Independent Blogging Curriculum

*Part 1: Knowledge Gathering and Harvesting*

Glenn Groulx, B Ed, MDE

**The Independent Blogger’s Journey**

My own opinion on the compelling usefulness of using blogging tools for lifelong learning is that you have to extend the usefulness beyond the immediately practical reasons, and look more into the future. Over the past few years, my own perspective as a learner has shifted repeatedly. My goals have changed, and my motivation levels have cycled over time from active to passive. For me, then, blogging is more of a learning journey, a process of maintaining and broadening the act of dialoguing with myselves (past, present, and future) and others, peers, instructors and other expert learners not part of courses or formal programs. George Siemens referred to e-learning as the *constant battle for lucidity*; it does not end or resolve itself with the completion of courses or programs or projects. It builds on subsequent works, wherein one can see the patterns and changes over a long period of time.

Sustained blogging sets up a *serialized imperative*, as Mark McCutcheon would explain, a strong motivation to “continue writing *into the dark* to occupy the *middle-space"* (Jennifer Jones). Sometimes the process of drafting and revising ideas involved *cognitive off-loading* (Jon Dron), or acted as an *outboard brain* (Alan Levine and D'Arcy Norman).

The most significant observation for me is that the sustained writing has provided me with a means of looking back in order to not just inform my current practice but to also help me look forward, to plan and strategize for future activity. I began to analyze in detail what in fact I was doing with my blogging and noticed patterns within the tags and themes I was creating over time. Thus, this first section of the independent blogging curriculum develops the skills for collecting, evaluating and harvesting data for knowledge building. I came up with this set of blogging processes that describe

how I have been using the blogging tool for knowledge building within an online practice network:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Processes | Description  |
| Berry Picking | **Blog posts that involve identifying, evaluating and selecting resources; collecting ideas, links, and references; creating annotated bookmarks within Delicious, adding annotated bookmarks to profile page;** |
| Jigging | **Blog posts that describe personal strategies and experiences while tapping into data streams such as Twitter feeds, network wire feeds, network activity streams, and use of email alerts and RSS feeds; managing email and site notifications; reviewing wire posts; customizing Activity Tab to filter content from data stream for searching/monitoring** |
| Piling | **Blog posts that detail decisions for classifying posts using Tags, categorizing posts, adding tags, keywords, and impressions of Tag Clouds of own and others’ blogs; Adding and editing tags for posts, files, pages, and photos;** |
| Setting | **Blog posts that reflect on proactive, long-term decisions for selecting post access; tagging and organizing strategies (ie. categories, albums, files, “collections”) within Ta/g Clouds; selecting hash-tags for tweets and wire posts; *“Fuzzy Tagging, Post Templates, and Meta-Tagging”(in development)*** |
| Weaving | **Blog posts that demonstrate summarizing of content, embedding links into posts; adding quotes and citing sources from others’ posts, articles, web sites, podcasts and other multi-media resources; Writing/editing/appending blog posts;** **uploading files for reflections; uploading photos for archiving; uploading files, photos and MP3s for review;** |
| Texturing | **Blog posts that explain strategies for tracking switches of narrative tone, voice and register; engages and addresses multiple audiences; provides textual cues such as highlighting, font changes, color-coding, meta-commenting, and layering (multiple revisions, comments interspersed with updated links and content)** |

***Table 1: Data Gathering and Harvesting Processes***

**Berry-Picking** is defined as the active evaluation of sources from the web to add to the richness of your posts, and sifting and collecting bits from the resource related to a specific topic. I consider berry-picking as active search and retrieval, as well as active filtering and sifting through the resource. I think that berry-picking is the "under-padding" of the blog post, because these sources can be set aside or incorporated into subsequent blog posts, or they can even be re-used for different purposes. Thus, it is important to consider berry-picking as a more refined form of link-blogging, and here are the items I consider important.

This berry-picking process is crucial for developing the confidence to gather information from various online sources before engaging in more complex sifting and sorting activities. With berry-picking, learners are encouraged to compose short posts that involve identifying, evaluating and selecting resources, and collecting ideas, links, and references.

**Why Cultivating Online Berry-Picking Activity Is Important**

Berry-picking in an online learning setting is often haphazard, and so it is important to develop methods to systematically organize one’s collected resources for future use. Because most bloggers post unconnected ideas “berries” at random, they seldom see the connections between their own posts and others, or rarely document these connections. Berry-Picking is a crucial skill novice bloggers need to develop to be able to compose blog posts that involve identifying, evaluating, selecting and collecting online resources such as experts, sites, references and content links. In the same fashion, blogging that documents these berry-picking activities and decisions made are valuable for both the individual, and for the group. Structured Berry-picking activities aid learners to connect the dots, primes them to be more aware of their information needs to meet goals such as projects, assignments, and presentations, and builds team-building skills.

The next section explores several suggested blogging activities that educators can use with their learners to cultivate online berry-picking skills, and that independent learners can engage in to develop their academic blogging skills.

**Suggested Berry-Picking Activities**

Learners can begin practicing berry-picking activity by using their blogs to compose short posts of between 50 to 100 words. For practice, learners might want to post at least once every few days, for up to three to four different short mini-posts for 3-4 weeks.

**Examples**

 *“The Ideas Sandbox”* outlines, short drafts, questions, web sites, blog posts, videos, books, music, and photos.

*“Inspirations for Writing”* includes notes to self, scribbled notes, ideas to follow up, and interesting ideas.

*“Link-log”* is made up of a collection of links to useful resources and short comments about usefulness of the resources for their project.

*“What I learned this week”* is made up of a series of blog posts that describe sources of learning, such as events, people, sites, activities, and conversations.

**Online Berry-Picking: Instructions for Bloggers**

These more detailed instructions on blogging are intended as a guide for learners. You do not have to do all the activities as suggested; instead, you might want to try practicing different types of berry-picking posts and putting off other types, depending on your requirements as an individual learner. Try to practice different kinds of berry-picking activities, and anticipate what you might need to complete your project. These posts should be tagged under the tag *berry-picking* for later retrieval and review.

*“The Ideas Sandbox”*

Compose a series of three to five posts over a few weeks that collect your different thoughts for different projects you might be working on. For example, you might start off with sketches or outlines for your assignments, or upload voice memos, or scan and upload scanned written notes. In any case, berry-picking involves the uncensored collection process. You can compose short, fuzzy drafts, questions you are working on or have encountered, as well as brief descriptions of web sites, blog posts, videos, books, music, and/or photos. The posts in the sandbox are typically a few sentences in length, unstructured, and should be tagged as *berry-picking, ideas, sandbox* for later retrieval and review*.*

*“Topics Worth Pursuing”*

Another topic related to sandbox posts bloggers can do in their blogs is to identify some areas of interest they have been pursuing over the past few weeks. This type of serial reflection using the blogging tool serves to identify patterns and common themes for future assignments and projects. Oftentimes, when done in such a series, these kinds of posts tend to reveal a progression and development of ideas over time. These sandbox posts serve to explore and elaborate on ideas and encourage brainstorming of topics and themes. The ideas generated in such sandbox posts can be a great means for bloggers to find others with common interests and to engage in *informal cooperative learning alongside formal instruction*.

*“Inspirations for Writing”*

Compose a series of blog posts that include eureka moments, often from a period of lucid dreaming. These short posts are often best attempted in the early morning. They can include notes to self, scribbled notes, ideas to follow up, and interesting ideas worthy of mention. They can also include inspiring videos, music, quotes, or things overheard that were personally significant for you in some way. These posts can be a few sentences up to several paragraphs in length, and might include several sections within a single post. These blog posts should be tagged *berry-picking, inspirations, leads* for later retrieval and review*.*

*“Link-logs”*

Compose a series of blog posts that describe a collection of links to useful online resources and short comments about usefulness of these resources for one’s project. The entries are quite brief and there tends to be between three to five link summaries for each post. These blog posts should be tagged *berry-picking, link-log* for later retrieval and review.

*“What I learned this week”*

Compose a series of blog posts that describe your own sources of learning for this past week, such as significant events, things people have said or did, sites you visited, activities you participated in, and conversations you had. These posts tend to require between three to five paragraphs and should be tagged *berry-picking, significant learning* for later retrieval and review*.*

**Additional Berry-Picking Activities**

*Online Activity Journals*

In these posts, individual bloggers recount their day-to-day experiences on their process of learning to navigate and find resources. Very frequently, these experiences tend to be hit-and-miss, and can include false trails, dead-ends, and back-tracking to re-trace one’s steps. For example, the journal entries might reflect on individuals’ attempts at evaluating if online resources about to be collected are in fact relevant and appropriate. There might be a case of needing to return later at a more opportune time, or it might be a case of mistakenly collecting the item only to have it filtered out later. The recording of the decisions made, the self-talk engaged in while collecting and evaluating resources, can provide a valuable learning archive for the individual blogger as well as others.

*Significant Learning Notes*

In these posts, completed at the end of ten day periods, bloggers review what they have posted on their blogs and posted to the Wire and Twitter, and also take a look at what was added as bookmarks in their web browser, or as bookmarks within the learning community or group blog. These *reflective posts on berry-picking processes* solidify some best practices one has observed and implemented, and adds more depth than general impressions. It provides an opportunity to consider ways to use the blog for meeting one’s learning goals and strategies, and promotes a review of personal successes and areas for future improvement.

*Bloggers I Follow*

This type of blog post requires us to explore the blog posts of others, and engage in a descriptive overview as well as an in-depth analysis of the expert bloggers’ main interests, issues, and topics. Of the many posts composed, why have certain posts been chosen over others? This post asks the blogger to engage in a search online for expert role models outside the formal instructional context to emulate and observe closely. How does this expert blogger use language? What is appealing or interesting about this expert blogger? What prompts “you” to keep returning to this blogger’s posts? How is this blogger’s voice unique? What have you learned from this expert blogger after watching from a distance?

*Resource Summaries*

In this activity, bloggers create resource summaries that include content metadata, as well as quotations, significant terms and phrases, questions derived from the content, and descriptions of how the reader might make use of the resource. In addition, bloggers include their own impressions of the content, how it is presented, and their own emotional responses (how much the content resonated with the reader, and for what reasons).

*Team Resource Gathering*

These posts are occurring within a group blog. A team of bloggers acting as berry-pickers seek to minimize time, not re-trace others’ steps, and collect the “berries” of content that will best serve their needs both in the short-term and possibly even long-term. Different pickers will have different versions of what is useful, and what might be useful, so the goals might differ. Such *collaborative teamwork* using a group blog saves a great deal of time, and collects more resources sooner than any individual could on their own. Bloggers engage in the process of articulating their intentions and goals, determining a valuable set of guidelines, and sharing among the team a large number of resources.

**Berry-Picking Self-Assessment Tools:**

**The Resource Annotation Checklist**

This is a checklist for students to use when creating blog posts that document their resource gathering activities. It can be used for forum posts as well as blog posts.

The *first level of posting* is to provide enough detail to find the resource again, but will give you minimal details about what the resource covers. This type of post is common to beginners, and consists of a link-blog post.

The *second level of posting* requires a more in-depth analysis of the content, including the selection of quotes, sections of text, and a brief summary or abstract. It also suggests that students should interact on a deeper level with the content, and describe how the resource is relevant for meeting goals, how significant it is for professional practice, and how the resource was found online, including the context that prompted the learner to search for this resource and the tools used.

The *third level of resource annotation* requires a re-visit and a review of the usefulness of the resource for the learner. It also describes how the learner has used (or intends to use) the bibliography listed. In addition, there is a more in-depth analysis and reflection of the questions and issues covered in the paper, and a consideration of related topics for further follow-up.

* Select the items you included in your resource annotation post:

**Level One:**

* Resource Type
* Title
* URL
* Author
* Date Retrieved
* Date Published
* Web Site name
* Journal
* Keywords

**Level Two:**

* Useful Quotes
* Resource Description
* Brief Summary of main ideas
* Identified Relevance to upcoming assignment
* Reflected on Significance of Ideas for Professional Practice

**Level Three:**

* Strategies & Methods resource found online
* Identified Links to follow-up from bibliography
* Explained Intentions for Use of resource in paper
* Elaborated on questions and issues raised by resource

**Suggested Berry-Picking Template**

***Meta-Data***

* name
* title
* site
* URL

**Analysis: sifting and sorting activity**

* questions asked
* keywords and phrases
* relevant quotes
* Significance/relevance (what jumps out, what is important)
* Summary
* Intentions (what I intend to do with this info, how I intend to follow-up)

**Berry-Picking Exemplar**

*Here is an example of how I make use of the berry-picking checklist and template to construct a blog post that can provide sufficient details for use in future assignments or projects.*

**Metadata:**

**Author:** D' Arcy Norman

**Year of posting:** 2008

**Blog post title:** [Learning Community - Blogging and Student Publishing](http://www.darcynorman.net/2008/07/21/learning-community-blogging-and-student-publishing/),

**Site name:** D'Arcy Norman Dot Net

**URL:** <http://www.darcynorman.net/2008/07/21/learning-community-blogging-and-student-publishing/>

**Analysis:**

**Key Questions:**

What happens when students are publishing their own content, and collaborating with each other? What does that mean for assessment?

How do you properly engage a class of 100 (or more?) students, having them all publish content, exploring various topics, commenting, thinking critically, and still be able to make sense of that much activity?

**Phrases/Keywords:**  blogging as an ePortfolio activity;

**Relevant Quotes:**

"...effective for students to publish various bits of content through their blog(s) and then to let it percolate and filter until the “best” stuff is distilled ..."

**Summary:** D'Arcy Norman describes the topics of discussion between colleagues at the University of Calgary about student publishing in general, and looking at the usefulness of various tools such as blogs, wikis, and edubglu.

**Significance/Relevance:**

-supports the topic, providing another perspective of usefulness of blog

**Impressions of Blogger's Tone/Style:**

- I enjoy D'Arcy's casual, humourous writing style: *"I’m hoping to to much more of this kind of thing, to get faculty members together and properly caffeinated in order to get the conversations flowing."*

*- I like the way he sets up a series of questions that act as prompts to structure his blog post*

**Intentions/Follow-Up:**

I want to incorporate the ideas further into this post as part of narrative stream, perhaps incorporate the quote as example of how another edublogger views importance of blogging for students.

**Jigging**

Jigging describes the process of documenting on blogs one’s personal strategies and experiences while tapping into and managing the inflow of data/activity streams and feeds such as network activity streams, email alerts, network wire feeds, RSS feeds and Twitter feeds. Jigging also refers to the activities of bloggers while managing emails and site notifications, lists of RSS feeds, as well as describing decisions made while customizing personal activity tabs to filter content from various data streams for more refined searching and monitoring of online resources.

The emphasis of jigging is to identify strategies and impressions of usage of various tools such as Twitter, RSS aggregators such as Google Reader, use of bots and spiders, and ways of managing information flow within a learning network.

**Jigging** is an increasingly crucial blogging skill which involves tapping into data streams and extracting useful data bits, and adding relevant meta-commentary. This type of post differs slightly from **berry-picking** as it focuses more on extraction of cues, or data-bits for further exploration.

**Suggestions for Composing Jigging Posts:**

A post involving jigging would begin with a *preamble*, perhaps describing personal context, motivation, etc. There might be a few different posts, with short notes about each, such as key words, quotes, significant learning, definitions, inferences, impressions, etc.

**Jigging Post Exemplars**

*Here are two jigging post templates as examples. The first is an informative, deep analysis from* ***Tom Barret****about Twitter and its usefulness as a networking tool. The second template demonstrates documenting the use of an activity stream to collect resources.*

**Exemplar 1: Using Twitter**

**Data Bits:**

* Twitter described as a *"...platform that can fluidly handle both synchronous and asynchronous messaging".*
* importance of retweets to aid others to keep up with torrent

[Twitter - A Teaching and Learning Tool](http://edte.ch/blog/2008/03/29/twitter-a-teaching-and-learning-tool)

**Relevant Quotes:**

My favourite metaphor for how we use Twitter is the idea that it is a river that is constantly flowing. And that when we open up the Twitter site in our browser or start up Twhirl we are at the banks looking on. Some of us stay on the banks, roll out our picnic rug or unfold that favourite chair and settle in to watch the information stream pass by. Others quietly observe from the banks for a short time but have their trunks on underneath their clothes, and were always going to jump in and contribute.

**Significance for my own learning:**

The author mentions it is sometimes important to post re-tweets to ensure followers capture the tweet - interesting parallel to **jigging** metaphor, the re-casting again and again into the data streams. Could the **jigging** process be expanded to include both the act of passive collection of data, as well as active search activity in the form of requests from others on Twitter, for example?

**Exemplar 2: *Activity Streams***

**Preamble:** I regularly tap into my Google Reader blog feeds to follow blog posts from various edubloggers, and enjoyed the post about George Siemens about [activity streams](http://www.elearnspace.org/blog/2010/11/08/activity-streams/).

**Data bits** I collected from this post:

*information streams*, Danah Boyd, [EDUCAUSE article](http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE%2BReview/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume45/StreamsofContentLimitedAttenti/213923), Jon Dron, *context-switching,* George Siemens, *information splicing*

**Interpretations** I inferred from this post:

* avoid centralizing your network centre in twitter using hash-tags
* avoid developing meta-node- these activity streams are temporary

**Significance** for my own learning:

The following two terms are highly relevant to my own ongoing analysis of *micro-*blogging processes; in this case, **jigging.**

**Defined Terms:**

***Context-switching*** – i.e. the ability to shape and adjust the information stream based on context and interest at the time.

***Information-splicing*** – selecting the type of information and social interaction streams that are needed to address a particular topic or area of interest at a particular time.

**Jigging Post Template**

1. **Preamble**

*Describes personal goals, intentions and motivations*

1. **Data Bits**

*Describes tools and sources used to tap data, channels, hash-tags, highlights, and networks*

1. **Definitions and Explanations**

*Identifies important terms and concepts*

1. **Relevant Quotes**

*Includes useful quotes, along with citation details*

1. **Analysis (Impressions and Interpretations)**

*Comparisons, brief critiques, evaluations of content*

1. **Relevance and Significance**

*Explores usefulness of resource for application to assignments*

**Piling**

# Pilingis a blogging process that involves active reviewing, revisiting and reorganizing tagging practices on one's content. Within most current online communities, this tends to include blog posts, files, photos, bookmarks, podcasts, and videos. Piling also involves the active review and reflection of tag clouds (both one's own and others), tagging categories, and blog rolls, and Twitter hash-tags.

Blog posts that involve piling offer details into the decision-making process bloggers engage in while classifying posts using tags, selecting posting categories, or creating keywords within the posts. Blog posts that involve the piling process also include reflections on impressions and experiences of the use of tag clouds for one’s own and for others’ blogs. In addition, piling includes the decisions of re-tagging different content differently depending on where it resides and the purposes it serves in various contexts.

During each course, students sporadically use piling strategies on their blog posts. Tags tend to be used to describe the names of courses, for example, or the assignment name, or the purpose for the post, perhaps. Thus, at the early stages, piling is hit-and-miss, random, and largely disorganized. Students seldom perceive the need for anticipating the need for revisiting and tapping into their own personal blog post archives at a later time. Thus, a crucial task of educators is to encourage learners to perceive their learning artifacts as valuable in future, as potentially part of e-portfolios for the end of the program, as a legacy for later review.

**Piling Activities**

*“In the Tag Clouds”*

With this activity, students are asked to examine three tag clouds of three blogging experts to describe the types of tags used, and to identify patterns of use. Which tags are more prominent? Which Tag Clouds make more sense to you? Why? Which tagging strategies would you like to emulate for your blogging? How do the tags for photos, files, and blog posts differ?

**Piling Blog Post Checklist**

*The following list of items to check for when posting in your blog on the topic of “In the Tag Clouds” is intended as a guide, and so you are not required to cover every single element in the first version of your post. In fact, you can either address these questions in a series of posts, linking the posts together, or re-visit your older post and update them to add or revise content.*

In your blog posts, have you…

1. \_\_\_ included the site names, resource types, and URLs of the expert bloggers you are following within the learning community?
2. \_\_\_ explained the reasons for selecting these expert bloggers?
3. \_\_\_ identified a few (3 to 5) important tags used by each blogger, based on their tag clouds?
4. \_\_\_ speculated on the kind of topics these bloggers cover?
5. \_\_\_ compared your own use of tags with these expert bloggers?
6. \_\_\_ identified how these expert bloggers use tags for photos and files?
7. \_\_\_ outlined lessons learned from examining the tagging practices of experts and how their best practices will impact your own future tagging practices?

*“Blog Rollovers”*

In this activity, students explore the blog-rolls and bookmarks of five different bloggers. How are these experts’ blog-rolls and bookmarks organized? Click-through a few of the links from each of the blogs you have selected. What does the content from these blog-roll and bookmark links indicate about the bloggers’ interests? Reflect on how you might use blog rolls and bookmarks in future on your own blog.

***Use the following Table to organize your posts that compare and contrast the different expert bloggers.*** *Rate the blog-rolls based on your own impressions of how well these blog-rolls describe your perceptions of how well organized they appear, whether there appears to be a clear focus, the extent to which the blog-rolls are effectively described, and how thorough they appear to be. Use the following rating scale from 1 to five:*

1. **Unsatisfactory 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very Good 5- Excellent**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Blog-Rolls and****Bookmarks** | **Blogger 1** | **Blogger 2** | **Blogger 3** | **Blogger 4** | **Blogger 5** |
| **Organized** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Focused** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Descriptive** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Thorough** |  |  |  |  |  |

**Comments:** *(Use this section to comment on any impressions you had about the experts’ blog-rolls and bookmarks, including the links you found particularly useful.)*

**Transitioning from Piling to Setting**

The transition between piling and setting is gradual and requires additional time of several months. For example, after about a year of blogging, I began to become more proactive about how I organized the posts. I began to realize that there were two different functions of tags: those tags that made my own navigation easier (for easier retrieval and review), and those tags that organized the posts into a more coherent structure others can make use of. At this point, I began to reflect on the reasons for needing to re-visit and revise older posts. It was largely prompted by a need for major house-cleaning – in my case, the posts needed to be migrated to another server. I spent some time reviewing my posts, and the notions of both piling and setting emerged as blogging processes. Another major motivator for the revisions was the need to draw together learning artifacts for my summative portfolio review, in which I needed to demonstrate that I acquired specific competencies.

Upon examination of my tags within the academic learning community, I realized that the Tag Cloud I have seemed all over the map - more than 100 tags had been used, and most of these have been re-used for courses. It prompted me to begin culling some of these less descriptive tags such as *draft*, or *exemplar*, or *MODEL POST*, and impose a more rigorous, organized structure that reduces the clutter. But how? How are other bloggers within the learning community using tags? Are they as haphazard and randomly assigned as mine? I felt compelled to find out, and I began looking around, and considered expert bloggers’ tagging activity based on Tag Cloud, blog rolls, and Twitter hash-tags. Experts’ tagging strategies tend to be much more refined and more descriptive. Instead of a smattering of different tags, experts commonly re-use a few common tags in many of their posts. There are a few larger tags easily identifiable in their Tag Clouds. I would like to emulate this practice and simplify my own Tag Cloud for easier retrieval and re-use.

I have also noticed that I had used similar tags, with slightly different wording - kind of confusing and messy. For example, I use blogging, edublogging, edublogs, blogs, blogging...a lot of variations. So I will definitely want to re-name these basic concepts using more generic tags, such as ACADEMIC BLOGGING.

**Activity: Content Tagging Review (after at least 6-8 months of blogging)**

1. What do you plan to use your blog posts and files for in future? (For example, you might need the content later for your e-portfolio, resume, assignments in later courses, or for Independent Study Courses.)
2. How do you plan to use tags to make retrieval of your posts and online content easier?
3. How do you think others might want to review your content? How does this influence how you use tags?

**Setting**

Blog posts that involve active identification, sorting, comparing and analysis of one’s own and other bloggers' data sets such as dashboards, followers, collections, bookmarks, blog rolls, tag clouds and home pages. In general, setting strategies involves the use of blogs for information retrieval, coordination and monitoring, aggregation and amplification.

**Reflecting on Personal Setting Strategies**

How can I become a more effective blogger? How am I using the coordinating tools to optimize information retrieval, aggregation and amplification? For example, by looking at my Dashboard on the Landing, I can make an evaluation of how well I have set up the widgets for use within the online learning environment. I notice that the external RSS feed and the Twitter channels are set up but inactive. I don't use the dashboard for those features, as I use Google Reader and Tweet Deck to manage the feeds and tweets. Oftentimes, I reflect on how I had used the dashboard in the past, and how I have been recently using it. By examining the differences, I can re-evaluate the layout, and customize the dashboard in view of recent use, removing and adding widgets to reflect what I require now, or in anticipation of what I will likely need in future (in advance of an upcoming project, presentation, assignments, etc.)

***Exploring Setting Strategies of Expert Bloggers***

How are expert edubloggers using Word Press and categorizing their blog posts? For example, [Terry Anderson](http://terrya.edublogs.org/) and [George Siemens](http://www.elearnspace.org/blog/) have WordPress blogs. How are they using tags and categories?  One observation is that Terry Anderson makes use of specific categories that many student bloggers could also adopt for use as tags in their own edu blogs: *PLEs, Personal, and Educational Social Software*.  George Siemens makes use of certain categories I would like to use as popular tags within a learning community or group blog: *presentations, conferences, technologies* (ie. Twitter and FaceBook). Useful tags include *Technologies, Tools, Trends, Blogging, and Uncategorized*.

**Setting Activities**

**Summary Reflections: Your Online Learning Setting**

*Reflect on the decisions made about what posts or content remains limited to your peers and your instructor, and what content has been made public.*

1. How were photos and files organized over time?
2. What are your reasons for following others, and creating follower/followed by collections?
3. How did you customize your own dashboard over time?
4. Take a look at your overall online activity – what tools are most commonly used? Which are rarely used?

**Summary Reflections: Managing Information Overload**

1. What are your impressions of the Activity, Wire and Collections features?
2. Have you used them to manage the flow of incoming information?
3. Have you made use of the dashboard to reduce overload?
4. In what ways have these tools helped? How are others using these tools?
5. Have you limited your notifications to just peers taking courses with you? Or are you following a wider group of participants?
6. How might your notifications change once you finish taking the program?

**Weaving and Texturing**

These processes begin the process of making increasingly complex connections between ideas, and form the foundations of sense-making activity, of utilizing the various affordances of blogging technology to make meaningful connections to other sources. The act of connecting to other resources and explaining the context (how it was found, and what led you to choose the content, and link to it), as well explain the potential significance of the content for others, embeds the blogger into a web of connections, so that one is both blogging for self, as well as considering the wider potential audiences. The extent to which one can successfully weave personally meaningful content into one’s own posts can be best assessed by an individual blogger using what I would refer to as the “tether test”:

***The “Tether Test”: Assessing the Significance of What Has Learned***

The tether test idea was inspired while I was addressing a question at a professional workshop about how relevant an online archive was to the students several semesters later, or to the writers, years after they had participated in the discussions, graduated from the program, and had moved on. I suggested that the truest test of the significance of the post archive to individual learners was how well these posts retained relevance and significance to those who composed them, how well the posts were created by their owners to capture sufficient detail so that the owner (as well as others) could re-capture the essence of the content and re-start or continue the sense-making activity despite the intervening months or years the post lay dormant.

Oftentimes, I look back at the posts I have written, and wonder where I can follow up again on the links I refer to in this post, or get back to the sources that I visited before. I lack the signposts and notice the gaps and the missing details that might have aided me to continue on with my learning. I am thus sometimes frustrated at having forgotten or having neglected to add more clues to my way-making activity. I wonder also to what extent I could now (some time after I first posted) make further updates to the post with more context to help me re-trace my steps. Regrettably, these posts stand alone, isolated, disconnected forever from the concerns I had when I first composed the post.

There are too many holes in the personal memory to gather he threads together to make the post more coherent. Instead, I am left to wonder what led me to be inspired at that moment, what other ideas and resources were connected to this post. It leads me to try to re-double my efforts not to leave posts un-tethered, no longer tied to the personal context that brought them into being. A post written months or years before that is limited in usefulness in the present moment provides me great lessons for self-improvement.

Blogging that involves weaving and texturing requires bloggers to actively play a number of roles for multiple audiences at once: one needs to blog as a *chronicler, recorder, scribe, and biographer* for the *self in the moment*, for the *future selves*, and for *other selves*. Seldom are we aware of this need to consider the potential significance of effective weaving and texturing. One needs to involve oneself fully in the decision-making processes, and this self-aware sharing can be intended for a pause-point one can turn back and review to monitor and track progress; however, it can also aid others to follow one’s own past thinking and struggles. These posts act as time capsules, or compositions, which summarize, evaluate, or paraphrase content, embed links from various sources, and add quotes, footnotes, and citations from one’s own and others’ posts, articles, web sites, podcasts, presentations, photos, files, videos, comments, and other multi-media content.

**Weaving and Texturing Blogging Activities**

***Digital Footprints***

*In this extended blogging activity, learners* engage in a dialogue with another blogger, in which each come up with a set of five questions about any topic of mutual interest. They then answer these questions, and invite the feedback of their blogging partner. Both sets of questions and the responses are added to the same post. Then, the pair reads and revises each others’ replies. The bloggers wait four to six weeks, and then re-visit the same posts to again add notes and further comments, and reply to each other’s annotations and updates.

***Tapestries***

Individual bloggers select a topic of interest to investigate and explore in depth, drawing on a wide range of authoritative sources. They record their progress in a series of blog posts, documenting their emotional experiences of independently seeking resources. They can identify strategies, challenges, successes, eureka moments and frustrations. They then return to a select number of posts and critically examine them again to record their motivations for shifting their narrative tone, voice, and register. The blogger speculates which audiences were being addressed, and attempts to identify one’s intentions for meaning-making. In addition, bloggers add a layer of meaning over top the original post, using meta-commenting, and adding highlighted text, colours, and fonts. The learners engage in three different sets of revisions, adding multiple layers of revisions and commenting and meta-narratives.

**Assessing Weaving and Texturing: Adding Details to your Posts**

*On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is complete and 1 is incomplete), identify whether you included the following elements to your posts:*

**Level 1:**

\_\_\_ linked to posts composed by instructor

\_\_\_ linked to peers’ posts

\_\_\_ linked to your own previously written posts

\_\_\_ linked to experts’ posts within learning community

\_\_\_ embedded photos and images

\_\_\_ linked to annotated bookmark created by member of learning community

\_\_\_ embedded link to experts’ presentations, videos, and documents

**Level 2:**

\_\_\_ used **bold** and *italics* to emphasize keywords and phrases in body of post

\_\_\_ used different font colours to demarcate different revisions at different points

\_\_\_ linked to external experts’ posts and resources

\_\_\_ added footnotes to post as appended details

\_\_\_ speculated on potential usefulness of content for others, and for oneself at later time

\_\_\_ described the reasons for searching for and selecting the resource

**Level 3:**

\_\_\_ explained how you found the content, what strategies and tools used. (ie. Online research tools, portals, experts, peers, keyword searches, databases used, etc.)

\_\_\_ described a short reference to authors and articles not elaborated on in post but connected to post topic

\_\_\_ included explanatory notes to self explaining personal learning processes, challenges, and successes

\_\_\_ included/embedded multi-media resources such as idea maps, rich pictures, idea maps, charts and tables

\_\_\_ created and included links from post to own supplementary content such as narrated presentations, podcasts, screen-casts, and videos

**Putting it altogether: Suggested Extended Blogging Activities**

**Chronicling**

The chronicling process involves a cycle of reading others' blogs, filtering, synthesizing and sense-making. It is an example of how one can comfortably blog in the open by sharing one's thoughts and ideas and processes of idea capture.

I think that using blogs for **chronicling** is an important aspect of formal academic blogging. For me, this process of reporting and commenting on conferences and seminars involves jotting down notes, collecting short voice narrations, preparing and conducting short impromptu interviews with participants and presenters during coffee breaks and lunchtime, collecting and reflecting on **backchannel** conversations -Twitter commentary- during presentations, and doing a post-conference blog post reviewing the archived presentations.

This reporting process takes several weeks, and leads to numerous posts, podcasts and uploaded files. In my own case, I upload the raw notes, outlines, scanned images of conference notes, and voice notes to a sandbox part of my academic blog, a more private *"holding space".*  I tag these for my private use, deciding on how to **pile** the posts together for easier retrieval, and categorizing them as separate artefacts that I might re-visit and re-use at some later time. I **weave** in *meta-narrative*, and add **texturing** *context cues*, so I can remember the context of the isolated tidbits and info-scraps.

I then begin **weaving** the content together as a narrative, linking and embedding the pieces into a series of posts. I am always looking for ways to tag and categorize these posts, and often check out the *Tag Clouds* of other edubloggers, to compare my tagging strategies with theirs. How did they do their tagging? What are they posting about? What data streams and info-scraps are they weaving into their narrative? What sources are they quoting, citing, or drawing from?

**Assessment of Chronicle Blogs**

*To what extent can the posting help the blogger?*

I can’t see how a writing tool such as a blog can be assessed like an essay or article – the posts are open-ended, are in constant flux, are intended to be changed, updated, and improved upon. How can a post provide comprehensive insights, complex understanding, and a focused and creative viewpoint? It is through the process of blogging one gradually acquires these skills, through trial and error. The posts may or may not generate discussion or invite comments from others. There may not be any intended audience, primarily because the blogger might have mixed intentions, and blog in different ways at different times. The post might end up with inconsistencies and shifting, often contradictory, perspectives. The blogger’s voice often shifts over time, and sometimes may be a borrowed, or rehearsed, mask. The blogger may be trying on different ideas for size. In effect, the blogger’s position to the subject may be altered, thanks to others’ feedback, or transformative shifts in one’s frames of meaning can change gradually…this might not be at first apparent to the blogger through week-to-week activity, but be obvious upon comparison of earlier posts composed years ago and more recent posts composed recently. Organizational structure shifts when one attempts to try out new ways of expression, demonstrating a process of development as one traverses various creative phases. Using timeliness and frequency as elements for assessment are ridiculous ways to assess blogging – one learner chooses to blog monthly; others blogs weekly or monthly; others blog when inspired to do so. Still other bloggers experience spurts of activity, followed by latent periods of inactivity. English teachers are more preoccupied with mechanics than needed; bloggers would like to aim for a more coherent presentation of ideas; however, learners can learn more about mechanics over time when given plenty of practice, encouragement, guidance, and constructive feedback. Grammar, capitalization, punctuation and spelling are all important. Blogging provides learners with effective practice to observe and apply the use of mechanics in their own writing. I think it is crucial for learners to incorporate details about personal context related to data gathering, way-making, and sense-making. Adding hyperlinks, embedding multimedia content, quoting and citing sources, incorporating and addressing others’ comments, and appending to one’s earlier posts with updates, are crucial elements necessary for effective blogging.