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## **Incorporating blogging into an English for Academic Purposes course for international students**

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### **Abstract**

Digital education has become an integral part of any modern tertiary establishment. Using technological devices to deliver materials or assess students' work creates more opportunities for both educators and learners.

*English for Academic Purposes 2* (EAP2) is a bridge course for many international students who come to New Zealand to start or continue their tertiary studies. During the 12 weeks of the EAP2 course (25 contact hours per week), students are given the weekly task of participating in the discussion forum. All work has to be submitted via the blog, which is designed specifically for the EAP2 class.

This paper outlines the process of designing interactive tasks which invite other students to express their opinions and cooperate during EAP2 research projects, as well as share their findings or ask for assistance. This is a good chance to demonstrate an ability to work as a team and develop interpersonal skills, which are vital for successful integration into a new cultural environment.

All forum tasks have been designed to complement the EAP2 main writing assignments, research projects, etc. Each of them is aimed at developing essential academic skills in an interactive fashion. Students are given credit for blog participation. This credit depends on the quality and depth of submissions, as well as the level of interaction with peers.

*Keywords:* Blogging, discussion forum, blended learning, English for Academic Purposes

## Introduction

Auckland Institute of Studies is an educational provider of undergraduate diplomas and degrees in International Business, Information Technology, and Hospitality and Tourism Management. The English Language Centre can be seen as a foundation platform to degrees for many international students. The majority of them come to New Zealand in order to obtain western tertiary qualifications, which is one of the criteria for professional success in the modern competitive environment. This means that English can no longer only be regarded as just a communicative tool, but also as a pathway to other achievements on both national and individual levels. The reflection of this process can be found in the major changes of language courses specifically designed to help international students to master English skills, which are essential for their future academic and socio-economic success.

EAP2 at AIS has been successfully run for more than ten years as a bridge course for international students who come to New Zealand. China, Japan, and Korea are the main source countries for these students seeking to start or continue their tertiary studies. All students have to undergo a series of assignments and to participate in different research projects, which require not only sufficient development of the core language skills of listening, writing, reading and speaking, but also the ability to work as a team through building a multicultural academic community. To achieve this, cultural awareness and understanding combined with good interpersonal skills are vital. Furthermore, international learners have to understand, and most importantly accept, the concept of western education. This process demands a lot of effort from both educators and learners to alter previously adopted learning styles, and sometimes to develop or form them from scratch. For example, collaborative learning as well as critical thinking is less meaningful for the majority of Asian students and therefore can be a barrier to academic achievement. A significant number of EAP2 students admit that expressing opinions, providing arguments, as well as participating in classroom discussions, is a very new experience. Therefore, completing the EAP course helps them to get used to a new academic environment and to build academic confidence.

The question arises as to whether the existing teaching approaches are efficient and suffice for a modern educational establishment, and how to monitor and distribute the amount of independent studying in order to make it academically valuable and at the same time interactive. In this case, using technological devices creates more opportunities for both educators and learners. Obviously, this is not a replacement of the traditional concept of learning, but a way to enhance the process in order to make it more collaborative and interactive.

### **Reasons for creating the EAP2 blog**

Blogging has become a tool welcomed by many educators as blogs are “easily created, easily updatable Websites that allow an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection” (Richardson, 2006, p.8). Taking into account the fact that the majority of young adults have already embraced the idea of incorporating cyberspace into their everyday life, it is obvious that they are even more alert in using technologies than their conservative academics who are generally much slower to change their approaches. However, in the academic environment, it is crucial to be able to maintain the required level of formal communication with certain flexibility, and so-called chatting cannot be applied in the same form as it is presented on other social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. That is when professional educators can lead by providing an example of academic communication in collaborative fashion by keeping and developing “entertaining, informative, engaging, and unique content” (Rich, 2009, p.103).

From an economic perspective, blogging, also called a “digital journal”, does not require the submission of a hard copy of the post, as all text-based entries can be seen online. That significantly reduces the waste of paper needed for multiple printed handouts, and therefore can be more economical and environmentally friendly. However, to make the blog journal more structured and fit the overall curriculum of the EAP2 course, a handout was developed containing the description of the forum tasks, rubrics and the overall requirement, which allows students to familiarise themselves at the beginning of the EAP2 course and then use it as guidelines. There is also an opportunity to discuss some points of the forum tasks in class, face-to-face, which can reduce

tension or misunderstanding, and eventually creates a favourable form of blended learning with “a parallel self-study component” (Sharma & Barrett, 2011, p.7) in the form of the EAP2 blog.

As noted by Sharma and Barrett (2011), there is currently a considerable increase in the number of publishing companies, including the Macmillan English Campus (n.d.), which offer educational providers a set of online materials that can be integrated into their main courses, as well as interviews with the authors and a forum for users. There is also a growing trend of using social networking for business communication, ranging from small businesses or being self-employed, to big corporations. For example, LinkedIn is widely used by business owners and administrators as “means of marketing [their] products and services” (Hall & Rosenberg, 2009, p.112). According to Wright (2006), it is much easier to carry out research into customer feedback as “blogging affords the opportunity to ask the world of customers about what they actually want” (p.51). On top of that, company blogs could be a good way to build dynamic internal teams of employees with “similar passion across your organisation” (p.52). There is a certain parallel between creating organisational and course blogs and their impacts. If we look at the EAP2 course, each group comprises about 15 students with different social backgrounds, work experience, education, and personalities who have to work together for 12 weeks doing different research projects and assignments in order to achieve the same goal, and we can therefore see it as a micro-organisation. For this reason, getting students’ feedback on the course and creating a dynamic team via different channels such as face-to-face or by means of the forum discussion via the EAP2 blog is highly beneficial. The reflection of this phenomenon can be found in the growing trend of using discussion forums for collaborative learning by many world-ranked western universities, for example, the University of Auckland, New Zealand, the University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia, and many others, including several professional development courses provided by the University of Cambridge.

In addition, because many AIS graduates are aiming to join the international business community, which nowadays is not limited by a country border or a region, and on the contrary requires global networking, it is essential to

understand the main aspects of proper netiquette, such as how to form and maintain proper communication via the Internet. Hall and Rosenberg (2009) emphasise the reciprocal nature of online interaction, which requires not only the knowledge of the language but also the development of certain interpersonal skills as “vital ingredients for managerial success” (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2012, p.2), which can be seen as a difficult task for many overseas students or business graduates. As noted by Robbins and Hunsaker (2012), there is a split in opinion on whether the use of good interpersonal skills is a question of nature or nurture. Some EAP2 students who have come to New Zealand with previous international experience admit that working for an international corporation requires not just professional knowledge, but also the understanding of new forms of communication, which can be challenging to gain. For example, a Chinese businessperson who has completed multiple language courses and achieved an advanced level of mastery of English language skills may fail to succeed in an American-run company mostly due to under-developed interpersonal skills, and a lack of ability to negotiate and compromise. For Japanese counterparts, it is a big challenge to become an active listener and express one’s own opinion directly. Koreans tend to build physiological or imaginary walls to secure a certain level of privacy (Neuliep, 2009). In this case, the online forum provides an additional opportunity for the learners of different social, cultural and educational backgrounds to become fully engaged by giving them more autonomy and flexibility. This means that a student with suppressed interpersonal skills has a chance to experience both face-to-face and online interaction with a tutor, peers, or a project group, and therefore can develop them gradually. A combination of different forms of communication has proved to have a positive effect on the classroom environment by making it more favourable for teamwork and creating a long-lasting bond among EAP2 graduates.

### **Creating the EAP2 blog**

The first step is to use a specialist search engine, which in our case is Google Blog Search (n.d.). Advice was sought from those colleagues in the English Language Centre who have already had some experience in using a class blog and forum discussions in a quite flexible fashion. There is also a plethora of

publications on this topic. The choice of Blogger.com as a hosting service was based on several advantages, such as that it is free and user-friendly, and at the same time it is compatible with other on-line services provided by Google, e.g. Gmail. It allows a user to create a blog very quickly and, most importantly, features multiple templates from choosing the font to inserting photos and videos. Language learners can also apply a built-in spell check, which can be beneficial for reducing errors while composing the blog entry. In addition, Blogger.com allows readers to post comments and feedback, and therefore create a collaborative environment, which is desirable for forum discussions.

Rich (2009) describes the main stages of creating an individual blog via Blogger.com, which I developed and adapted further for a group (EAP2) blog.

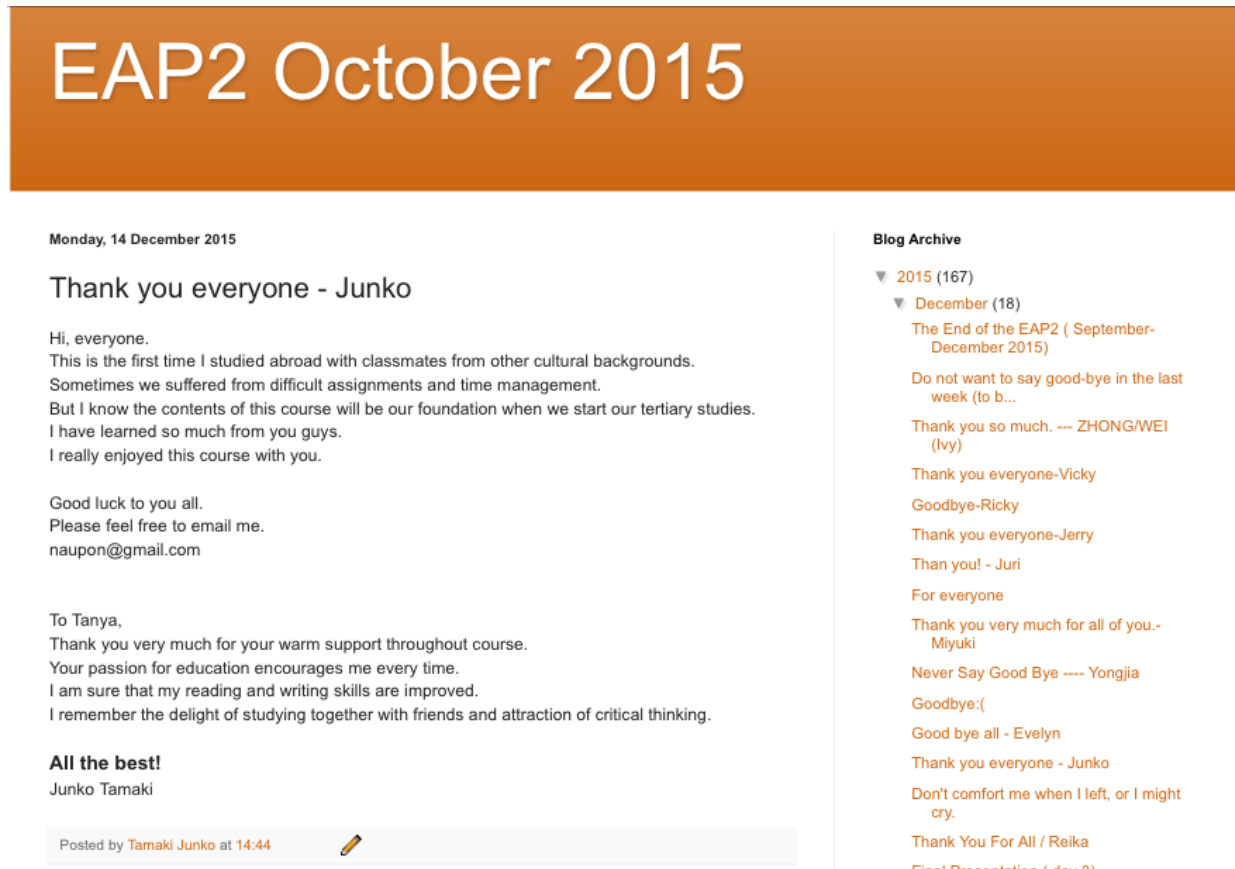
### **Creating a Google account**

Gmail was found to be very useful for individual correspondence with EAP2 students concerning their course assignments, for providing some individual assistance, or in case of some personal matters. All students should have their own Gmail account. As it is difficult for some students to discuss the issues related to project management and interpersonal relationship within a group, being connected by a Google account can be very handy.

### **Choosing a name**

To register a blog, it is necessary to name it. Three EAP2 classes used the blog throughout the 2015 academic year, so for each class blog, the blog name included the name of the course and the date of completion, for example, "EAP2 October 2015" and so on (Figure 1), which appears every time on the top of the page. In this way, it would be easy to track the earlier posts from previous classes.

Figure 1: The blog name



The next step is to select the blog's URL, which is [...].blogspot.com. After choosing a template, which should be simple and easy for visualisation, the blog can start.

### Target audience

A very important step is to ask your students to send you a message via Gmail, so that the tutor will invite them to join the EAP2 blog. The tutor plays the role of an administrator of the blog, so that it gives an opportunity to monitor students' posts very well, to see their drafts, to slightly edit the text or even delete the post entry, which is very rare. The students, who are the target audience in this case, become writers of the blog, and can view or post their entries any time. Because of the nature of the blog, which has been created specifically for the EAP2 course, it is not open in the public domain, but operates within the micro-community of the EAP2 class. This makes it more personalised and supportive in terms of sharing ideas and submitting

comments, and eventually creates mutual respect and trust within the group, which is crucial for the successful functioning of a team (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2012). Finally, this limitation can be seen as a safety measure, allowing better monitoring and administration of blog activities.

### **Discussion forum**

As mentioned above, the prime reason to incorporate blogging into the EAP2 course is creating a collaborative community for the students, which could enable them to develop better interpersonal and communicative skills by overcoming age, social status, cultural and other differences. It is also crucial that students are given equal opportunity to express their opinion in digital space, as some of them can experience a lack of confidence to interact in person. For this reason, the discussion forum tasks have been developed in order to complement the course syllabus, rather than to replace some class activities.

Due to the academic nature of the EAP2 blog, each forum task has to be formulated in formal or semi-formal fashion. Providing verbal instructions, and posting instructions straight to the blog were tried, but neither of them worked efficiently. Therefore, a hard copy was created with the description of each task in a narrative manner, as if a tutor is talking to the group. As noted by Rich (2009), it is important to maintain “some level of consistency” (p.114) in the manner of delivery, and approaches to the task in class and digitally, so that the target audience, in this case, a group of EAP2 students, feel comfortable and eager to participate. At the same time, the instructions should be very clear and concise.

The EAP2 course consists of 12 weeks of intensive work, including working in small groups, doing research projects together or individually, mastering academic research and writing skills, and practising public speaking. Apart from studying, students also learn some social skills in a multicultural environment, so building mutual trust within a group is crucial. Therefore, the first forum task is simply to introduce yourself (Figure 2). However, the impact of the task is significant as it works as an icebreaker, helping new students to know each other better, “to believe in the integrity, character, and ability of one another” (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2012, p.260), as well as to form new friendships

and social communities triggered by similar professional or personal interests and hobbies.

Figure 2: Self-introduction task

EAP 2 Blog. Discussion Forum -Week1

In this forum, you should introduce yourself to the members of the EAP2 class, and to the teacher. Write one paragraph on each of the following:

- Your family (optional)
- Education and previous work experience
- Why you decided to do the EAP2 course and what you expect to achieve at the end of it.
- Your interests and hobbies

Invite your classmates for a discussion; feel free to post any comments to other entries.

The forum provides an additional channel of information and a chance to communicate via posts and comments in your own time. Some students are happy to share family pictures; those with children always get more comments from their peers. Some students invite others to participate in their favourite extracurricular activities, posting on the class blog photos and comments about their outing (Figure 3). As a result, graduates from the EAP2 class usually create a bond that lasts for a long time.

Figure 3: Social blog



On the other hand, discussion forum tasks have an academic nature because they are directly related to the course. The challenge for the tutor is selecting forum tasks in which participating will add credibility to the course and not the opposite. That is why a tutor should understand the process and demonstrate genuine interest and commitment. Moreover, the ability to lead students by example and to provide a clear description of the outcome are vital. In this way, forum tasks either preview or complement the major assignments. For example, the first two research projects require collaborative work in order to prepare a PowerPoint presentation based on research findings (weeks 3 and 5). All students are working in pairs and have to depend on each other's participation. The process could be frustrating if both participants have insufficient interpersonal skills or lack cultural awareness. This often happens when one student is falling behind and his partner cannot convey the

information clearly or is unwilling to do so. In addition, a combination of two dominant participants unable to compromise could be seen as a cause of an argument. The related forum tasks require preparing a critical synopsis of the major article of the first research project (week 2), and a summary and paraphrasing practice of the passage related to the second project (week 3).

In blended learning, such online activities reflect on what has been learnt in the classroom such as elements of critical thinking and research, as well as help to recycle these new academic skills (Fowler & Blohm, 2004). It is also an additional way for students to get used to independent studying, which is an integral part of western tertiary education. They also have to overcome cultural differences by focusing on achieving their goal. By posting their entry on the blog, they invite other students to comment and express their opinions, which can be quite opposite and “create controversy and make [the] content more enticing” (Rich, 2009, p.114). In this case, the members of project groups act as a team to defend their findings and practise building a formal argument.

The role of the tutor is to constantly monitor the activity, to emphasise unique findings and to encourage further discussion. As stated by Richardson (2006), in forum discussions “... the teachers’ role becomes that of connector, not just evaluator” (p.49). The emphasis is on students’ interaction within their micro academic community. Therefore, the comments of the tutor should not outweigh or stand out, but monitor the process. It is also important that there is an opportunity to exchange ideas among peers and learn from each other, which goes well with a teaching philosophy which sees students as active participants of the studying process. In this case, the discussion forum can be so-called rehearsal before the actual presentation. It also helps to alter or add some ideas, or just enjoy a sense of accomplishment. As for peers, it is a chance to preview the topics and prepare for further discussion after all project groups have given their PowerPoint presentations in the lab a week later.

It is a part of the course assessment that a tutor should provide detailed evaluation of students’ work, usually in written form and individually. In addition to that, blogging can make it possible to post some short video clips or photos of the presenters.

Figure 4: Video and photo material

Wednesday, 9 December 2015

## Final Presentation ( Day 1)

Today we had the first five speakers who presented very interesting findings in different areas. Satoshi has provided some interesting findings related to major trends in marketing a in a very fluent fashion. That was a good start.



Juri has chosen environmental perspective of the hotel management , which is vital nowadays. She was also the best in logical delivery and signposting. Well done!

Riki and Anki covered the area of IT in different perspectives , though Anki 's findings demonstrated deeper research skills and critical thinking. Riki's presentation could be the reflection of our Assignment 1 'Education and Technology'.

Vicky showed brilliant understanding of the topic ' International trade' in terms of exporting dairy products from New Zealand to China. I would recommend to have a look at the part of the APA manual again in relation to the recommended limit of using graphic information for the further research, as it was a bit heavy on graphs today.

Overall, thank you very much!

Here are some pictures of the day.

**Blog Archive**

- ▼ 2015 (167)
  - ▼ December (18)
    - The End of the EAP2 ( September-December 2015)
    - Do not want to say good-bye in the last week (to b...
    - Thank you so much, --- ZHONG/WEI (Ivy)
    - Thank you everyone-Vicky
    - Goodbye-Ricky
    - Thank you everyone-Jerry
    - Than you! - Juri
    - For everyone
    - Thank you very much for all of you.- Miyuki
    - Never Say Good Bye ---- Yongjia
    - Goodbye:(
    - Good bye all - Evelyn
    - Thank you everyone - Junko
    - Don't comfort me when I left, or I might cry.
    - Thank You For All / Reika
    - Final Presentation ( day 3)
    - Final Presentation ( day 2)
    - Final Presentation ( Day 1)
  - November (66)
  - October (66)
  - September (17)

From the educational perspective, students can analyse their body language or the manner of delivery (Figure 4) in order to see their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, some of them like to show posts to their friends or family, especially their children, who become very proud of their hard-working parents. This makes blogging post entries very personal.

Some individual forum tasks, such as the analysis of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 6<sup>th</sup> edition (week 3), reflect the findings of students' independent studying. The task is to share any findings they need to highlight, or clarify and discuss with their peers via the forum. The tutor can get involved if students fail to clarify the point themselves. The next task (week 5) is to research a dominant business culture in terms of business

communication and management, which helps students to prepare better for the writing assignment on “Leadership and Management”. It is very common for students to combine their research findings with case studies, which can trigger a group discussion on the forum.

In addition, many students tend to compare the Asian and Western modes of communication that are known as high and low contexts respectively (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2008), which can benefit not only their future study and work, but help them to succeed in integrating into multicultural global networks, as well as to avoid communication misunderstanding. As noted by Samovar, Porter & McDaniel (2008), “the dynamics of the global marketplace and increased reliance on IT were creating changes ... in traditional Japanese corporate communication procedures” (p.252) towards a more direct fashion of online communication. Therefore, discussion forum tasks are highly valued, especially by the majority of Japanese students, who are quite shy to interact in person. Overall, the mutual understanding of socio-communicative differences acts as a foundation of students’ interconnectedness as a group.

To provide variety to the discussion forum, tasks are included such as creating a line graph (week 7) and a flow chart (week 8). The former directly integrates into the research essay, which requires creating a graph and statistical analysis based on students’ research of the chosen travel destination. The forum task provides an opportunity to conduct similar research, albeit on a smaller scale, about their hometown or a country. Students also need to apply critical thinking to analyse the reasons behind existing trends. The latter encourages students to think about cause and effect phenomena in different fields through preliminary research and analysis. There is no restriction of choice, with emphasis only on understanding how phenomena such as ideas, concepts, events, and actions affect each other (De Chazal & McCarter, 2013). Students are usually highly interested, and post questions and their opinion, often followed by further summative discussion in class, which can be helpful for completing the cause-and-effect essay as the last writing assignment of the EAP2 course.

Forum tasks (weeks 6 and 9) mostly focus on brainstorming ideas for the two final research projects. As students have to conduct their research individually this time, they are eager to cooperate and collaborate in order to ease the process. At this stage, they have learnt well about each other's abilities and academic competence to ask certain peers for assistance or opinion outside the class. This reduces the constraint of working only in the limited space of the classroom, as "part of our total reaction to our environment is based on our perception of whether, and how easily, we can leave it" (Knapp & Hall, 2010, p.103). As noted by Richardson (2006, p.28), "Weblogs truly expand the walls of the classroom.". Each forum task has to be completed by the end of the week, but without a specific date or time of the post entry, so the students can work at their own pace.

During the last two weeks of the course, the EAP2 students are working on their final assignment, the research report, related to their further tertiary degrees; therefore, there is no specific forum task, simply an open discussion for group collaboration. Some of the extra posts can include the address of the former EAP2 students currently doing Bachelor's or Master's degrees, or some important course reminders, student feedback and graduation photos. All students get a credit for blog participation, mostly depending on the level of interaction with peers and the depth of post entries that have to be created according to the discussion forum guidelines.

## **Conclusion**

The appearance of new forms of pedagogical approaches result from the extreme development and implementation of telecommunication in different fields, including education. In a globalised world, people are connected via a multitude of media, which can be seen as a means of new channels for collaboration and sharing ideas. For international education, such a multitude of media provides a new platform for stakeholders to interconnect and fully engage in collaborative learning regardless of their cultural and social differences. However, the challenge for educators is to select the viable alternatives and incorporate them efficiently into conventional methodology in order to boost academic proficiency. The process of adopting the Western style

of education can be a challenge for the majority of international students not only because of the language barrier, but also due to insufficient communicative skills and failing to understand the main principles of studying in a multicultural environment.

Apart from developing major academic writing, reading, listening and speaking skills, English for Academic Purposes is a pathway course to further tertiary studies, which helps to form and develop essential skills of critical thinking and collaborative learning, as well as raise cultural awareness. Incorporating blogging into the EAP2 course creates additional media support to the face-to-face component in the form of the weekly discussion forum. The contribution of each student to the blog is valuable in terms of sharing cultural aspects, academic ideas, and so on, which helps to create a micro academic community. Moreover, educators can better assess and monitor the project or individual work by giving learners more flexibility and autonomy. The outcomes and student feedback have proven that this educational tool of a blended-learning model is adding extra value to the academic courses.

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