Student blogging, plagiarism prevention and animal behaviour

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For the third year running, non-biology students who take the cross-faculty module LSM1303 Animal Behaviour are blogging. As part of their continual assessment, every student in the class of about 200 creates a single blog post each. Their blog site, Blogging about Animal Behaviour is hosted on Blog.nus.

Blogging benefits

Writing an original post encourages students to read and communicate beyond the limits of their project work and lectures. It also exposes them to their fellow-students’ efforts which cover a wide range of examples of animal behaviour.

The blog engine can limit the display of posts to those tagged with a specific group number (which the students add, if they followed instructions)! Teaching Assistants (TAs), who visit the blog to contribute constructive comments to the specific groups they supervise, merely need to click relevant tags instead of ploughing through 200 posts. Students quick on the uptake learn another feature of blogs - they can explore the blog for topics from the syllabus such as “territoriality” or “mating rituals”.

Evolving guidelines and copyright

I drew up guidelines which reside online on Google Docs. These were edited immediately after encountering issues each year and are now relatively comprehensive. Concomitantly, I receive fewer queries about clarification, and student posts have also improved. Still, new issues emerge. For example, although citations were evident this year, many did not integrate these effectively within their text.

Comment moderation (which I enabled), alerted me to another problem this year - two professional photography sites traced pingbacks to our blog, ironically alerted through the students’ proper citation. Despite restrictions about 3rd-party use displayed on these sites, students had persisted. The culpable students replaced the photos even as I updated the online guidelines to explain copyright and introduce them to Creative Commons. A relatively new issue to most of them, I extended the deadline by a day to allow them to adopt the new guidelines. I also thanked the complainant for adding to our learning objectives!

Beyond plagiarism

Despite the briefings at the beginning of term and just before the assignment, the odd individual or two will plagiarise, either knowingly or unknowingly. Although some TAs can easily spot these, we submit a pdf of the entire site to Turnitin, an excellent plagiarism detection tool for which NUS has a license.

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Next year I hope to go beyond TurnItIn’s policing capability by having students check their own content. This will help them to learn about plagiarism, paraphrasing and citation.

Future directions

With the practical issues ironed out and filled with enthusiasm, I finally asked the 2nd year ecology students to blog. Ecological observations in Singapore was greeted with an immediate and wider local audience when their blog posts were highlighted by Singapore’s International Year of Biodiversity 2010 blog and Facebook pages. The enthusiastic comments on Facebook were a great read but faded when the flood of last-minute posts swamped the blog!

Instead of a single explosion of 100 blog posts at semester-end, rostering groups for weekly blog posts would improve class and public readership. If synchronised with the syllabus, their posts can be integrated into the lectures. I already include and acknowledge the rare student-suggested content and have been heartened by the ‘conversation’ with otherwise quiet individuals. Blogging to encourage dialogue? We’ll see.

**Article Links**

Blog.nus
http://blog.nus.edu.sg/

Plagiarism Prevention (TurnItIn)
http://cit.nus.edu.sg/plagiarism-prevention/

Animal Behaviour
http://blog.nus.edu.sg/lsm1303student2010/

Animal Behaviour blog assignment guidelines
http://tinyurl.com/lsm1303co-blog

Ecological observations in Singapore
http://blog.nus.edu.sg/lsm2251student/

Creative Commons
http://creativecommons.org/

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http://snipr.com/lsm1303blogs