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# Evaluation of the use of blog posts as a method of assessment for AN300: 'Advanced Theory in Social Anthropology' (2016-2017)

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**Evaluation of the use of blog posts as a  
method of assessment for AN300:  
'Advanced Theory in Social  
Anthropology' (2016-2017)**

Learning Technology and Innovation (LTI) &  
Department of Anthropology  
London School of Economics  
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## Executive summary

This report is an evaluation of the use of weekly blog posts as a new method of assessment for the course AN300: 'Advanced Theory in Social Anthropology', in the year 2016-2017. This was the first time that the blogs were used. The pilot received funding from the Learning Technology and Innovation (LTI) unit. This report is based on feedback received from students and teachers – in particular through a focus group discussion held at the end of Lent Term 2017.

In general, the trial can be considered a success. AN300 is a third year-course in which students engage closely with whole books, rather than journal articles, and connect these to other literature they have encountered during their degree. As such, it is sometimes described as an advanced reading group. This makes it ill suited to exams as a mode of assessment. The blogs, by contrast, allowed students to develop their own ideas about the books they were reading as they went along. The posts that resulted were often highly original and creative. Students appreciated the opportunity the blogs provided to be more experimental with their ideas and arguments, and less formal in their writing, and to work in a medium other than an essay or exam. It was also clear that having to produce weekly posts encouraged many students to engage more closely with the readings than they otherwise might have. This was particularly evident in the high quality of class discussions. Having to write a post prior to class gave students an opportunity to critically reflect on the readings, and to bring to the class ideas they had developed in their blogs.

At the same time, the trial of blog posts was met with a substantial degree of frustration and anxiety from students. Much of this feeling was a result of this being the first year blogs were tried in the department. Many of these third-year students, at the pointy end of their degree, felt they were being 'treated like guinea pigs', as one put it. Some of this anxiety no doubt stems from other factors only indirectly related to the blogs – concerning, for example, the more general demands of their degree. But students also expressed frustration with specific features of the blog assessment: with what many students perceived as insufficient guidance on what they were expected to produce; with what some felt was a lack of rigour and fairness in how the blogs were graded; with what some saw as inadequate feedback on their posts, especially at the start of the course; with what many considered an unreasonably heavy and anxiety-inducing workload; with what they felt was a lack of clarity regarding the length of blog posts; and with what some saw as an unfair regime relating to lateness and extensions.

Additional concerns were raised in feedback received from the course lecturers. Chief among these was the heavy workload placed on the GTAs responsible for marking the blog posts. Instructors were also disappointed that students did not in the end comment on each other's posts as much as was intended – meaning that the exercise did not fully realise its potential to facilitate collaborative learning.

Some suggestions for responding to the various concerns raised by students and lecturers – and thereby improving the running of the assessment in future years – are offered in the discussion section of this report.

## **Introduction**

This report presents findings of a pilot that introduced blog posts as a new method of assessment for the course AN300: ‘Advanced Theory in Social Anthropology’ in the year 2016-2017. The report is based on feedback from both students and teachers. The project received funding from the Learning Technology and Innovation (LTI) unit, and is part of a wider program to enhance assessment and feedback at the school through technology.

## **Background**

The aim of this project was to encourage students to develop their own original ideas and critical responses to key texts in social anthropology, as well as to cultivate their capacity to respond thoughtfully and diplomatically to the ideas of others. Making regular blog entries was also meant to encourage students to keep abreast of the required readings for each week, partly in order to positively impact the overall quality of class discussions. The project was also intended to cultivate students’ digital literacy, providing them with training in an increasingly widespread form of disseminating information.

AN300 is an intensive reading course focusing on full-length books rather than journal articles. There are three ‘cycles’ per term, each devoted to a different book. It was hoped that students would be able to use their posts to develop and articulate original ideas prompted by their reading of these books, and relate them to other literature they have read over the course of their degree.

Each student was required to produce his/her own blog, posting regularly over the course of MT and LT. Students were expected to make one post each week for the first two weeks of each book cycle (12 posts for the course overall). Every third week was dedicated to commenting on the posts of others. The final mark consisted of the average of each student’s best eight posts. That is, their worst four posts did not count towards their final grade. Because of this feature, extensions were officially not to be offered, since students could miss up to four posts without any penalty.

The posts were assessed weekly by a GTA who was also in charge of providing feedback. For this trial, LTI hosted an introductory session for students on writing for blogs, established a Word Press framework through which students could set up their own blogs, and provided ongoing technical assistance with their development and maintenance as required. See Appendix 1 for further information on course details.

## **Evaluation methodology**

The new mode of assessment was evaluated in two ways:

First, student feedback was gleaned through a focus group held on the day of the last lecture for the course in LT. Approximately 20 students attended the focus group –

out of a total enrolment of 28 students. A sandwich lunch was provided. The focus group ran for approximately one hour and was led by the two GTA's who had been responsible for marking the blog posts over MT and LT. They developed a question schedule and used this to guide the discussion in an open-ended way. The discussion was free flowing and almost all students attending contributed to the conversation. There was a sense in which the students were genuinely interested in voicing their reflections on the blogs. The discussion was recorded. In addition, a representative from the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre attended the focus group and took notes of the discussion that were later shared with the organisers.

Second, the focus group data was complemented by feedback elicited from the course lecturers (who also taught the classes). This was provided in the form of short written reflections. In contrast to the student experience, lecturers were asked to reflect in particular on how the new mode of assessment impacted learning and teaching, e.g. how it affected class discussions, interactions with students, etc.

## **Limitations**

While the feedback provided in the focus group was broad and detailed, and while the students appeared uninhibited during the discussion, there are three possible limitations worth flagging. The first is the possibility that the direction and tenor of discussion may have been affected by the fact that it was moderated by the two GTA's who had graded the blogs over the previous two terms. While this is unlikely to have had a substantial impact, it might be that students who had been disappointed with their grades – or with the amount of feedback received – used the discussion as an opportunity, with the GTA's in the room, to channel their disappointment. At the same time, those who had been pleased with their grades might have exaggerated the extent to which they were positive about the new mode of assessment.

A second potential limitation is that a general sense of frustration with this year's use of blogs being an initial trial may have coloured the discussion. In other words, had this not been the first year, the discussion may have proceeded differently. This point will be addressed further in the discussion section of this report. A third and related potential limitation is that the focus group was also used by some students to voice their more general frustrations about the course – especially about what they saw as its unreasonably demanding reading list. This too may have coloured the discussion about assessment, which is in many ways a separate (though related) issue.

## **Results**

### **Impact on class discussions and reading**

There was general agreement among both students and lecturers that having to write the blog posts encouraged students to do the readings before the classes. Students generally admitted that they would not have been as prepared for the class discussions were it not for having to write their posts. The lecturers also highlighted the significant effect this had on class discussions:

*Blogging had an incredibly positive effect on the quality of class discussions. Students were much better prepared to articulate their points of view in the weeks when blogs were due. Discussions were more lively and students seemed to feel more comfortable disagreeing. By comparison, in the weeks when students were supposed to comment ... students were comparatively sullen and freely admitted to not having done the readings.*

Moreover, many students felt that the discussion were especially engaging when it was clear the lecturer had read their posts before class. The instructor could then prompt students to tease out ideas they knew students had raised in the posts. They could also compare and put into dialogue different ideas from different students' posts.

However, some students also felt that their engagement with the text was often diminished because of the 'anxiety' produced by the pressure to find a subject to write about every week. As one said,

*Every time you were reading something you were reading it with the explicit intention to find something to blog about, instead of trying to appreciate the text holistically.*

At the same time, one student admitted that once they had landed on their topic for that week's post, they would sometimes, 'not bother with the rest of the book'. As will be discussed further below, very few students said they were able sustain the amount of reading and blog writing over both terms. As one student admitted during the focus group, 'I didn't finish even one book this term or last term'. This statement was met with some agreement.

### **Impact on student writing**

The students were generally positive about the impact blogging had on the development of their writing – in both the posts themselves, and also in the end-of-term essays. Lecturers observed changes in the blog posts as the term progressed, as student writing shifted from a more informal, personal style to a more academic one with a deeper engagement with the texts. At the same time, this raises questions about the kind of writing that is expected from students in this new medium, and to what extent it should be seen as different from essay writing. This will be further addressed below.

One major positive that students expressed was that the blogs gave them more freedom and an opportunity to be more creative in developing their ideas, especially when compared to an essay or exam where there is only one shot at 'getting it right'. As one put it, 'It has allowed me to do things I haven't been able to do in other courses. I could try one thing one week and then the next week another.' Relatedly, students expressed how they now felt now more confident when starting a new piece of writing, and how this will help them when writing an essay or their dissertations: 'I have been able to, in a very informal way, just go 'blah' on a page and then

restructure it and work on it'. Or in the words of another student, 'I feel like I can go "OK, now I'm going to write 1000 words and I'm going to structure it this way"'.

On the other hand, one student expressed concern that the blog posts had not given them enough opportunity to bring the different readings together, which could prove difficult when it comes to writing their essay.

### **Student workload**

Many students were vocal about the level of 'anxiety' they experienced during AN300. As noted above, it is difficult to determine to what extent this is attributable to the blogs as a method of assessment, and to what extent to other features of the course – or indeed to other concerns beyond the course. A common refrain was that the reading load was unreasonably demanding. It is possible that this sense was compounded by having to write weekly blog posts, because it generally compelled students to keep up with the reading, as noted above. Additionally, as one of the lecturers remarked regarding this issue,

*I suspect a good deal of the negativity around the blogs stems not from the blogs themselves at all, but rather from more general anxieties about Grade Point Averages and future employment prospects, which are likely to be inflamed by any attempt to evaluate students or hold them accountable for what they have read and learned.*

At the same time, several of the students made it clear that they did not necessarily see this anxiety in negative terms. Some felt that it was 'productive' since the weekly deadlines motivated them to keep up with the readings and to develop their ideas as the weeks progressed. However, it is important to note that this sentiment came from those who admitted to being students who already worked well under pressure. There was also a minority of students that felt that the workload was not entirely unreasonable: 'Although it was a lot of work, it was bang on', one said. For their part, one of the lecturers was somewhat sceptical about the student complaints regarding workload, stating that, 'the reading requirement for the course – a book every three weeks, plus one or two articles – should be well within their capacities.'

A major complaint from students was that they had to write their posts before the lecture and the class. They felt they needed more guidance in how to engage the readings. One of the lecturers found that they were able to mollify the complaints by posting the lectures three days before the blogs were due. Although the other lecturer did not follow this approach, students expressed that this lecturer was helpful when students emailed them asking for more directions about a reading before writing their posts. Another factor that students felt reduced anxiety was that the reading lists were circulated early, in the summer prior to the start of the academic year (although they expressed some frustration that the list for LT term was later altered for reasons unrelated to the blogs).

In terms of workload-related anxiety, the students offered several suggestions for how this might be reduced. Many related to timetabling. One student, for example, proposed that the post be due after the lecture but before the class. They felt this would allow them to get some direction from the lecture, but still be pushed to do the



readings and develop ideas on them before the class. Indeed, as one of lecturers suggested, to have the blogs due after both the lecture *and* the class ‘would have a major negative effect on the pedagogical value of the exercise’. Another student suggested to write only one post for each book, which would also allow, ‘more time to consolidate ideas’.

### **GTA workload**

Both lecturers felt that the assessment of the blog posts was unreasonably time-consuming for the GTAs recruited. One lecturer put it this way: ‘The workload involved in providing students with proper feedback was far from trivial. I quickly determined that it wasn’t reasonable to expect the GTA to bear the responsibility on her own given the amount of hours she was being paid for.’<sup>1</sup> The other lecturer noted that the blogs seemed ‘very time consuming to assess properly.’ As noted below, a chief reason for this was the expectation from students that they be given detailed feedback each week.

### **Marking**

Students were particularly vocal on the issue of marking. Indeed, the fairness of the grades appears to have been a concern for students over the course of the two terms. At some moments, this concern was particularly high, as in the first couple of weeks of MT; at other times it seemed to have dissipated somewhat, as when one of the lecturers began providing extensive written feedback on posts, in addition to the feedback from the GTA. In one perhaps extreme case, a student felt the blogs had jeopardised her overall result for their degree: ‘Because of the way [the blogs] are marked, there’s just no way I’m going to get a first now, even if I do well in the essays.’

Some students expressed frustration that there was insufficient guidance provided for how to get a higher mark for the blog posts. Although they were made aware of the marking grid (see Appendix 1), some felt that that the marking was not in line with this rubric. One student thought that although they were originally encouraged to write something very informal and which, she mistakenly felt, could perhaps be only tangentially related to the readings, markers were expecting writing that was more essay-like:

*[We were told] that they can be informal blogs, they can be, like, ideas, and problems, and anything that’s kind of adjacently related to the book, but eventually we marked in the sense that it has to have a beginning, middle, and end – it has to relate directly to the book, it has to explain something in the book ... so it was just like writing an essay.*

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<sup>1</sup> The GTAs recruited were post-fieldwork PhD students funded by LSE PhD Studentships. The blog marking constituted part of the ‘work’ component of their studentship: ‘The studentships include a requirement that scholars contribute to their academic department as part of their research training, in the form of providing teaching or other work in their department, usually from year two onwards’ (See <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/students/moneyMatters/financialSupport/ScholarshipsLSE/PhDApp/LSEPhDStudentships.aspx>).

It would therefore be important to stress to students in future years that, although a fully polished argument is certainly not required to achieve a higher mark, a close engagement with that week's assigned reading is still key. Those students who failed to achieve higher marks consistently produced posts that, although perhaps interesting and original, displayed little engagement with the book. And although this was expressed to them in feedback comments, more thought ought to perhaps be given on how to make this explicit. A related concern (to be discussed in more detail below) was that some students felt that their experiments with the blogging form – hyperlinks, gifs, videos, photos, layout, etc. – were not sufficiently reflected in their marks:

*There are some really cool things you can do with blogs that there just isn't any scope for in the way it's marked ... You could make the blog look amazing and use links, but I felt I was just throwing them in there for a novelty.*

This student and others suggested that a portion of the mark should be formally set aside to assess the originality and flair with which students made use of the blog format. This was also a concern on the mind of one lecturer:

*A key question for future years would be whether to encourage this kind of public-facing work and, if so, how to reward good design and accessibility; or alternatively whether to encourage a more serious and disciplined style of learning diary, free of the distractions of animated gifs etc.*

More generally, another student felt that allocating half of the course final grade to a new mode of assessment in the third year of the degree was unfair:

*It's a shame that fifty per cent of our mark was based on blog posts when we've written essays for 3 years. I was just getting the hang of it. It's like going back to zero again.'*

There was some agreement on this last point, as well as a suggestion from another student that the current breakdown of marks should be altered so that the blogs are only worth only 40%, and the essays 60%. On the other hand, another student felt that the breakdown was appropriate, and that it did not place too much pressure on their blog posts, meaning that they were able to try out new ideas, whereas, 'I can't really experiment with [an essay] ... I'm going to do the bog standard thing.'

Two other related points were prominent in the comments about marking. First, is that students felt the marking scale (1-4) was too narrow: 'It just doesn't give you guys enough scope to give [students] feedback that actually reflects their work.' Students suggested that a mark out of 100, or out of 10, would be preferable. One student who said she had received 'solid threes' was convinced that some weeks she had put in substantially more effort than others. Putting aside the question of effort translating into quality of posts, this student's call for greater granularity in the marking might warrant consideration. Other students echoed this position, as well as a suggestion that students ought to have, at least in principle, the possibility of getting full marks, even if exceedingly rare. One described the current capping of the marking scale at 4 (the equivalent of 80%) as 'incredibly discouraging'.

Second is that, for some students, the marking felt ‘subjective’. They suggested that a second marker might put their mind at ease, especially ‘when you think how much our dissertations are scrutinised.’ Some students felt that the marking of the blogs felt insufficiently rigorous given how much they contributed to their final grade. This sense was compounded, for one student, by the switching of GTA markers between MT and LT: ‘In the first term you built up a rapport... [The marker could say,] “You’ve developed here, you’ve brought something in that you may not have last week”.’ She felt that this was disrupted in the second term. Finally, one student thought that the assessment might work better if the students were only given a participation mark on the basis of posting anything at all. But this suggestion was not widely supported, and one student felt such a move would ‘disincentivise’ students from putting effort into their posts.

### **Feedback**

Opinion on the quantity and quality of feedback was mixed. One fairly widespread view was from students was that they would have appreciated clearer guidance and feedback that would have helped them get better marks, especially early on in the course. One student expressed it this way: ‘I found it difficult in the first few weeks ... I had no clue what I was doing.’ One of the lecturers made a similar point, feeling that, in future, it would be necessary to provide ‘extensive, timely feedback after the first blog post.’ This same lecturer ended up providing substantial feedback on posts on a regular basis.

*[In addition to the GTA’s feedback,] I [felt I] had to dedicate a few hours per week to providing my own comments on the blogs. Yet students remained upset that they had not received sufficiently extensive feedback in the first week.*

The amount and quality of feedback provided by that lecturer was greatly appreciated by the students, and considered highly unusual:

*[Their] feedback was so phenomenal, so constructive ... I’m appalled at how much contact time we get at the LSE... [He gave us] the feedback we deserved ... He went above and beyond and took advantage of the medium.*

As addressed below, there is an outstanding question of how much feedback – aside from the initial week in MT – ought to be expected and is sustainable to provide to students over the course of the two terms. As one of the lecturers suggested, it may be a question of managing expectations: ‘In future, clearer guidelines may need to be set in terms of how much students can expect in terms of feedback.’

### **Collaborative learning and comments**

Given that students were encouraged to think of the blogs as ‘a collaborative endeavour’, it was disappointing that students did not read and comment on each other’s blogs to a greater extent – during the third week of the cycle, and also more generally. As one lecturer put it,

*Although students clearly wrote their blogs for an audience ... very few took the trouble of actually commenting on the blogs of others, despite this being a requirement of the course. In conversation they claimed to read the blogs of other students, and found this helpful and interesting, but lacked the confidence or will to leave a written comment. Unfortunately, the fact that comments were not part of the summative assessment made commenting impossible to enforce. This was a weakness of the course design in my opinion, especially as learning how to write tactful, constructive criticism of others is a valuable transferable skill.*

The focus group discussion resonated with the above point: Students made it plain that the commenting would need to somehow have a bearing on the final mark in order to guarantee greater participation. As one student said, 'I think it would be worthwhile to alter the marking system so that comments also counted toward the grade because otherwise people won't do it ... I thought it was a lost opportunity'. There was a general sense that although they may have wanted to read – and even comment on – each other's posts, their busy schedules mean they had to be strategic with their use of time, and this was one thing they were able to let slide without consequences. That said, the few students in the room who appeared to have regularly commented found the activity incredibly productive:

*I don't think you should get rid of the commenting. The commenting part was super helpful, super useful. I think it's a massive shame that more people didn't comment on each others' blogs. Because I know that I certainly did ... The comments are really important. If you do them, it will really help with synthesising your ideas.*

This student went on to say that reading and commenting on other blogs had ultimately informed what they chose to write about for the end of term essay. He was frustrated that his interest in what other students were posting was not reciprocated:

*I was always super disappointed I never got any comments. It's really upsetting that you're expected to comment on other peoples' blogs but no-one comments back on yours. You're like, 'Are my ideas invalid? Are they not important?'*

Some students explained that they had been reading, but not commenting on other blogs: 'It was good, fine, great. I enjoyed reading other people, I just didn't comment.' Still others seemed to treat the third week of each cycle as a week off. 'I appreciated the commenting weeks [as a break from writing posts].' Another student took a more hardline position, rejecting the more general collaborative thinking underlying the blogs and commenting: 'I don't pay seventeen grand a year to attend this institution for a book club ... [We need] just a little more structure.' However, this last sentiment did not appear to be widely shared. In any event, a key question is what might have encouraged greater participation and greater investment in the collaborative aspect of this project. Aside from incorporating commenting into the marking scheme, two additional points seem germane.

First is the discomfort that some students felt about commenting. As one student put it, 'You feel awkward, commenting on your peers like I'm this authoritative voice,

when I don't know what I'm talking about.' Some students felt this discomfort might be reduced by greater anonymity, arguing this might reduce the felt obligation to flatter one another, and reduce the barriers to critical engagement. 'Being in class with someone who's shredded [your post]' would be uncomfortable, one said. On the other hand, another student thought greater anonymity would be a bad idea: 'Surely we don't want to feed into this awful culture we have on the internet where people can't stand behind their ideas ... [that's] a problematic culture.'

Many students agreed they that the situation might be improved by having only the GTA's comments – but not their marks – made public:

*[Because] the marks were on the blog posts, I felt I was in competition with everyone else ... I was like, 'Oh, this person got a 4. What can I take from their post to get a 4'? Rather than, 'Oh, what they've written, that's really interesting!'*

On this more general question of publicness and anonymity, one lecturer said,

*How best to provide feedback and marks to students on their blog posts was an ongoing issue and one I felt we were not able to resolve satisfactorily. Given the intention that students comment on each other's blogs, having the comments of teachers be immediately visible seemed a good idea. On the other hand, hiding the marks from everyone except the student also seems fair and desirable. More thought needs to be given to the question of how best to record and communicate grades each week.*

The second point relates to the site format, which many students felt was not well suited to starting the kinds of conversations course designers had desired. Students needed to go from their own blogs to a main list page and then click through from one blog to the next: 'Reading everyone's blog didn't feel easy', as one said. Many felt a 'newsfeed' feature would have worked better. This would have allowed students to get a sense – on a single web page – of what other students had posted about that week, to see whether they had discussed similar or different topics to their own posts, and then to engage accordingly: 'If [posts from different students] popped up, you'd think, "Oh, someone else wrote about religion in their blog"'. In the absence of such a space – which one student suggested could take the form of a Facebook group – there was, in the words of one student, 'no space to follow through.'

### **Lateness and extensions**

An additional issue that came up with both students and lecturers was lateness and the question of extensions. One lecturer had this to say:

*Despite the fact that I made it very clear to students early on that there would be no extensions for blog posts, and that this was essentially factored in to the structure of the assessment (by which four blog posts would not enter into the final assessment of the course, i.e. they could miss up to four without penalty), I was regularly emailed by students each week to ask for extensions because of extenuating circumstances.*

A few students also expressed frustration with this situation regarding lateness and extensions, but from the opposite perspective, feeling that the regime was too rigid:

*There are twelve [posts], and you're only allowed to miss four, whereas for me, I get ill quite a lot, so at this point I've only done seven, and there's no space for me to an extra one, and you can't get extensions ... What do you do?*

### **Blog post length**

The issue of the length of posts was also of concern for some students, especially those who felt this unfairly affected the marking. Despite the word count being 200-400 words, there was a sense that longer posts – in which ideas could be fully teased out – were rewarded in the grading:

*In order to get the top marks we had to write a thousand words whereas what we were told to write was two to four hundred ... A thousand words is quite a lot of work ...*

Another said that, 'People who did well wrote double what I did'. But when asked whether the word count should be increased, students said no. It should stay as it is, one said, because it 'didn't feel like a big burden.' At the same time, there was general resistance to the suggestion that students should be penalised for going over the word count. If you get into an idea, one said, you should be able to develop it and see where it goes. In the overall interest of fairness, however, there was some agreement that perhaps a cap of 1000 words should be enforced: 'A decision needs to be made about whether you want everyone to be standardised. It's not fair on people who really want to synthesise their post.'

### **Technical/aesthetic aspects and transferable skills**

As noted above, some students felt their efforts to creatively and experimentally work with the blog format was not recognised in the marking. Even so, some still appreciated the opportunity to experiment with expressing ideas in different media. As one said, 'Finding photos is quite fun. It can change the tone of the piece. It can be less serious, you can put a stupid picture next to it.' However, this also raised the question of the extent to which these efforts might be a distraction. In the words of one lecturer,

*Many students obviously invested quite a bit of time and effort in the design of their blogs, including in finding good or amusing pictures or gifs. The tone of some of the blogs was also quite light and whimsical. This made the blogs easier to read and engage with, but I did have some reservations about whether this also came at the cost of substance and rigour.*

Another lecturer expressed a similar concern, though noted a change over time:

*The early blogs, if anything, were at times too blog-like, with an over-emphasis on gimmicky reaction gifs and the student's personal emotional reaction to aspects of the readings (or the act of reading itself). Over time, almost all of the students became better at finding a middle ground between*

*the informality of online discourse and the sometimes stilted and over-written quality of academic writing.*

The use of different media – and the ability to tailor writing for online settings – were part of a broader suite of skills that were part of the course’s intended outcomes. Students seemed generally happy to have developed some of these, though they were resistant to say that they could see the blogging having any direct bearing on future employment. Few said they were likely to include this exercise on their CV or in job applications. But many expressed a more general positive view along these lines:

*It’s quite nice to be able to write in a different style to essays because we’ve spent the last two years just writing essays, and this is a very different way of articulating your thoughts, which is probably a bit more useful [in terms of employment].*

One student who had previously run a short-lived a blog noted that, ‘If we were to go and pick it up now, I’d actually be better at writing for that blog, because of these blogs.’ Another student said that while he probably would not put the exercise on his CV, he appreciated being able to practice a way of writing,

*... where you have to think really quickly. ... I wrote mine in a very academic way, so that probably wouldn’t be helpful to an employer, but just the fact that you can synthesise your ideas is quite a useful skill as well.*

Regarding the more technical side, there was mixed opinion as to whether students had been given sufficient guidance. ‘I though it was really intuitive to set up a blog; it wasn’t that complicated’, one said. This echoes the view of one of the lecturers: ‘In terms of the interface itself, the blogs were fairly straightforward to set up and to read. LTI provided a very good level of technical support.’ At the same time, however, another student remarked, ‘I actually found setting up the blog really confusing because I’m bad at this stuff ... [Other people] decorated their blogs, and I literally couldn’t figure out how to do it.’

## **Discussion and conclusions**

On the basis of the above results, we can draw some general conclusions about the use of blogs as a method of assessment for AN300. Although students expressed various degrees of frustration with different aspects of the pilot, it can in general be considered a success – especially with respect to the overall learning aims of the AN300 course. As one of the lecturers put it,

*On the whole I felt that the blogs worked well and were a useful and effective form of assessment given the nature of this course, which revolves around close reading of whole books, and which would not be at all well suited to an exam. Blogs seemed to provide the space for students to pursue aspects of the text that interested them and to formulate original and often quite creative responses.*

The other lecturer also judged the pilot an overall success:

*I think the students learned a lot. A few described the experience to me as “intense.” One person, more ambivalently, compared the course to “eating your vegetables” (ie. It’s good for you, it makes you stronger, but it isn’t always immediately gratifying in the short-term).*

As noted above, much of the frustration and anxiety expressed by the students in the focus group – as well as throughout the two terms – can be attributed to the fact that this was a pilot. In the words of one student,

*I don’t think blogs are bad, they could work, but to experiment on us in our last year – it’s a bit much. It’s so stressful and now we’re being guinea pigs ... Do it to second years or something.*

In future years, as one lecturer suggested, ‘the fact that it has been done before will lend it legitimacy.’ This will be especially so if students are able to look over a selection of posts from the previous year to get a better sense of what is expected and what kind of post receives what grade. Moreover, it seems that many of the problems identified can be overcome if particular aspects are amended in future years. The focus group provided an opportunity for students to suggest some of these changes themselves. Several key points and possible recommendations become clear from the results. These can be broadly grouped as follows:

- Notwithstanding students’ complaints about workload, it is clear that having to write blog posts achieved the goal of positively impacting the students’ **engagement with readings** and the quality of **class discussions**. It is therefore suggested that, in future years, posts continue to be due prior to classes. The related question of whether they should precede or follow lectures might however warrant further consideration. This will have implications for timetabling; this year classes and lectures fell on the same day.
- Having to write blog posts also seemed to have a positive impact in terms of students’ **written communication skills**. Students acknowledged that having to produce succinct pieces of writing quickly, to tight deadlines, and in a form other than an essay or exam, were important skills to have developed. This suggests that the rate at which students were required to produce posts had a beneficial impact. It may be important, however, to consider student concerns about whether the third year of their degree is the appropriate time to introduce them to this new mode of writing. That said, and as noted above, AN300 is, compared to other Anthropology courses, particularly well suited to this type of assessment.
- It is important to note the degree of **anxiety** that students expressed during the focus group and throughout the two terms. As mentioned above, it is difficult to fully disentangle the extent to which this anxiety is attributable to the new method of assessment, to the fact this was a pilot, to other aspects of the AN300 course, or to outside factors (e.g. employment prospects). A major concern seemed to be with what was perceived to be an overly demanding



**reading list** – a concern that one of the lecturers felt was unfounded. Indeed, AN300, with its focus on reading whole books, always has a relatively substantial reading load. The question then is whether the weekly blog posts can be considered a justified additional burden; and also how they might be considered against that anxiety that might have been produced by the exams students avoided by having the blogs instead.

- A major focus of students’ frustrations was **marking**. This is related to the above point about anxiety regarding overall degree results and their perceived impact on job prospects. Possible changes to consider include:
  - Amending the 1-4 marking scale in favour of 1-10 or 1-20 scheme to provide greater granularity (although this will impact the issue of instructor workload discussed below).
  - Providing clearer advice at the outset about how the posts will be graded. This could be offered in the initial session, replacing or complementing the session led by LTI about how to write blogs. Exemplar posts from previous years could be discussed, making it explicit that although students are certainly not required to produce polished arguments each week, a close engagement with the reading is still required in order to receive higher marks.
  - A more formalised way of rewarding students for their originality in experimenting with the blog medium in the form of photos, videos, hyperlinks, etc. It may be worth setting aside a portion of the marks for this purpose – something that would be made easier by having a more granular marking scale.
- The question of marking is related to the issue of **feedback**. Much of the frustration discussed above seemed to result from what some students considered the insufficient feedback received early on in the course. It is therefore suggested that, in future years, extensive, timely feedback be provided after the first blog post. As one of the lecturers suggested, ‘an “all hands on deck” push to get each student a solid paragraph within four days of submitting their first blog posts would address a lot of the negativity that emerged’. At the same time, it will be necessary to provide **clear guidance** on how much feedback students should expect to receive. In this pilot year, students came to expect detailed comments each week, which was not the original intention.
- The issue of feedback has implications for **GTA workload**, and it will be necessary to consider, in light of the above discussion, whether it is sustainable to continue to rely on LSE Studentship-funded PhD students to mark and comment on the blogs. Another possible consideration is whether to instead require students to submit all their blog posts as a kind of “portfolio” at the end of each term, and to get a single mark and substantive comment on the portfolio. This might however make it harder to enforce the weekly deadlines, which are a likely reason for the high level of engagement in class as noted above.

- Despite their ability to facilitate **collaborative learning** – as well as to develop students’ capacity to engage critically and diplomatically with the ideas of their peers – it is clear that the blog posts did not realise this potential this year. The following changes might make students more likely to **comment** on one another’s posts in the future. Encouraging more commenting might also work towards reducing the amount of feedback expected from GTAs.
  - Make commenting a factor in the summative assessment of the course. A participation mark is one option, but this might be insufficient to guarantee more than token comments.
  - Making the marks from GTAs invisible – while keeping GTAs’ comments visible – in order to reduce the sense of ‘competitiveness’ and promote a more collaborative ethos. Relatedly, it might be worth exploring how to increase the level of anonymity of students as they comment on one another blogs, as this might decrease ‘discomfort’. This year, with the Word Press site, students were quite easily identifiable.
  - Find a way of introducing a ‘newsfeed’ or ‘homepage’ feature whereby students can more easily see what their peers have posted each week, rather than having to click through several pages to get to each other’s posts. This would enable them to readily see points of connection and difference across students’ blogs, prompting conversations.
  - Provide some examples of interesting commenting threads and online conversations – alongside the exemplar posts – at the initial session discussed above.
  
- More thought will need to be given to the issue of **lateness** and **extensions**. It may be necessary to reinforce even more the absolute, categorical lack of extensions, no matter what; or alternatively to consider increasing the number of posts a student can miss without penalty.
  
- It will also be necessary to come to a clear position on whether and how to police the **length** of blog posts. It may be necessary to consider enforcing a 1000 word limit and to penalise students for going over this limit.

## Appendix 1: AN300 Course Details

### *Aims*

The aim of this course is to train students to engage critically with classic and contemporary texts in the discipline, thereby deepening understandings of current trends and emerging debates. It will examine the theoretical implications of particular anthropological approaches by surveying their origins, their strengths and their critique. The course will take the form of an intensive reading group in which approximately six texts (three in each of MT and LT) will be discussed and analysed in depth, along with supplementary reading material where appropriate. Students will be expected to develop their own critical responses to each text, as well as an appreciation of the context in which it was written and its contribution to relevant theoretical discussions and debates.

### *Teaching*

The course consists of 10 lectures and 10 classes in each of MT and LT. These will be structured in three-week cycles, with each cycle focusing on a particular book and its context. Lectures provide a general introduction to the text and relevant issues or debates. Classes probe more deeply into these topics and will comprise small group work as well as general conversations. The course guide lists the six books which will constitute the essential reading for the course; you are strongly encouraged to purchase your own copies of each. It also lists relevant supplementary reading, which will be useful for completing blog entries and essays. The supplementary readings are intended to help situate each book within relevant discussions and debates; to delve further into key concepts and issues; and to act as a starting point for more advanced, independent enquiry into particular topics.

### *Guidance on Blogs*

Each student will design and maintain their own blog using the WordPress platform. In the first week of Michaelmas Term, the Learning Technology and Innovation unit will host a session on blogging, providing guidance on how to set up the blog, as well as what is expected of a blog entry and how blogs differ from formal academic work, such as essays.

You will be fully responsible for the management and curation of your blog. It will function as a kind of learning journal in which you respond to the readings each week. The purpose of this is to help you develop your own original ideas and arguments, to create a body of ideas and resources that you can draw upon when writing the final essays, and to ensure you keep abreast of the reading. You are expected to make one post each week for the first two weeks of each book cycle (12 posts for the course overall). The third and final week of each cycle will be dedicated to commenting on the posts of others (see below).

The blog posts are intended to be short, informal reflections or commentaries, rather than polished products. Each entry should be around 200-400 words, and should focus on one single idea inspired by your reading for that week. You are also welcome to include pictures or photographs or links to relevant information online, if appropriate.

There are a number of ways to approach these open-ended posts: it may be a personal reflection on some concept or idea that caught your interest in the reading that week; it may explore a connection to other literature you have read, whether in this or other courses, or elsewhere; it may describe a question or problem you had while reading; it may develop an idea raised earlier by one of your friends or peers. It should be personal and original, comprising your own thoughts or reflections on the reading and on your own learning. In all cases, you should strive for thoughtfulness and nuance.

You should treat the blogs as a collaborative endeavor to understand the texts and develop a thoughtful response to the arguments they raise and the broader issues they engage. As such, the final week for each book cycle (i.e. Weeks 4,8 and 11 in MT and Weeks 3,7 and 10 in LT) will be devoted to commenting on and discussing the posts of others. During these weeks (and prior to the classes) you should make at least four separate comments on posts of your choosing, of around 100-200 words each. These will not be assessed, but should be intended to provide helpful and constructive feedback to your peers.

Your blog will be password protected and visible only to students and teachers on the course. At the end of the year you are free to export your content to your own blog or website.

### *Assessment of Blogs*

The blog posts will be assessed on a weekly basis throughout each term. The main criteria for assessment will comprise the following:

- The quality of the ideas
- Evidence of comprehension, critical thinking and intellectual engagement with the reading
- Creativity and originality
- Punctuality and regularity of posts
- Writing quality
- Organization and appearance

### *Marking Grid*

- 4 *Exceptional.* The blog post is focused and develops an interesting idea clearly and cogently. The entry reflects in-depth engagement with the topic and includes, as appropriate, insightful explanations or analysis; a synthesis of different material; and/or considers multiple perspectives.
- 3 *Satisfactory.* The blog post is reasonably focused. Fewer connections are made to other ideas or literatures, and though new insights may be offered, they are not very developed. The post reflects moderate engagement with the topic.
- 2 *Underdeveloped.* The blog post is mostly description or summary, without evidence of original thought or critical engagement. Few connections are made between ideas. The post reflects passing engagement with the topic.

- 1 *Limited.* The blog post is unfocused, difficult to follow, or simply rehashes previous comments. Displays little or no grasp of the content and little evidence of engagement with the topic.
- 0 *No Credit.* The blog post is missing or consists of one or two disconnected sentences.

You will be required to make 12 posts in total for the year, as noted. However, your final mark will consist of the average of your best 8 posts. That is, your worst four posts will not count towards your final grade.

The deadline for each entry is midnight on Wednesday, the day before the corresponding lecture and classes for that topic. (The first post is therefore due on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> October). Entries made after this time will receive 0. If you miss more than two weeks due to extenuating circumstances (e.g. illness), you should email the GTA responsible for the blogs. Please do not contact the lecturers or the Chair of Exams.

#### *Key Texts*

#### Michaelmas Term: Neoliberalism and Citizenship

Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*.  
Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper*  
Jason de León, *Land of Open Graves*

#### Lent Term: Ethics

Webb Keane, *Ethical Life*  
Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes*  
James Faubion, *An Anthropology of Ethics*

## **Appendix 2: AN300 Focus Group Schedule**

### **Introduction**

#### Welcome

- Thanks for agreeing to take part in the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate and your contributions will inform future assessment practices at the school.

#### Purpose

- The school is interested in evaluating student perceptions and experiences writing blog posts as a method of assessment.

#### Rules

- We want you to do the talking. We'll try to ensure that everyone has their say for each question
- There are no right or wrong answers. Please be completely honest and don't sugar-coat your answers
- What is said in the room is completely anonymous. None of your answers will be directly fed back to teachers. Answers will be held in complete confidence, and any notes taken will not be linked to identifying information
- We will tape the discussion provided that's ok with you. Recording will assist with accuracy.

#### Process

- Data collected from this focus group will be combined with feedback received from the course lecturers and analysed as a part of a report that will be read by the Department of Anthropology, the Learning and Technology Innovation unit, and other departments interested in rolling out new approaches to assessment.

### **Past experience**

- How familiar were you with the blog format?
- Had you already written for blogs before? Had you ever managed your own?
- Did you already them often? What types?

### **Blogging and other types of assessment**

- General thoughts on how this compared to other forms of assessment?
- More or less difficult?
- More or less fair?

### **Blogging and learning outcomes**

- How useful were writing blogs for helping you engage with the weekly readings?
- Did they allow you to work through your ideas over the course of the term? How?
- How did you feel the blogging related to the end of term essays? Were they useful for allowing you to try out arguments?

### **Classes**

- How do you think writing blogs affected classes? How did it affect discussions and participation?

### **Workload**

- How did you feel about the frequency of posts?
- How did you feel about the length of posts?

### **Feedback and marking**

- Any thoughts on marking? Fair? Consistent with the course outline?
- Feedback from GTA's? Helpful? Sufficient?

### **Comments**

- Were the comments you received from other students helpful?
- Was it useful to be able to read other students' work?
- What would have encouraged you to read other students' blogs more often, and to comment more often and more substantively?
- Did this exercise feel collaborative? What would have encouraged a greater sense of collaboration?
- How did you feel about your work being made public to other students?

### **Technical aspects**

- How useful was the first introductory session of the term?
- What other preparation would have been useful?
- How was your experience of the technical aspects of blogging? Was it easy to set up?
- Were you able to customise your blog the way you wanted?
- How did you feel about the non-textual aspects of blogging? Images? Hyperlinks? Was this helpful? Did it allow you to better express your ideas? Or did it feel like a distraction?

### **Transferrable skills**

- Do you see yourself writing blogs in the future? How do you feel about the skills gains through this exercise? Would you put this experience on your CV?

- Would you consider continuing posting on your blog and making it public to a wider readership?

### **Evaluation and Suggestions**


- And other thoughts or suggestions? What are the general advantages of this type of assessment? What are its disadvantages?



## Appendix 3: Examples of Blog Posts

My Sites Ma Pensée sauvage Customize 2 New


### Prosocial Punishment and Cultures of Shame



February 8, 2017  
1 Comment  
Edit

*The featured image for this post can be accessed [here](#).*

Although [Webb Keane's](#) attempt to introduce a more interdisciplinary approach to the anthropological study of ethics must be commended for its novelty, I have to agree with [Rita Astuti](#) (2016) that Keane's engagement with the psychological and cognitive dimension of ethical subjectivity is underdeveloped. In reading [Joshua Greene's](#) (2013) psychological approach to the study of human ethicality, however, I cannot help but feel as though Greene's analysis commits a very similar crime, only this time there is not enough of an emphasis on how socio-cultural institutions impact the dialectical dynamic between human cognition and socio-cultural institutions. I therefore wish to complement some of Greene's fundamental assertions regarding the psychological explanation for human ethical subjectivity with anthropological engagements so as to allow Greene's work to be used as a tool in manifesting Keane's vision of a truly interdisciplinary account of human ethical life.



### THEY CREATED A DESERT AND CALLED IT PEACE

NOVEMBER 30, 2016 1 COMMENT EDIT

The above phrase was one of those serendipitous 'stumble-upons' you often find occur when you are personally lacking the vernacular to poetically abridge new readings. Credited to [Tacitus](#) around 50 AD (a Roman senator) – it adeptly captures the policy-based paradoxes scattered in "[The Land of Open Graves](#)". In particular, the neutral semantic framing and the agonizing reality migrants endure at the behest of this arid sprawl of minerals and other landscapes.

I permit that the successful commitment to abstracting human life

## Appendix 4: Some examples of Student Comments

... principles, are deeply intertwined in projects of cultural change, but Keane doesn't seem to be talking about these in terms of 'universal ethical improvement', as you put it. Indeed, he seems to be bit skeptical of such narratives in his conclusion when he tells us that 'ethical history moves along more than one direction' (p. 256). I'm also intrigued by your point about technology and online fraud – might Keane's emphasis on interaction be helpful here? Is there a point where technological makes interaction overly mediated to the point that ethical life become difficult?

REPLY



**spaldina**

February 1, 2017 at 6:38 pm [Edit](#)

I personally really like the discussion here concerning the relationship between technology and the changing nature of criminality. I would, however, like to elaborate a little further on the first point that was made in the prior comment in regards to the problematic invocation of the word 'progress' when discussing instances of ethical change. I would like to specifically emphasise this point using my own research on regimes of gender embodiment in rural Vietnam.

As Keane makes clear in Chapter 7 of his book, the Vietnamese social mi-



**Gemma**

February 2, 2017 at 10:48 am [Edit](#)

This blog is a hoot to read – really engaging and a great example to bring in to really put Keane's work into a tangible situation. I do agree with the above comment though, you could have focused on the objectification process more and weighed up the first, second and third perspective analyses. This would have opened up a space to be more critical of Keane's work.

REPLY



**israelqu**

February 2, 2017 at 12:01 pm [Edit](#)

The way you couch the idea of moral breakdown within the cultural phenomena of tipping is very engaging. Tipping someone appears to be a positive ethical act because it involves a concerted choice. However, in some circumstances, where tipping is expected (such as in food service in the US) is it still an act of generosity, or just adherence to set of unwritten cultural rules?

REPLY