City as Text™:
To Blog or Not to Blog

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INTRODUCTION

In any honors program, the freshman seminar is designed to introduce incoming students to the rigors of collegiate honors study. According to the National Collegiate Honors Council, an honors course ought to have objectives of developing: (1) "effective written communication skills"; (2) "effective oral communication skills"; (3) the "ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material"; (4) an understanding of academic and creative processes; and (5) independent and critical thinking ("Honors Course Design," 2014). The Marymount University Honors Program's honors freshman seminar (Honors 101) is no exception; its objectives follow many of the concepts outlined by NCHC alongside an interdisciplinary approach that supports the variety of majors represented in the incoming class.

In the fall of 2011, the then-director of the Marymount University Honors Program reorganized the Honors 101 experience with the goal of enhancing its interdisciplinary and inclusive approach to knowledge. The honors program at Marymount is an intimate experience for the students; no more than twenty incoming students are admitted into the program annually. The majority of incoming honors students are freshmen; however a small number of upperclassmen are admitted each year. The students represent a wide variety of majors, often outside the traditional humanities landscape of honors.

Parallel to the revisions considered for the honors program was an effort on the part of the university to integrate place-based education more strongly into the undergraduate student learning experience. Place-based education promotes learning by connecting students to the issues, history, culture, and environment of the local context, often in a hands-on, experiential way. At Marymount, this place-based education seeks to take advantage of resources and offerings in the surrounding community. Marymount University occupies a small, pastoral campus within ten miles of downtown Washington, DC. The university's commitment to maximize the opportunities afforded to its students by the institution's proximity to such a vibrant, powerful region provided direction for revising Honors 101. During Konkel's year-long tenure and subsequently in David Gammack's continuing leadership, the program adopted the City as Text™ (CAT) methodology developed by Bernice Braid and the National Collegiate Honors Council. The overall course theme was designed to examine the many overlapping layers of life in Washington, DC.

City as Text™ has been a focal point of many honors courses—and also non-honors courses—since it was first developed in the 1970s with the pioneering work of Bernice Braid and her collaborators. Central to the CAT model are excursions that engage participants in their environment so that discoveries made by virtue of "looking and seeing some slightly surprising thing are the ones they will never forget" (Braid 53). Part of the beauty of this model is that excursions do not have to be dependent on the professor's subject area; the crucial feature is the discussions and writings that participants develop from observing their surroundings. On a practical level, there are four primary components of CAT: Mapping, Observing, Listening, and Reflecting (Long xi–xii). These activities give students guidelines without restricting what they can focus on. Although assessment of student writing is expected in virtually all honors courses, in CAT the writing assignment

especially needs "to set forth precise expectations, [and] feedback should be comprehensive and prompt, based on evaluation criteria that have been made public and that correspond fairly to the assigned exercise" (Raia 50).

The CAT methodology employs active learning strategies to foster student engagement and interdisciplinary research. The model deliberately challenges students to question the examined city-text, placing students outside the traditionally safe environment of the classroom. At the heart of a CAT course are frequent group walkabouts of the city and the surrounding environment, intended to challenge students to "investigate not only the local culture and history but also the local economy, ecology, geography, and politics" (Machonis 20). In addition, writing assignments encourage reflection on new experiences and observations along with integration of lessons learned in the experiential text.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this research study is to examine more closely the writing process and format centered on the Turning Point, or Critical Incident, Essay. As outlined by the NCHC, the Turning Point essay asks students to explore the relationship between meaning and context as informed not only by their personal observations and experiences in the excursion walkabouts but also through reading, discussion, and seminar interactions (Machonis 152). This assigned essay "asks participants to describe a scene, an event or other occasion that gave them a shift of perspective or a new insight into the location, its people, art, psychology, or culture" (Machonis 152). Key to the synthesis and analysis of broad experiences, the Turning Point essay encourages integration of knowledge and awareness derived from observations, reading, and discussion, and it provides a chance for students to examine their personal bias set against the context to which they are being introduced.

The specific research question asked in this study is whether students writing Turning Point Essays in an assessed personal blog format internalize the lessons drawn from their experiences and whether blogging encourages development though a semester. Since the Turning Point essay asks students to reflect both intellectually and personally on their observations, we tried to determine whether we can expect more successful reflection and integration within the writing forum of a personal blog than we might in a word-limited essay submitted at the start of class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature suggests a strong correlation between the goals of experiential education and the opportunities offered by technology. Otero writes of the ways that the technology generation is transforming the classroom, citing

> …the emergence of a young wired generation that is rebelling against passive listening to teachers. Their experience with technology—using mobile phones, instant messaging, podcasting, search engines, virtual tours, blogs, clickers, computer- and video-games, iTunes, e-portfolios, message boards, streaming video, online newsgroups, and wikis—gives students the capacity to do more things at once…. [T]hey respond to hands-on, interactive, collaborative project-based learning. (21)

The qualities attributed to learning with technology—hands-on, interactive, collaborative and project-based—mirror the "bottom-up approach to learning" (Machonis 21) described in the CAT methodology, yet, while ongoing advances in technology present an opportunity for new and exciting pedagogical practices, the educational literature reflects some uncertainty about their overall effectiveness in the classroom, an uncertainty that is evident in current research on the integration of blogs into pedagogy. A review of this literature reveals strengths and weaknesses in the application of blogging technology to classroom learning.

The emergence of the blog, an abbreviated term for "web log," as a form of web-based communication emerged in the late 1990s with the availability of web publishing software programs that targeted the non-technical user. By definition, blogs are composed of discrete entries, typically displayed with the most recent post at the top of the page, and a collection of author-curated links to other web content that supports the content presented in the blog entries. O'Donnell describes a blog as having two opposing principles: monologue and dialogue. The unique ability of a blog to house not only the author's reflections and opinions but also an interactive dialogue with blog readers via comments creates both a personal and community space simultaneously. Eide and Richardson include the promotion of critical and analytical thinking as key educational benefits of blogs, arguing that

> Within the structure of a blog, students can demonstrate critical thinking, take creative risks, and make sophisticated use of language

and design elements. In doing so, the students acquire creative, critical, communicative, and collaborative skills that may be useful to them in both scholarly and professional contexts. . . . (Qtd. in Duffy and Bruns 33).

Many researchers cite the presence of an audience as an asset of blogging in educational practice: when students write for a wider audience than the teacher, their sense of perspective and ownership of their writing changes. Downes describes an elementary school in Montreal that incorporates blogging as a tool for self-reflection and integration alongside classroom learning; when asked about the experience, one fifth-grader responded,

> When we publish on our blog, people from the entire world can respond by using the comments link. This way, they can ask questions or simply tell us what they like. . . . [B]y reading these comments, we can know our weaknesses and our talents. Blogging is an opportunity to exchange our point of view with the rest of the world not just people in our immediate environment. (Downes 14)

This social and interactive nature of blogging would appear to support the "strong communal nature in honors . . . with students working collaboratively to 'teach themselves and each other, as well as enlighten the instructor'" (Edman qtd. inHolman, Smith and Welch 213).

Kim suggests that the interactive nature of blogging and commenting encourages student engagement. Citing Pena-Shaff, Altman and Stephenson, Kim describes the phenomenon of feedback expectancy, citing the authors' discovery that students more frequently checked online communication sites such as blogs when expecting peer comments to their posts. Community and engagement can be built simply through the model of motivation by expected outcomes: "bloggers interact with each other to give and receive feedback by posting entries and receiving comments. If bloggers receive more comments from others, they might become more self-motivated to engage in blogging" (Lawlor qtd. in Kim 1346).

Bartlett-Bragg supports the notion that blogs can be a pathway to deeper learning, a means for students to stand back from an experience, seek out connections between concepts, and contextualize meaning. She describes student blogging as "an intentional process, where social context and experience are acknowledged, [and] in which learners are active individuals, wholly present, engaging with others, and open to challenge" (4).

But what happens to the intentionality of blogging when blog posts as well as comments are required by a teacher? Brescia and Miller argue that the involuntary nature of classroom assignments is the biggest challenge to the benefits associated with blogging. Although the peer-to-peer contact can still promote intellectual development, "the temptation for students is to respond simply for the sake of responding and to finish the requirement rather than processing information and learning" (50). Downes also raises the inherent conflict between the free-flowing world of blogs and the more structured world of education: "[B]y its very nature, assigned blogging in schools cannot be blogging. It's contrived. No matter how much we want to spout off about the wonders of an audience and readership, students who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher" (24).

Despite these concerns, there is some consensus that the advantages of blogging outweigh the challenges:

> [To] the current generation of students, the internet and other forms of electronic discourse are not necessarily associated with their concept of "reading and writing" in an educational sense, but rather are tools for social interaction. Blogging, as a socially driven public written reflection, can change the dynamic for teaching rhetorical sensitivity and reflection." (Duffy and Bruns 34)

Especially for current honors students in the setting of an introductory seminar, the literature suggests that blogging may facilitate interaction, engagement, and community, contributing to the foundational goals of the honors experience.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study described in this paper examined the use of personal blogging as a tool in completing Turning Point Essays in two consecutive Honors 101 CAT seminars. Assignment descriptions regarding the Turning Point Essays were informed directly by the language provided in Machonis's NCHC Monograph *Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning Strategies in Higher Education* and complemented the full range of experiences and assignments that make up the CAT model.

The study was conducted following the completion of all of the sections targeted in the research. All of the investigation outlined below was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Marymount University, with appropriate research methods applied.

To test the effectiveness of the use of blogs for reflective and integrative writing, a two-pronged study was conducted: content analysis and a student survey.

Content Analysis

A key component of the research questions being investigated is the question of student engagement. In each section of the Honors 101 CAT course, a series of Turning Point blog posts was assigned. A content analysis of a representative sample of blog essays was conducted, focusing on the first and final essays in the series for each semester. All students who successfully completed the Honors 101 CAT course were asked for consent to participate in the analysis of their written work; those students who gave consent to access their work make up the representative sample analyzed.

For the purpose of the content analysis, an evaluation rubric was developed by the authors to describe key indicators of student reflection. Each of these indicators was drawn from the Turning Point Essay assignment objectives found in Machonis (see Table 1). Based on this language about the CAT Turning Point Essay, descriptions of the learning objectives of the writing assignment included transformation from an individualistic to a more objective, curious point of view. Students who transition from simply noting their own opinions about what they have observed to conjecturing about the point of view of people observed in the city-text are displaying evidence of the curiosity that underpins the CAT experience. Transformation comes through the integration of a student's personal opinion, or bias, with external awareness and objectivity derived from making connections between the excursion experience, the experiences of peers, and scholarly readings.

TABLE 1: VARIABLES USED IN CONTENT ANALYSIS

Awareness	(internal) of individual point of view drawn from observations (external) of others' points of view in relation to observations
Curiosity	about author's or peer's assumptions
Investigation	further questioning about author's own assumptions or point of view
Transformation	questions raised about own point of view a changed perspective or point of view; connections made between the author's perspective and scholarly information (readings, discussion, etc.)

Based on these learning objectives, the authors identified the following hypotheses in relation to the content analysis:

H1: The frequency of Awareness (External) would increase from Essay 1 to Essay 2

H2: The frequency of Investigation relative to Curiosity would increase from Essay 1 to Essay 2

H3: The frequency of Transformation (changed perspective and connections made) relative to Transformation (questions raised) would increase from Essay 1 to Essay 2

Student Survey

To complement the analysis of student writing, a survey was conducted to assess students' opinions about the challenges and benefits of the blogging component of their learning experiences. All students who successfully completed the Honors 101 CAT course were invited to participate in the online survey; all complete responses to the survey were included in the analysis. The survey had both close-ended (yes/no, Likert scale) and open-ended questions.

The survey asked for student opinions about perceived obstacles to the general components of the CAT experience, such as working within a group, understanding the goals of the assignments, or managing the technological expertise needed to keep the blog. Students were also asked about the experience of commenting on peer blog posts and asked whether they engaged with their peers' comments on their own blog posts with any frequency. Finally, students were asked their thoughts about the platform of the personal blog for assignments such as the Turning Point Essays.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content Analysis

The variables used analyzing our three hypotheses are stated in Table 1, and twenty students over two years agreed to have their blogs assessed. Data for the content analysis can be found in Appendix A.

For our first hypothesis ("*Frequency of External Awareness would increase from Essay 1 to Essay 2*"), our results showed that, although some students had large increases in frequency and the average frequency did increase from Essay 1 to Essay 2, the increase was not statistically significant.

For both H-2 (*Frequency of Investigation relative to Curiosity would increase*) and H-3 (*Frequency of Transformation relative to Transformation would increase*), the data indicated that there was no change from Essay 1 to 2.

If we compare the blog analysis for freshmen to that for non-freshmen, most of the variables (and changes in the variables) were consistent across academic year. However, one interesting difference is that the ratio of external awareness (final to initial) for non-freshmen was 1 (i.e., did not change) whereas for freshmen it was 1.6 (i.e., increased by 60%).

Student Survey

The results of the student survey consisted of nineteen questions answered by twenty students, thirteen of whom were freshmen. (See Appendix B for summary of student survey response rates)

Experience and Confidence at the Onset of the Course

Of the students who took the survey, 46% (6) of the freshmen had maintained a personal blog before starting Honors 101 compared to 14% (1) of the non-freshmen. The course had three types of assessed writing: research (MLEA), reflection, and presentation. (MLEA projects are divided up into four components: **M**ythos expresses the research topic in an abstract way; **L**ogos puts the research question in context and argues points objectively; **E**thos integrates the research arguments; and **A**pologia reflects on the process and research conclusions.) Only three students had no experience of any of these types of writing. The majority of students were most concerned about the component of the course that required setting up and maintaining the blog, specifically the technology that they were going to have to use. The students were most excited about the excursions that formed the central part of the CAT experience.

Progression during theSemester

As the semester progressed, most of the students became more comfortable with the demands of the course for three main reasons: (1) becoming "more accustomed to the blogging format," (2) understanding "the process" (expectations), and (3) realizing that the "MLEA process" was supposed to push them out of their comfort zone.

Students were required to read and comment on blog posts from at least three of their peers following each excursion and Turning Point Essay

posting. Students completing the survey were asked to identify how many of their peers' blog posts, on average, they had read and commented during each excursion cycle. The freshmen tended to read (and comment on) five or more whereas the non-freshmen read the minimum expected. All the freshmen said they read all the comments they received and then used those comments to "improve [their] work."

When asked about their audience, most of the students indicated that they wrote their blogs for all three readers: themselves, their peers, and the teacher. As one student noted, considering audience in this way helps focus ideas and observations; "because classmates are looking at the posts, students are probably more likely to try and put forth something that is substantive." The tension between writing for oneself and writing for an audience, including the teacher, was evident in one student's response, writing that he/she had intentionally incorporated self-reflection, which ". . . helped me to try and find a balance between simply recording my observations and making sense of the experience. If I had been writing for myself, there would have been [fewer] observations, and if I had been writing just for either of the other two, there would have been [fewer] personal musings."

However, some students felt restricted by having to worry about writing for others, with one noting, "I was more timid than I am if I am just writing in a journal." Many students found it hard to balance writing for a grade and writing a personal blog, with some students commenting that they wrote for a "good grade" and one commenting,

> Whenever something is being reviewed for a grade, the content and nature of that assignment changes entirely. While I did experience some revelations during the process, the majority of my blog posts felt forced or faked to appear more interesting than they actually were. I think the outcome would have been different if the blogs were not ultimately just another school assignment or an additional grade to worry about.

This last comment is insightful and leads the authors to question the effectiveness of having rubrics for blogs. In the context of the CAT model, it may be more effective to incorporate personal blogs as a tool for writing, reflecting, and commenting; the blogs can then become a processing tool for writing more formal reflection pieces.

On the whole, using a blog to discuss the CAT excursions was seen as positive, with summary comments from the survey such as "[B]logging not only help[ed] me track my thoughts and experience but also help[ed] me

form better conclusions," and "[I]t was a way for me to gather my thoughts, and freely express what I was thinking." Blogging also altered how students observed their environment: "It definitely made me think of my surroundings in a more creative and analytical way because I knew that I would have to respond to them after," and "I had to pay more attention to the little things and see how it affected the whole rather than just examining the big picture and leaving it at that." These comments demonstrate that the thinking asked of students in the Turning Point Essay is evident to them regardless of the writing tool they are asked to employ.

The students who were writing purely for the teacher, however, were less enamored with the process. Survey comments indicated they felt that "the experience and most of my responses were writing to gain a response that would result in a good grade" and that when "told to write a blog about an experience they do not care about, then at the end of the day they are still not going to care about it." When asked about the relationship between blogging about their actions and reflective analysis of those actions, freshmen thought that blogging helped them think "more completely" about experiences at a much higher rate (80%) than upperclassmen (40%).

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings about the benefits of blogging in the CAT format are inconclusive, and more data points would be required to explore our hypotheses. Further work should focus on how blogging for CAT helps freshmen develop their ideas for the MLEA project and, as a longitudinal study, whether blogging affects the way students perceive and execute their honors thesis.

However, our study did show that freshmen appreciated the format more than upperclassmen. This particular result has affected how the Marymount University Honors Program tackles Honors 101 in that upperclassmen are no longer required to participate.

In addition, most students felt that writing the blog for a grade negatively impacted the writing style and voice they would otherwise have used and that "some blog posts felt forced or faked to appear more interesting than they actually were." This result gives the authors reason to suggest that, in the CAT format, it may be a good idea to have students use the blogs as the first step in writing more formal material, allowing the blogs (with comments and discussion) to be more organic and less restrained; the blog can thus encourage students to express themselves, develop ideas, and collaborate with their peers rather than stressing about how their content is going to be assessed.

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APPENDIX A

Data from Student Blog Analysis

First Essay

Author Code:	Awareness:	Curiosity:		Investigation:		Transformation:	
	Individual	External	Assumptions	Questioning Assumptions	Raised Questions	Changed Perspective	Scholarly Integration
A	8	0	1	1	1	0	0
B	6	3	2	2	0	1	0
C	4	1	4	2	1	2	1
D	5	0	0	1	0	0	0
E	3	1	4	0	1	0	1
F	1	3	2	0	2	0	4
G	5	2	3	2	2	2	1
H	1	1	3	0	1	1	0

Final Essay

Author Code:	Awareness: Individual	Curiosity: External	Assumptions	Investigation: Questioning Assumptions	Raised Questions	Transformation: Changed Perspective	Scholarly Integration
A	5	3	1	1	1	0	1
B	4	3	2	1	1	0	0
C	5	3	3	1	1	0	1
D	3	0	1	0	1	0	0
E	4	2	3	2	0	0	0
F	1	3	1	0	2	1	2
G	3	2	2	1	1	3	4
H	4	0	2	1	0	0	0

APPENDIX B

Summary of Student Survey Results

Year When Taking HON 101	Total # of students	Maintained a Blog prior to HON 101	Percentage of comments that agreed that blogging encouraged students to think "more completely" about their experiences
Freshman	13	6 (46%)	80%
Upper	7	1 (14%)	40%