors of research practice knowledge promote greater research confidence among students?

Reflection through blogs

The term and concept of reflective practice can be seen to represent in fact a range of often quite disparate notions, reflecting the range of disciplines and traditions within which it has developed (McGarr & Moody 2010). Reflection in and of itself need not necessarily be a critical process, or a constructive one. To use Bolton and Delderfield's (2018: 14) phrase; "...reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confession". Muncy (2014), citing also Pavlovich (2007), argues that reflective learning is more about a student's intellectual approach to the introduction of new material than any conclusions the student may draw from "learning" something. The ability to think deeply about content, and make connections from it to existing knowledge and life experiences, is the key to reflective learning.

A primary function of blogs since their inception has been to provide individuals with a means of such personal reflection on the world (Oravec 2003). A key educational function of blogs is to provide a learning resource that has the potential to develop deep learning, especially by encouraging students to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted (Oravec 2002), providing opportunities for students to reflect on their learning experiences. Thoughtful reflection on new information promotes the making of connections between disparate ideas, allows learners to consider the resonance of abstract concepts with the concrete world, and construct new knowledge (Foster 2015). Reflective learning exercises proceed from the starting point of new knowledge being constructed by individual learners,

through students building their own cognitive structures and mental models. Cameron (2012) and Ferdig & Trammell (2004), argue that blogging addresses very effectively this discursive nature of knowledge construction because interactive feedback is integral to the blogging process, producing engagement that is immediate, and promoting interactive discursive learning experiences conducive to higher order thinking and knowledge construction.

Munday (2010), and Clark & Hardham (2010) showed that structured blogging helps students to take responsibility for reflecting on and documenting processes in their own learning, and to improve learning outcomes, particularly when engaged in group and collaborative learning. Conscious reflection helps in linking the contents of course materials to life experiences thereby making the learning experience more personal and thereby deeper and more lasting (Foster 2015). Reflection, as observed by Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985), is “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (p. 19).

While Cameron (2012) has stated that blogging promotes interactive learning experiences due to its collaborative, discursive nature, it has been argued that such advantages are not necessarily inherent. Concerns related to engagement with e-learning have specifically addressed issues with reflective practice related to blogs. Ajeneye (2005) states that students often find online reflective writing onerous, a time-consuming interruption to learning. Jackling et al. (2015) examined the potential benefits of blogging in the context of collaborative group learning in a multi-cultural student cohort. They identified a range of factors which may undermine the learning benefits of collaborative blogging activities including; poor interpersonal/intercultural relationship skills, perennial fears of reduced grades/freeloading peers attendant to assessed group work, students’ undervaluing of activities/tasks not subject to summative assessment, or attracting too low a mark allocation to justify a high level of commitment. This and other studies (Glogoff 2005; Platzer, Snelling & Blake, 1997) indicate

that overall student attitudes to blogging are mixed, but positive, collaborative and reflective engagement, and delivery of the intended learning outcomes, is dependent upon a high degree of focus and preparation.

Ladyshevsky & Gardner (2008) argue that despite the common assumption that as young people in the main, students are IT literate and media savvy, most have little or no direct personal experience of blogging or of blogging applications prior to encountering them as a (frequently summatively assessed) learning activity. Indeed, several studies (e.g. Muncy 2014, Farmer et al. 2008), have highlighted significant resistance to engagement with the blogging process on the part of some students, and almost all the studies examined identify significant numbers of students (as high as 25% in Muncy 2014) who decline to engage effectively with the activity. Most if not all found, however, that most students ultimately enjoyed the simplicity, immediacy, accessibility and convenience of the blogging process. The early introduction of students to blogging activities is advised, and Muncy's findings support the provision of structured workshop support for the setting up of accounts, supervised familiarization with the chosen applications, and provision of example blogs. Both deadlines and incentives for early and frequent posting, and penalties for infrequent and late posting, were viewed as necessary to avoid last minute activity. This was seen as having the potential to undermine the benefits of the exercise by reducing the time available to build up a stream of ideas, get feedback, implement suggestions, and develop the reflective discourse that is the primary pedagogical purpose. That technical obstacles to the free flow of ideas, and anxiety regarding (to most students) novel forms of engagement and assessment should be addressed as early as possible and certainly before blogging is employed during fieldwork or practice placement, is a common conclusion.

Green (2005) used the term "spaces of influence" (p. 295), where an individual learner can develop with and through the support of others, expanding and developing upon the work

of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), which proposes that social interaction is fundamental in the development of cognition. Group based collaborative learning allows an individual learner to learn with the active support of others; his or her peers, opening up possibilities for experiential learning and the integration of disciplinary knowledge through reflection, discussion and peer dialogue. “Discussion about the state of one’s knowledge forces novices to explicate their reasoning...[and] fosters the development of meta-cognition, as it requires students to think about their thinking, and to consider how much they know and do not know” (Ladyshefsky & Gardner 2008, p. 242). Foster (2015) addresses this aspect of peer readership of online blogs, as opposed to what he terms ‘low stakes’ reflective writing such as ‘offline’ journals. Foster found that neither private ‘low stakes’ journals, nor public blogs produced definitively higher quality reflections from students, rather identifying that “students appear to be overall more likely to take greater *intellectual* risks in blogs, which they know will be read and commented upon by their peers. Conversely, journals—the more private option— compel students to be vulnerable and take more *personal* risks in their reflection.” (p.111, our emphases). In blog posts, Foster found students were significantly more likely to take a position on a controversial issue, to develop a personal theory about the social world, and enter into debate around them. Public blogs incorporating peer readership, appear from Foster’s evidence to induce intellectual risk taking in students, and to engage them more with logic and rationality. Substantial research has demonstrated that blogs can be, with adequate preparation and clarity of purpose, highly effective as tools for developing student’s reflective capacity and practice, and can render positive learning outcomes; whether these outcomes are the *product* of peer readership, however, is still uncertain.

As Chaumba (2015) observes (citing also Brookfield, 2010; Rodgers, 2002), fundamental in the reflection process is an occurrence that contradicts or unsettles assumptions or prior knowledge, leading to a process of reflection as an attempt to resolve the discrepancy.

Experiences of such cognitive dissonance is a common feature of fieldwork, particularly international fieldwork. Simm and Marvell (2015) have observed, in the context particularly of international fieldwork and the importance of sense of place, that through critical reflection, challenges to our reasoning and attitudes can be acknowledged, and new meanings validated, especially through challenge by unfamiliar encounters and experiences, which may lead to transformative learning (Brookfield, 2012). As Kolb states, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Reflective diaries, travel journals, or perhaps more particularly in light of the research examined above, particularly collaborative blogs, offer a vehicle for students to make sense of their observations and experiences (Dummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett & Hull, 2008; Glass, 2014).

Fieldwork in Criminology

While fieldwork training is a relatively novel development in Criminology programs in the UK, it does have a much longer lineage within subjects such as Geography where it is an intrinsic feature of the discipline. Increasingly, fieldwork skills and experience are developing broader appeal within Criminology and social science more generally. There is a growing recognition that students should experience and be actively involved in real world activities because first-hand experience of criminological issues and matters of social harm complement more traditional approaches to learning such as lectures, seminars, use of television programs and key text readings (Morris & Marquart 2010). In doing fieldwork, Criminology students can enhance a whole range of skills. These include interpersonal skills derived from close working contact with other students and staff. Analytical skills can be honed through reflecting on criminological and social harm issues and the proposed solutions to crime-related problems. Observational skills derived from experiential learning and a respect for the environment around them can also be enhanced. Applied research skills and methodological skill-sets

through conducting research in unfamiliar environments involves not only looking at processes but linking processes to outcomes. The development of these skills complements the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education subject benchmark statement for Criminology (2014) and its emphasis on research training skills.

Methodology

Seventy-four undergraduate Criminology students at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in the UK participated in this study abroad course. Students spend five days in Slovenia and engage in problem-based fieldwork, which develops transferable research skills (Houser, Brannstrom, Quiring & Lemmons 2011; Evenson 2013). During the trip, they meet and conduct interviews with public, private and not-for-profit agency officials responsible for implementing harm reduction initiatives in relevant areas. These topic areas included interpersonal violence, homelessness and forced migration. The Criminology program at LJMU is one of the largest in the UK in terms of student numbers, with approximately one hundred and seventy five students graduating each year with degrees that have Criminology in the award title. Figure one reveals that the overwhelming majority of participants (94.6%) were in the 20-24 age category. In terms of gender, 82.4% of the cohort were female which is not unusual for subjects in British universities allied to law such as criminology. In terms of ethnic group, 94.6% were white. All students were in the final year of their three-year bachelor's degree program. Prior to starting the research, the researchers were able to brief the participants about the blog assessment task and its key learning outcome:

“To monitor, appreciate and reflect critically on one's own learning and experiences of carrying out research in an unfamiliar social, cultural and physical environment”.

The student groups had to write five blogs during their study visit. These blogs would be published off-line and only available to fellow students and staff teaching the course. As Foster (2015) argues, peer scrutiny encouraged the students to take intellectual risks with their writing. These risks were ameliorated somewhat by the opportunity before the study visit to submit a draft blog for formative assessment. The students were also provided with possible topics for their blogs based on what past students had written about and this served to further ease concerns about this unfamiliar reflective writing task. The research team spent time explaining any possible ambiguities in the survey questionnaire that the students identified. This made for a more informed cohort of students that were tuned into the ethos of this research project.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

In accordance with University research ethics, each potential participant was provided with a participant information sheet in which informed consent was embedded within the questionnaire rubric. Each student was invited to complete a semi-structured questionnaire toward the end of the international field visit. In this way, we were able to pitch the investigation to a captive audience but more importantly the students had undertaken several days of field research and were in a better position, in terms of their experiences, to reflect upon the processes and practices that they had utilized. All completed questionnaires were collated and analysed quantitatively using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The open-ended qualitative data were subjected to a rudimentary analysis using the QSR Nvivo software tool.

Analysis and discussion

Prior experience of blogs

Despite the prevalence and importance of social media platforms amongst young people today, it was a little surprising that very few students (20% of those who participated) prior to doing the International Fieldwork module had written any kind of blog. Douthit et al. (2015) noted a similar finding in a study examining blogging and learning journals by American college students. Whereas Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WeChat for example lend themselves to instant and rapid posts or replies in the form of limited word messages and/or images, likes and emojis. Blogs on the other hand are unique and can be seen as straddling the formal/informal writing divide and arguably requiring more time and effort to compose the several hundred words that make up the typical blog. Through classroom workshops, sharing of blog examples from elsewhere and previous student work, the participants appeared to grasp well what blogging involved in the context of this International Fieldwork in Criminology course:

“To me a blog is somewhere you can express your views in a creative and informal manner” (Research Participant 15).

“Reflecting on practices” (Research Participant 30).

“A piece of work (academic) which is written in an informal way about a topic. Can include pictures and links to other sites – more relaxed document” (Research Participant 26).

The relatively recent surge in the popularity of vlogs (video blogs) needs to be acknowledged at this point and despite the mundane nature of some of these vlogs (e.g. recordings of daily life), they can still require a significant amount of production effort and editing prior to publishing on platforms such as YouTube. Unfamiliarity with blogs clearly had

the effect of shifting many students from the relative comfort zone of more traditional essays, exams and reports to a less familiar and uncertain assessment territory of writing about their research positionality (Dummer, et al. 2008). The following participant's insight captures the views of the majority of students:

“[Yes it has taken me out of my comfort zone] because it's not as academic, nothing we've done before (that goes towards a degree). However, I do like the flexibility and chance to be creative and write from my own perspective for a change” (Research Participant 73)

Hence, the opportunity to produce blogs rather than traditional forms of assessment provided students with the opportunity to try out new skills and take intellectual risks. These experiences gradually appeared to instil confidence within the participants and their competence as a researcher when confronted with unfamiliar challenging situations and environments (Haro, Knight, Cameron, Nixon, Ahluwalia & Hicks, 2014)

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Triggering a change in research practice

Research participants were asked what they found beneficial about the blog assessment task (Figure 3). The most popular answer related to the capacity to promote critical reflection on research practice (37% of respondents). The views of the participants below are typical of this 37% of respondents:

“It is making me understand how I can influence research” (Research Participant 74).

Another 34% of participants pinpointed the blog as a creative form of assessment that was interesting and novel to them.

“It’s an unusual assessment for me to do and I liked doing something different from an essay” (Research Participant 22).

“It makes you think ‘outside the box’” (Research Participant 72).

Teamwork and the opportunity for group working was stated by an additional 12% of respondents. It was reassuring to see that a significant proportion of the group were starting to see the value of the blog in these terms and as a vehicle to engage in meaningful reflection on their research practices. Implicit within a significant number of the qualitative responses to this question was the capacity of the blog to build students’ confidence in a variety of ways. This included positively influencing decisions about research in their undergraduate dissertations through capacity building transferable writing skills, and overcoming the challenges of individualism versus teamwork within a developing community of practice (Green, 2005). Wenger (1998) provides a useful working definition of communities of practice in which the interests and values of members have a profound impact on the formation of the community. The community serves as an environment for exchanging knowledge and testing new ideas while still valuing the contributions of each member. It is this mutual respect and the co-determined ways of communication between members, that is critical to the community of practice and its capacity to foster both confidence and collaborative learning. The following short quotes provide examples of this developing confidence and emergent communities of practice:

“Taught me to write in a more casual expressive way” (Research Participant 58).

“Not just working alone, having to constantly work with and discuss everything with others and their different working styles” (Research Participant 23).

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Participants were also asked, by way of a follow-up question, whether engaging in the blog task had altered their research practice in any way (Figure 4). Somewhat surprisingly, given that the blog calls for reflection upon the conduct of research, their own positionality and its potential effects on the research process, only 23% of those surveyed felt that their practice had changed. One reading of this is that the blog task was not having the desired effect and that its impact was limited and superficial. However, an alternate narrative on this finding, points to a group of students who were largely non-reactive to thinking about their own practice, perhaps due to their prior research training, and carried on regardless. Just as importantly, it can be argued that a temporal problem exists here. An unspecified amount of time needs to elapse before a researcher can be truly reflexive and be open to deep and meaningful self-introspection of their research practices. Blogging about these subjects encourages students to delve into their personal assumptions, beliefs and actions (Hovorka & Wolf, 2009). The timing of this survey towards the latter end of the international field visit could arguably be too soon for this self-awareness and consciousness to fully develop (Bolton, 2010; Moon, 1999).

[Insert Figure 4 here]

This temporal argument is supported further, by looking at the response to the psychometric scale question “On a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is high and 1 is low) to what extent has blogging developed an increase awareness of research positionality?” If a score of between one and four is taken to denote a low extent response, a score between five and seven indicates a medium extent response and a score between eight and ten indicative of a high extent response, then

Figure 4 summarises the findings from the 69 participants who answered this question. One can conclude from this, that self-awareness was reasonably widespread with 52% of participants indicating a high level of awareness of their research positionality compared to 44% in the mid-level category and only 4% in the low category. These findings resonate with those of Hovorka & Wolf (2009: 12) who highlight that student learning experiences from both residential fieldwork and classroom-based field courses can lead to “experiences of discovery”. In the words of a student quotes in their research, “I definitely found this class changed my perspective on feminism/gender for the better...made me question my own values in depth” (Hovorka & Wolf, 2009: 12).

Conclusion

To conclude, the research has found that blogs do facilitate meaningful student reflection on the research practices they adopt in the field. Asking students to pause and reflect on how they engage in the practice of research is challenging for them. However, when provided with some examples of what possibly their blog reflection might focus upon, the opportunity for introspection on why the research was conducted in a particular way and the influence of one’s subjectivity on the research process can be a cathartic experience for some students. Some of the participants in this study found themselves drilling down on their positionality and becoming more aware of their research practices and behaviours. In a small number of cases, this heightened awareness was transferred into the research epistemology write-up for dissertation theses.

By working in research teams, the students were actively encouraged to help each other in the preparation of their blogs and to read each other’s entries. Reflection on one’s research practices and those of fellow group members was shown to enhance critical reflection and

mindfulness of their work and influences. In addition, teamwork competencies also received a boost as communities of practice emerged organically through the sharing of ideas, collaborative writing and mutual support of fellow group members. Criminology students in the university, as they are across the UK higher education sector, are very familiar with essay and exam style writing. As revealed above, the blog style assessment and its focus on the practice and process of doing research exposes our students to other forms of creative writing within this era of computer-assisted technologies. There is less conclusive evidence in this research to support the notion of enhanced student research confidence through blogging. Perhaps it is premature to arrive at this conclusion because identifying and reflecting upon transformative levels of research self-efficacy can require a much longer time-period than that afforded by this preliminary study (Bandura, 1997; Margolis & McCabe, 2006)

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Figure 1: Demographic profile of study participants

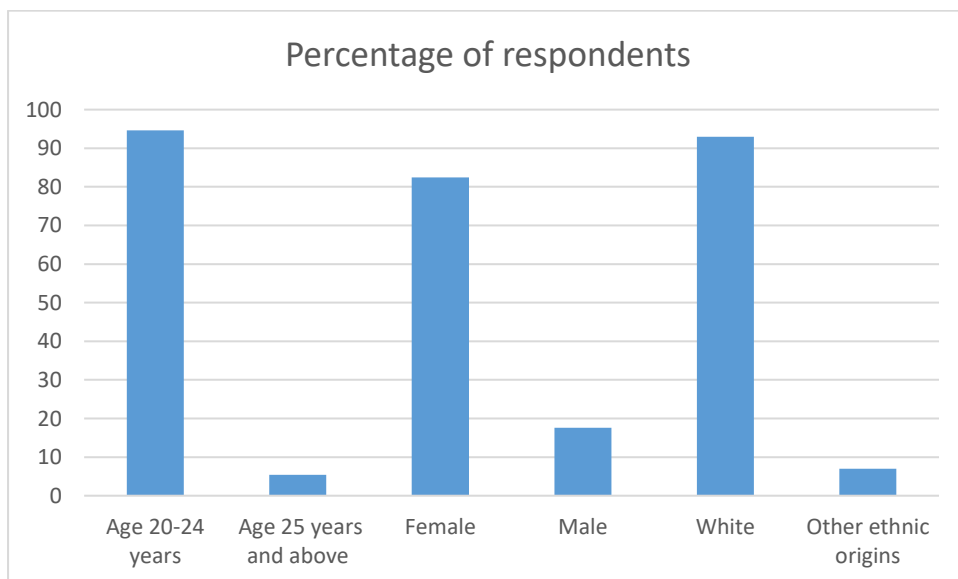


Figure 2: Has the blogging task taken you out of your comfort zone?

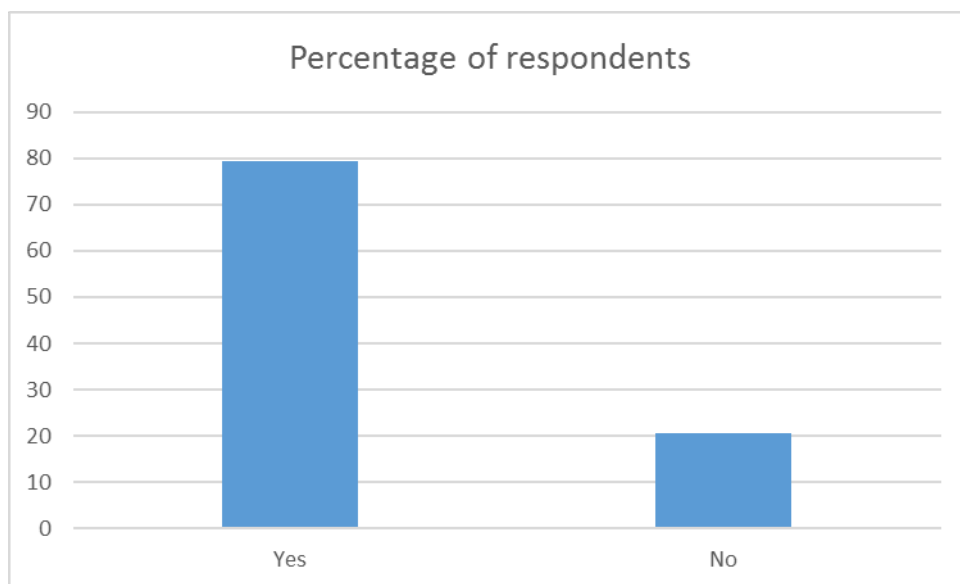


Figure 3: Perceived benefits of the blog assessment task

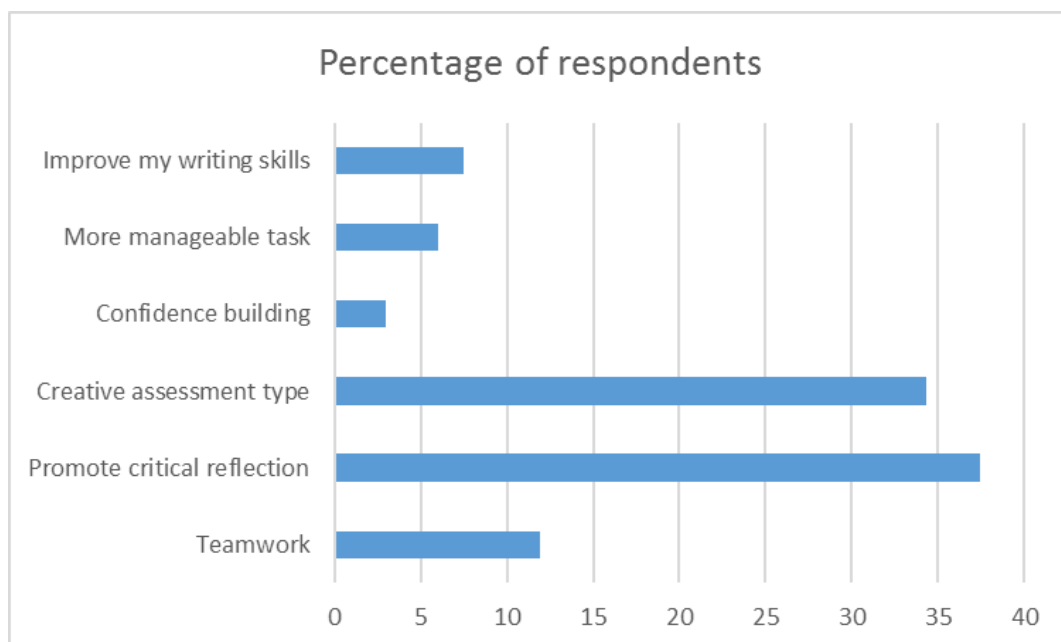


Figure 4: To what extent has blogging impacted upon awareness of your research positionality?

