

# Academic blogging in the “accelerated academy”: How to build a personal, professional and public community.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/25/academic-blogging-personal-professional-public/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/25/academic-blogging-personal-professional-public/)

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*As a dynamic space, a group blog can be particularly suited to the rapidly changing context of researcher development. [Claire Aitchison](#), [Susan Carter](#) and [Cally Guerin](#) share their experiences developing a doctoral support blog, a global space for personal and professional development and for building community. Individuals and their institutions stand to benefit from blogging, they argue, but if it were to be mainstreamed, would the practice be able to retain the unique elements that account for its success?*



There's been [persuasive discussion](#) about the hyper-fast, urgency-driven environment of contemporary academia and how social media can both [contribute to](#) and counter this hyperactivity. Unsurprisingly, there appears to be a longing for refuge from such hyper-demanding, over-ventilated, and over-scrutinised workspaces; for some, this is found in the freedom afforded by social media. While tweeting can be a neat, time-efficient device for sharing a message or rapidly linking into a conversation, blogging can be a contemplative personal space for bringing slow writing and reflection into more public places of exchange.

This is how involvement in the [Doctoral Writing SIG](#) blog has proved for us, at least. The blog originated in 2012 from [a conference special interest group](#), so has always been a semi-professional, shared space for tabling our thinking. Our audience comprises academic developers, language and writing specialists, PhD supervisors/advisers and doctoral candidates. We co-editors ([Claire](#), [Cally](#) and [Susan](#)) see the blog as a pedagogical space for researcher development and learning around doctoral writing. As group bloggers we rotate responsibility for curating content on a monthly basis, thus managing the workload and maximising opportunities for more thoughtful contributions—although each of us struggles to balance the seemingly spiralling demands of our paid work against the satisfying intellectual engagement of blogging.



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We argue that semi-professional [group blogging](#) has certain unique features that make it a generative and seductive pedagogical environment. It can be a space where slow thinking can occur away from the everyday demands of the coalface; there is a certain autonomy from surveillance (but a heightened self-monitoring); the movement between private reflection and public interest creates unique encounters with and for learning; and, importantly, this space invokes the tension of being connected to, yet independent of, university institutions. As a dynamic space, it is particularly suited to the rapidly changing context of researcher development at this point in history.

With countries setting ever-increasing targets for [expanded doctoral degree programs](#), doctoral education is opening up from the [private space](#) or 'secret garden' traditionally occupied by the supervisor-student dyad into a pedagogical space activated by academic developers, writing and language specialists, librarians, ethics officers and data management experts. And doctoral learning extends even further [beyond the institution](#) to the entrepreneurial 'e-tivities' of mass online training (both open access and costly bespoke modules), [consultancy services](#), [editors/proofreaders](#) and writing coaches. Blogging has made an early and important contribution to this diversified pedagogical space, with numerous student-initiated and -oriented blogs, but relatively few that explicitly position themselves as learning spaces for supervisors and other stakeholders.

This increasingly distributed activity of developing the skills and competences required for successful completion of a PhD potentially challenges the role of the supervisor, contributing to the shift to an [apprenticeship/intellectual community model](#). Although [not entirely free of traditional hierarchies](#), the global dimension of blogging fosters such dispersed pedagogical practices. As participants in this liberating opening up, we aim to share our ideas and practices with colleagues, to reflect on the challenges we face, and learn from the insights and experiences of others. A professional blog like this occupies a territory that is both intimate (in that it allows for the personal and reflective) and [public](#). Blogging provides valuable access for engaging with others who work in our field and who face similar dilemmas in the rapidly changing Higher Education sector.

As [newcomers to this medium](#), we aimed to create the blog as a community of learners—and slowly we have seen this come to fruition as the readership has grown and global networked communities of social media have further extended our reach. The blog has also entered more formal networks of researcher education, for example, being integrated into institutional sites for researchers and supervisors. We also know from the comments, reblogs, tweets and private correspondence that the blog is frequently used as a teaching resource by peers engaged in doctoral education. Guest posts on practices and research into doctoral writing and research cultures facilitate additional opportunities for others to drive the exchange of views and emerging thinking.



Contemporary academic life is precarious; it's fast, [mean](#) and lean. Our public aim is to build community around the practices and concerns associated with doctoral writing, but, in addition, we have come to recognise that, privately, we each depend on this space as a haven from the relentless demands of the rest of our academic lives. Since we began blogging, we have witnessed organisational restructures resulting in the need for many academics to reconstruct themselves. As more academics join the '[new precariat](#)', it's likely our primary places of identity construction and maintenance will become untied from a single institution. Blogging in this context lets us inhabit an independent, global space for personal and professional development and for building community.

Perhaps because of the rapidly [changing landscape of doctoral education](#), our experience has shown that there is a thirst for information and exchange in the doctoral sphere; blogs can play an important role in meeting this need. Benefits accrue both to the individuals active in the professional blogging space and for institutions building capacity and know how. Given the advantages to institutions, one could argue they ought to facilitate such spaces for free discussion and intellectual exchange. However, should this kind of blogging practice, which is currently largely independent of institutions, be brought into the mainstream? And if so, what might the advantages and cautions be; how might it work; and would the practice be able to retain the unique elements that currently account for its success?

We are ambivalent. One of the blessings of blogging as a fringe activity is that we (presently) work outside the purview of authority, with a certain unshackled freedom to think and write as we choose. The independence of blogging makes it a medium for real and vibrant communities of practice, where increasingly research and knowledge is disseminated and intellectual exchange occurs. Blogging is powerfully useful for enriching personal teaching practice and offers major benefits to the field and the institution. And yet, it is all too often a silent, unrecognised academic labouring, at least from the perspective of the employing university. [The Conversation](#), an online newspaper where institutions support the platform but don't control the output, has much to recommend it as a model for sustainable and supported professional blogging practice.

What is clear is that the growth of blogging as a valued source of intellectual endeavour means institutions will need to develop relationships with this powerful media. Yet, just as notions of freedom bedevil the practice of democracy, perhaps blogging is freedom writ large, too large, for risk adverse institutions to take within their mandate?

The ideas presented here are explored in more detail in our article: Cally Guerin, Susan Carter & Claire Aitchison (2015): [Blogging as community of practice: lessons for academic development?](#), *International Journal for Academic Development*, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1042480.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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**Dr Claire Aitchison**, currently at UNSW, Australia, has taught and coordinated higher degree researcher programs for students and supervisors for over 20 years. Her research and publications on doctoral writing and pedagogy include (with Guerin 2014) *Writing groups for doctoral education and beyond* and (with Kamler and Lee 2010) *Publishing pedagogies for the doctorate and beyond*.



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**Dr Cally Guerin** has been working and publishing in doctoral education since 2008, coordinating a comprehensive suite of research skills training opportunities and academic development programs for research students and their supervisors at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. Recent publications focus on doctoral writing, researcher identities and writing groups, including *Post/graduate research literacies and writing pedagogies* (in press), co-edited with Badenhorst.



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