

Marta Stelmaszak Mahara research project report

Project report

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Mahara Research Project Report

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Introduction

The aim of the Mahara research project was to investigate and report on the students' use of the Mahara blogging platform as part of the MG492 course. Students participating in this course were using Mahara to deliver a blog post worth 20% of their final grade on a topic on which they were planning to write the full essay, worth 70% of the grade. As part of the remaining 10% of the grade, students' participation was measured and this included providing one comment on another student's blog post on Mahara as well as from class and discussion forum participation.

A poll run among students revealed that slightly over half of them preferred not to publish blog posts under their full names, so candidate numbers were used instead. Each student was asked to include the candidate number in the blog title. However, as it was later revealed, when commenting under the following post, students' full names

were revealed. It has been suggested that in the future, students should author blogs under their real names.

One of the assumptions of the project was that students as blog owners were to have control over the visibility (i.e. public or private) of comments received, both peer and faculty. However, it became evident during the course of the assignment that all comments had to be made public, or otherwise they were not being visible to anyone apart from the comment author. This turned out to be a technical setting which seems to be easily remediable in the future.

The Mahara research project involved gathering quantitative data on the use of the Mahara platform, as well as qualitative data from interviews with students to assess the effectiveness, usefulness and performance of Mahara for the purposes of peer and faculty feedback. I observed students' activities on the Mahara platform from 25/02/2016, which was the deadline to publish blog posts, to 13/04/2016, when I conducted final interviews with students.

This report presents an overview of the methodology and findings around the usefulness of Mahara as a peer review and faculty feedback platform.

Research questions

In broad terms, the aim of the project was to investigate the usefulness of Mahara for peer review and faculty feedback. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, I set out to obtain data to answer whether Mahara is a useful tool for peer review and receiving faculty feedback. While investigating, I also came across data answering the question of the ease of use of Mahara, potential other applications of the platform in the university setting, usefulness of the peer review process in general, as well as pointers towards what students considered good feedback.

Methodology

In order to obtain quantitative data, I used Mahara's report function and counted the number of blog posts, comments, student interactions by way of replying to comments

and observed for any frequency changes following a reminder email sent out by the faculty member mid-way through the deadline to submit comments (see the timeline below). The quantitative part of the study did not involve any more complex calculations other than frequency counts, mean, median and standard deviation. Quantitative data covered all activity on the Mahara platform.

To collect qualitative data, I engaged in four phases. In the first phase, I interviewed students who provided or received comments early, within a few days of the beginning of the commenting period. In the second phase, I interviewed another group of students who provided or received comments already, as well as some students who received or provided more than one comment. In the third phase, I interviewed students who received both peer and faculty feedback from one of the tutors. The fourth and final phase involved interviewing students who received peer feedback and faculty feedback from both tutors. As evident, sampling was purposeful and limited in scope by the time allocated for this research project.

Phase	Number of interviews
1	4
2	4
3	7
4	3
Total:	18

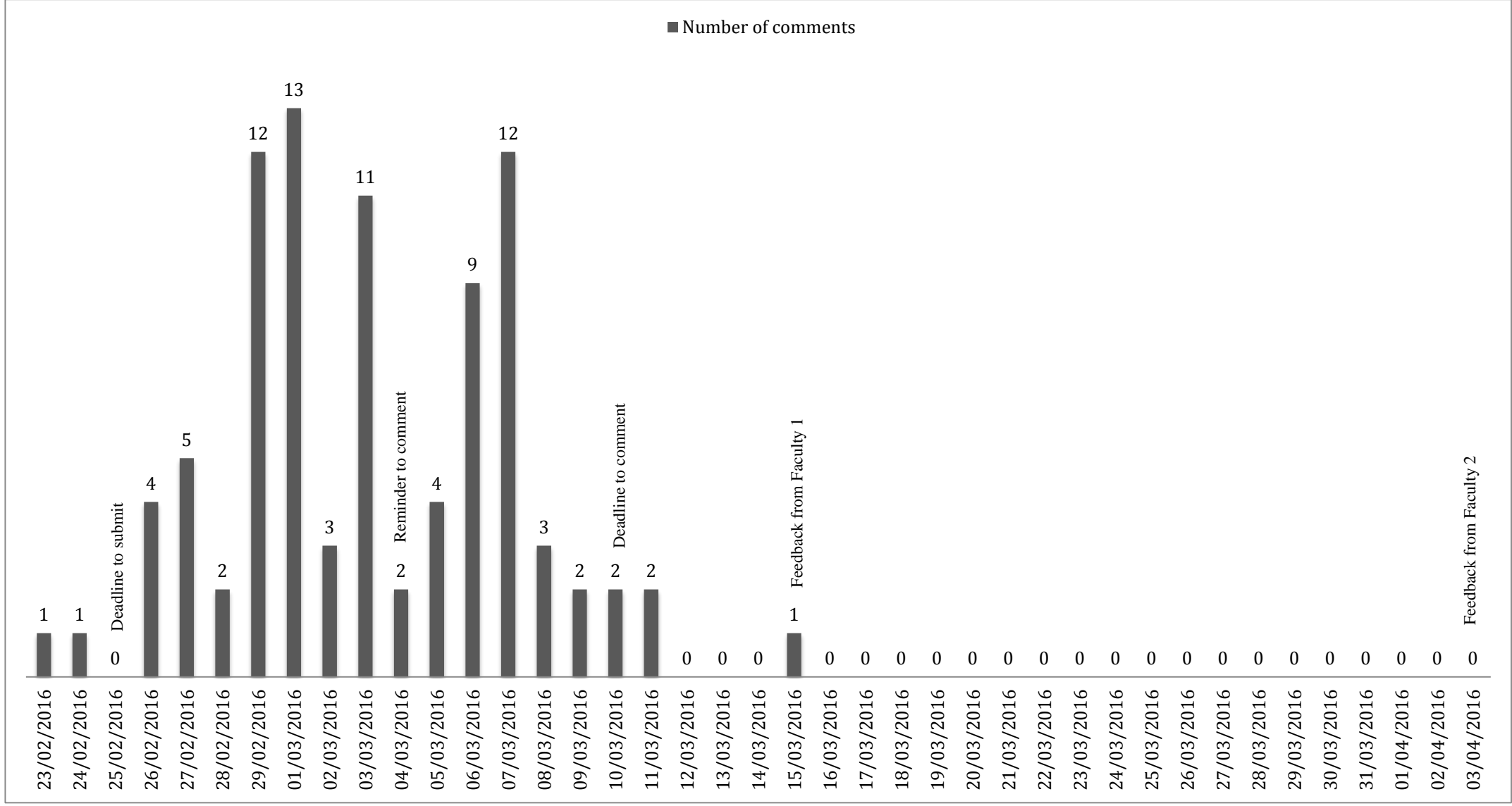
In total, I interviewed 18 students for a total of 5 hours 52 minutes (I approached 30 students out of the 55 student cohort with an interview request and 18 were ultimately interviewed). On average, an interview lasted 19 minutes. The shortest interview took 14 minutes and the longest one – 26 minutes. All but two interviews were conducted face-to-face (one was carried out via Skype and one via Google Hangouts). In some interviews, I used printouts of students' blogs or opened their blogs on my laptop to discuss particular comments. All interviews were structured and followed a uniform topic guide. Students were ensured of confidentiality and asked if they agreed to have their interviews recorded, and recordings were later transcribed.

Findings

Timeline

The process of submitting peer review comments and faculty feedback on Mahara spread from 23/02/2016 to 03/04/2016. The deadline to submit blog posts was on the 25/02/2016. On 04/03/2016, a faculty member sent out a reminder email for students to comment on other blog posts as part of their participation activity. The deadline to submit comments was on 11/03/2016. The first faculty feedback was published on 15/03/2016, and the second faculty feedback was published on 03/04/2016. A detailed timeline of events containing the frequency of student comments posted on any given day in this period is presented below.

Date	Marking process	Interviews
23 February	Blog open for submissions	
25 February	Deadline to submit	
4 March	Reminder to comment	Phase 1: 4 interviews
11 March	Deadline to comment	Phase 2: 4 interviews
15 March	Feedback from Faculty 1	Phase 3: 7 Interviews
3 April 2016	Feedback from Faculty 2	Phase 4: 3 interviews



Quantitative findings

1. Blog posts published

In terms of the number of blog post published, out of 55 students 1 did not submit a blog post. All other blog posts were submitted within the deadline.

2. Peer feedback comments published

In total, there were 89 comments submitted from 23/02/2016 to 15/03/2016 (excluding 7 comments by original blog authors which were replies to comments provided), averaging at 1.62 comment per student. 54 comments were provided before the reminder to comment were sent out, and further 34 comments were provided after the reminder email but within the commenting deadline, and 1 comment was provided after the commenting deadline.

In terms of the number of comments submitted, there was one blogs which did not attract any comments, 26 blogs received one peer comment, 18 blogs received two peer comments, 6 blogs attracted 3 comments, and 2 blogs received 4 comments, as summarised in a table below. Seven blogs attracted comments from original authors in response to peer feedback comments. On average, each blog received 1.62 student comments (excluding the 7 comments mentioned above).

Number of comments received	Number of blogs
0	1
1	26
2	18
3	6
4	4
Total:	55

Qualitative findings

1. Using Mahara

In interviews, students overall reported that Mahara was similar to other blogging platforms they used in the past or were familiar with. This made it easier to use Mahara.

- *“Once I started using it, it was quite straightforward; I think the layout is quite similar to that of other forums” (Interview 1)*
- *“I would say overall a pretty easy user interface. I think it’s a nice setup in terms of blog purpose.” (Interview 2)*

Some students also noted that having prior experience of blogging tools and platforms was beneficial.

- *“I don’t blog currently. So for its purposes it seem pretty good, I think if you have better skills, you can manipulate it in the better way.” (Interview 5)*
- *“Yeah, I think generally it is quite intuitive to use, I mean, if you are familiar with blog or postings in general which probably most of the people are.” (Interview 12)*
- *“To me and all my colleagues, we are certain age, I’m 30 now and we have experience with using this kind of web tools, we have experience in this kind of web interfaces and blogging tools so it was quite ok for me” (Interview 13)*
- *“You know like this course is I guess more tech-able than normal courses, so even people in this course which is more technical sort of community, some people couldn’t figure it out how to post it correctly. So if we were confused I think other populations would be even more confused.” (Interview 8)*

However, also due to the fact that students were overall familiar with blogging tools and platforms, they were more likely to compare Mahara with other tools they have used in the past and point out features that were missing or were not as straightforward as with other tools.

- *“I didn’t like it. I think it was hard to use. It is I don’t think entirely clear. I think you have to do a lot of playing around with it. But you can tell there are other people who really didn’t know how to use it” (Interview 7)*
- *“It’s a page which supposed to be a blog post, you shouldn’t have to read a whole page of instructions. Everyone on our course was supposed to know how to use this sort of stuff and if a blog page isn’t straight forward to use its pretty bad.” (Interview 7)*
- *“I think it was unnecessarily cumbersome. I blogged before, I used several blogging platforms and this one I had to spend some time to really figure it out” (Interview 8)*
- *“If you see here in my blog post, I want to put source with some caption to the pictures, at other blogging platforms it’s really easy to do, in here I have to upload*

the picture and then it goes to this sort of pool of pictures within Mahara, maybe there is another way but this is how I did, then you include it and you have to define how many columns you have, so like in here I have one column, here I have two. It took a while for me to do it.” (Interview 8)

Overall, students reported that the tool required a fair bit of familiarisation, for example: *“it took me I guess about half hour to get used to the, I would say, organizational things” (Interview 17), “it would have taken quite a lot fiddling for which you don’t necessary have enough time for” (Interview 15), or “I had to mess around a bit to get it the way I wanted it” (Interview 14).*

Some students reported they were initially confused, but used guideline documents provided by the tutor. The majority of students interviewed read the instructions before logging in to Mahara and creating their blog, some referred to instructions only when encountered problems, but in general they appreciated having instructions available (*“I guess that the user descriptions that we got, also that we got a trial page at the blog that we could use as an experiment, so that helped to get the functionality a bit easier, otherwise I think it would’ve taken a bit more time” (Interview 1)*).

In terms of particular technical issues reported by the students, the majority of concerns were related to:

- **Formatting of text and pictures** (*“Yeah, wrote everything there and then copied it and pasted it, and it practically got rid of formatting. So you have to rebuild everything, if I had pictures, you couldn’t just copy the picture you actually have to insert file and bring it in.” Interview 4, “I mean the only thing that I remember is that when I was actually writing my blog and I try to get some pictures and some images in it was always sort of mis-formatting them so when I was in draft mode it seem alright but when I actually published the blog then they were kind of out of place” Interview 6, “the only thing that I was thinking, as you can see from my post, the formatting. It was the only thing that I wasn’t really aware and my post in the end looked like this. So I found personally that the formatting wasn’t good, the format what kind of not so intuitive, Interview 16), and for this reasons many students decided to write the article in Microsoft Word*
- **Speed and responsiveness of the platform** (*“So couple of times I had to close the system and go back in, and considering I was just copying and pasting and uploading images, it should have taken about 10-15 minutes and it probably took a couple of hours. But it was just on images, the text was fine.” Interview 15)*

- **Responding to comments** (*"Yesterday I wanted to respond to feedback that I did receive from another student and I noticed that at the bottom of my own blog post I could only comment by pressing on "place feedback" as well. So that was kind of unclear to me: is this feedback now that feeds to another part of the system because its classified as feedback? Or is it just a normal commenting feature?" Interview 2*), which after I clarified to some of them encouraged them to respond to feedback received
- **Lack of spell check** (*"I think there is no spell check, and obviously the whole issue of not being able to do draft" Interview 15*), which was another reason to write the assignment in Microsoft Word
- **No draft function** (*"I think the main issue, the only problem I really have is, I don't think you can save as draft." Interview 15*), which resulted in many edits
- **Blog interface** (*"I did have trouble when you first get in and you're creating your blog, and you kind of have different size text boxes and I wasn't really sure what was going on at any given time" Interview 5*), which caused some degree of dissatisfaction with the tool among students
- **Lack of clarity over blog content and description** (*"so we had basically posted our blog posts in the description rather than in the actual part where body supposed to go and I was one of those people who done that so it wasn't obviously as easy as it looked and I think it was a bit unclear that the box that they had was just meant for description and we have to click on another tab to get to the actual editing part. So I think that was a bit unclear." Interview 10*), which required edits and changes
- **Navigation** (*"when I was searching for blogs, sometimes I had to press six different buttons in order to get there" Interview 4*), which seems to limit students' eagerness to visit the platform and browse through articles
- **Lack of integration with email or Moodle** (*"The only thing I found hard about it is not linked to LSE e-mail, I found that slightly annoying. Just because it would have been easier to be aware that it was commented on. Because I always check my e-mail, when I obviously don't check Mahara." Interview 5*, *"Even if I was logged in to Moodle I would have to log in again through Mahara portal and sometimes my username wouldn't work, I always had to go through the Moodle page, so as a user experience I think it was quite terrible." Interview 7*, *"if you come from Moodle I wasn't able to login somehow if you were logged out due to time reasons, I don't really know, the credentials which will be required", Interview 12*), which caused some degree of dissatisfaction with the tool among students
- **Concerns over privacy** (*"But I think what really concerns me before you might expand it is that you have a candidate number and an exam number. And you had*

to submit your exam number but with the concept of everybody commenting on the next blog and you can refer to the exam number, because when I comment on the next blog then everybody knows” Interview 9)

- **Concerns over the grading process** (*“Because I think LSE policy is that you are not allowed to share any assessed work with other course mates before the grading. We had to sign something, and this is like. I did not want the others to see, but I had to let them see it” Interview 9, “I’m pretty sure you can actually edit any ones and obviously as a student that’s that a little bit nerve-wracking because obviously you would never hope this is the case but I mean it is kind of scary that someone can go to your blog and by accident change your formatting or delete the word. Something that could actually count against you for marks” Interview 3)*)

In general, students were happy with this form of submitting a graded assignment, but a few of them pointed towards certain uneasiness: *“it’s like, not academically, I mean it’s good that I didn’t need to do a lot of academic, like, strict references or academic analysis but it’s a kind of weird because I’m just not used to it and then the blog itself its more casual I say informal for me, because blog is informal” (Interview 17)*, which indicates that these students were surprised by the informal format of the assignment itself rather than the functionality or features of the platform.

When asked, students were in general positive about using Mahara to turn in a graded assignment, but some of them expressed their reservations around the informality of the tool, concerns over the diminished privacy, or the fact that blog articles could be edited after the deadline. Some students suggested that Mahara is a useful tool at a university, but perhaps for other purposes than turning in an assignment, for example:

- Discussion forum
- Supporting other students in their work
- Peer feedback platform
- University blogging platform

This points to potential other applications of Mahara at the School.

2. Peer review on Mahara

In general, the majority of students – all but one interviewed – admitted that they found it was useful to see blog posts written by other students. Some reasons mentioned included:

- **Exposure to other perspectives on the same subject** (*“I thought it was interesting, because I know that a few other blogs were about the same topic and you could view what other people thought on the same topic” Interview 1, “It was really interesting to read the different takes on the topic and the different views so I really like that” Interview 2*)
- **Familiarisation with other issues related to the module** (*“I thought it was helpful because you can get like a quick fix of the themes included in the course” Interview 1*)
- **Transparency** (*“It was actually very interesting because you can and it’s very transparent, like, we send the assignments for the courses and no one ever sees them and this one you can truly see every one” Interview 3*)
- **Improvement of own writing** (*“I think if you know your peer group and you’re writing stuff like this in a way you would work so you want to write something good, so the quality might increase.” Interview 5, “There was actually this one concept that really did a lot for me, there was this concept, because I’m quite for legislation, I think it needs nourishing” Interview 1*)
- **Expansion of own knowledge** (*“I just found it interesting, like topics that I never heard of like quantum computing for instance, I actually read the blog and followed the references.” Interview 8*)

The majority of interviewees looked at posts related to their topic, some students also read on other subjects, mostly guided by blog titles they found interesting. Some students planned to return to Mahara at a later stage to read other articles.

Several of interviewees spontaneously brought up the value of peer review and mentioned that receiving peer feedback helped them in formulating their thoughts on the final essay:

- *“I found it extremely useful because he also put down, I think, like 8 or 9 references which I can use toward my essay and I’m very grateful for that” Interview 7*
- *“It was nice to see how another person will argue in this particular course and that helped me to understand, or at least see another perspective, and I think that it would help me to write a better essay because I know how other people go about it. And, as I said, when I was looking at the other blog I think it really helped” Interview 16*

- *“Overall I very much liked the idea of having peer review. And I was also very happy to receive the review and the feedback on my blog from another student. So that I thought was really helpful and it was also very insightful to see what other people were writing about” Interview 16*

Some students pointed to the fact that they thought peer review in general was a useful element, but did not work in their case due to the quality or type of feedback received. Most concerns in this case were related to the fact that some comments were not critical or insightful (e.g. *“It just needs to be careful to make sure it’s not like fluffy feedback either and, like I said, I think some people have got feedback, like, very lengthy, here are some sources to look at, like actually trying to help and some people getting feedback like “good job” Interview 3, “because I think it is useful to give a comment but the things is that lot of people only commented like ‘oh, very good blog’ but in my opinion that is not helpful because I would rather that people say ‘you should think of this and this and this’ and kind of be more critical” Interview 4*), or suggested looking at points that were not relevant to the essay or blog idea, or were just opinion comments, rather than feedback on the blog.

A peer comment was considered useful when:

- It contained some sources for further reading
- It was critical
- It commented on the coherence of the argument or conclusions
- It sparked new thoughts or ideas
- Was encouraging

Some students commented that they felt peer feedback was not entirely fair, as some students received what was consider better feedback than others (e.g. *“The comments I received are extremely valuable for my essay. I know this student; he has a very strong academic background and is a very focused worker. So I guess I profited from a chance of receiving feedback from him. To me it’s very helpful in that regard. Having this component for my essay is very valuable” Interview 2, “I’ve had people show me feedback that they received and it wasn’t always as detailed as mine” Interview 7, “there are a few people who commented, like, a great deal and I was like: ‘oh, I wish this person would comment on my blog’ to get a really proper feedback” Interview 1, “I think it was purely luck of the draw. I think I got very lucky with the person that gave me feedback, because it was very helpful and detailed, but I know some other people who have like a couple of lines: ‘yes, it’s great” Interview 7*), or some students were disappointed they have not received any peer comments despite having posted theirs (e.g. *“So, yeah, I did not receive a comment*

yet. [It makes me feel] kind of bummed because I think I provided a comment for someone so early because truly this meant to be a very helpful type of exercise where is he is where I think you can improve and as I'm writing my essay, it would be great to have that. I like to talk out my argument with someone because I thought I haven't got my feedback yet and others have" Interview 3).

There were no clear patterns in relation to the sequence of receiving or giving comments. Some students provided peer comments before receiving theirs, while others waited to receive their first comment. In general, students browsed comments provided by others on other blogs to learn what was expected of a peer comment. Some students admitted they were positively influenced by the quality of comments received and in turn decided to provide equally useful and grounded comments to others.

In terms of reviewing the work of other students and giving a peer comment, the majority of students admitted they found it a useful exercise. It helped them in:

- Avoiding the same pitfalls
- Improving the structure of their own argument
- Improving their own writing
- Formulating a better argument for the final essay

Students took between 20 minutes to 2-3 hours to provide peer review, and usually had quite a structured process around providing it, which included doing a fair bit of independent research on the topic:

- *"So, I went through their article a couple of times. I didn't really give feedback immediately, I went through it first and after a couple of days I went back to it, trying to understand their point of view. The one I was to provide the feedback for was not the topic I was working on, but it did address an important theme for the course that we were learning about at that time as well, so I just commented on, trying to understand what the main argument is and what the opposing views are, so I just tried to comment on how valid that person's argument is, so I guess my feedback was sort of similar to this one, not maybe that specific." Interview 1*
- *"I read their blog piece and tried to find the themes within their blog piece. Do a little bit of researching reading online and try see if there are any further aspects of that theme or topic that they can include or talk about because I think the main thing with reviewing somebody else's blog is that you haven't read as much as they did on this topic, so definitely try to read up on that topic and see if there are any holes or any criticism that you could give to be helpful and be able to help them when they writing their essay" Interview 7*

- *“I read it carefully and again, tried to look at it from perspective of someone receiving a feedback so what would I want to have as feedback so I tried to as far as I remember give a feedback that would augment their argument not necessarily change it. So there was a sense of criticality but I was mostly trying to perhaps give them additional perspective or just I think I did two feedbacks but in one of them one of the things I did was to post an article which I found interesting which could help their arguments but it wasn’t an entirely different argument” Interview 6*

3. Faculty feedback on Mahara

Students in general did not mind Mahara as a platform to receive faculty feedback:

- *“I mean doesn’t make much difference I think whether it’s on Mahara or by email, so either way I think it’s helpful” Interview 6*

However, the majority of them would have preferred to keep the faculty feedback private. Some were concerned about the visibility of the comment and concluded they would rather keep their comment private (in some cases, only if the faculty feedback was negative, in some cases regardless of the contents of feedback received):

- *“Well, in this specific comment I didn’t see anything that I would like to hide, but generally I think feedback should be private” Interview 1*
- *“I would say as student here that we don’t submit many things in the program, right, so there is a lot of pressure, like, on every submission even if it’s like a blog post that’s worth 5% of your grade so I would not really want my feedback out there” Interview 3*
- *“I don’t think that should be on the blog. I don’t think it should be public because then I think people would be more, like natural response would be to look at other people what’s they got instead of focus on your own work and what you could have done better.” Interview 4*
- *“Because the feedback was so short and generic I didn’t mind but I feel that if the feedback would have been critical or if the feedback would have been negative maybe then it would be different, I wouldn’t want it to be public.” Interview 10*

Several interviewees commented that they were not satisfied that the initial premise of being able to decide whether to make a comment public or private failed:

- *“I think that is a bit unfortunate, because the feedback is not something you necessarily, depending on the feedback of course, but you don’t want to everybody to necessarily read your feedback, so that would be an issue in the future as well,*

because of the nature of the form makes it easier to provide your name and the feedback part you would like to be private, so I guess people are analysing whose is whose, so if my name was there and it would be really negative feedback, like, that would be a bit demotivating.” Interview 1

- *“Yeah, definitely I thought about that at the beginning because this is the first time where I was submitting something that has been public and other people will be able to see my work, see the comments and were able to know it was me. But we had to submit and we really didn’t have a choice, so... We did the poll at the beginning, where the professor asked if we wanted the blog post to just say our candidate number or our actual names, so then the majority of people want the candidate numbers, so I think most people wanted to be anonymous but then that in the end didn’t work out.” Interview 10*

4. Submitting final essay on Mahara

When asked about submitting the final essay on Mahara, the majority of students expressed reservations and would have preferred to submit it as a PDF through Moodle. This was due to:

- *Ease of formatting (e.g. “maybe then I would choose a different platform, because of formatting. Publishing 5.000 words with that structure wouldn’t work” Interview 1)*
- *Formality of the assignment (e.g. “Yeah I feel like because I relate Mahara to blogging and it feels like an informal way of submitting academic essay. As a blog piece it was ok but when you write an essay so long then you want to hand it in as an academic piece and not like another blog post” Interview 10)*
- *Weight of the final essay (e.g. “My initial reaction is that I don’t seen Mahara in the final essay type of format for me. I feel like an essay is something you pour all your heart and soul into and I would wanted it to be PFD and submitted on Moodle because that’s what I know and makes me feel happy about it” Interview 3)*

Students in general did not mind receiving feedback on final essay through Mahara, as long as they could keep it private or at least decide whether to make it public or private.

Some students commented that they would prefer to submit the essay the usual way, but then make it available to other students (e.g. *“If I can submit it the traditional way I wouldn’t mind putting it there for others to read” Interview 10, “Truthfully, it’s just like a bit of a ritual thing, we’ve been here, like, close to 5-6 months and I did everything through Moodle, I’m used to it, I got e-mails that have been submitted, I feel very fit for the*

technology. And this is just completely new; it's more like a social thing than technology thing" Interview 3)

The majority of students admitted they would welcome the possibility to go to Mahara and read essays written by their fellow students (e.g. *"of course I would want to look at articles, so if there was an article that received positive feedback from academics and peers it would definitely be worth browsing through the topics that would interest me in that sense" Interview 1, "I would have a look at those which got very good grade, to sort of see what gets you that very good grade" Interview 7).*

Conclusions

Both qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that students engaged well with the task and saw the benefits of providing peer review. Qualitative data points to several areas of improvement which, when addressed, would turn Mahara into a useful peer review platform.

Students' views are more polarised in relation to the faculty feedback, especially its public visibility or not. Allowing students to have control over visibility seems to be a required feature.