

Student Blogs and Journals as Assessment Tools For Faculty-Led Study Abroad Trips¹

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Abstract

Two similar study abroad trips were conducted, with one group of students required to post daily blogs in Australia and the other group completing handwritten journals in Argentina. Observations regarding the two writing modalities are described. The correlations between ratings assigned by faculty evaluators based on blog or journal entries of student achievement of student learning objectives (SLO) and scores assessed by the faculty leaders independently of blog or journal entries were inconsistent (-0.40 to 0.82). Consequently, blogs and journal entries may best be used in conjunction with other tools to determine whether students achieved the SLO. Blog and journal entries on day 1 were compared with entries posted on day 10 to determine whether students improved their use of spelling, punctuation and grammar; increased the amount of reflection evident; and showed more enthusiasm. Students on the Australian trip improved in each area ($P \leq 0.041$), with the greatest improvement in enthusiasm ($P < 0.0001$). Students traveling to Argentina showed improvement only in reflection ($P = 0.029$). While student writing improved with blogging, students in Argentina demonstrated declining effort as they composed journal entries.

Key words: blog, learning objectives, social media, student learning, study abroad

Introduction

Colleges and universities across the country are emphasizing study abroad experiences for undergraduate students (Gibson et al., 2012; Zhai and Scheer, 2002) and Kansas State University's (KSU) College of Agriculture (COA) is no exception. The Department of Animal Sciences & Industry (ASI) alone has offered 20 faculty-led study abroad trips since 2008, with seven trips to English-speaking countries. A total

of 349 students have participated in these experiences and most of the trips have been 10 to 18 days in length. The majority of the faculty leaders of these study abroad experiences have required students to write a report or turn in a journal of reflections on experiences and perceptions during the trip.

Requiring students to write about their experiences helps them achieve several objectives, including improving their writing skills and developing the critical thinking skills that lead to cultural competency (Page and Benander, 2011). As times change and technology evolves, students need to expand their proficiencies into online modules, including social media outlets. Although 72% of college students indicate that they communicate most with friends online (Jones, 2002), 89.1% report that they do not have a blog (Rhoades et al., 2008). Students also need to learn to communicate electronically in a professional manner (Leggette et al., 2011). In a faculty-led study abroad trip to Australia in 2012, KSU students were asked to compile a blog about their experience in lieu of writing traditional journals. Upon return, the blogs were evaluated to determine if they reflected whether students achieved the student learning outcomes (SLO) and if specified components of the blogs improved from the beginning to the end of the trip. Similar comparisons were made regarding a faculty-led study abroad trip to Argentina in 2013 during which students completed a handwritten journal. The intent was not to determine which was better (blogging or journal writing), but to document some observations regarding each.

Materials and Methods

All procedures in this study were determined by the KSU Institutional Review Board to be exempt from review.

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Student Blogs and Journals

Pre-trip Preparation for Australia

A 10-day faculty-led study abroad trip to Australia was offered with an emphasis on beef cattle and sheep. Students ($n = 20$) were required to enroll in ASI 660 Study Abroad/Animal Science in the spring of 2012. This course met for 1 hour per week throughout the spring semester. Students learned about Australia, with an emphasis on the sites they would visit. Students were required to research locations and give graded oral presentations to their classmates. Students were also provided basic travel information, which included their flight and travel itineraries, packing suggestions and passport requirements. The SLO for the course were for students to:

1. Gain direct exposure to many facets of the livestock industry in Australia;
2. Gain awareness of the challenges facing people involved in agriculture in Australia, as well as awareness of the international opportunities that exist between the United States (US) and Australia;
3. Develop an appreciation for the differences and similarities between livestock production systems and management practices in the US and Australia;
4. Become familiar with the diversity of Australian culture and customs; and
5. Increase written communication skills while becoming familiar with the social media outlet of blogging.

One unique aspect of this particular trip compared with others in the department was that students were required to blog about their experiences while they were in Australia. To prepare students for this, one class period was devoted to teaching students about blogging and helping them set up their individual blogs. Nineteen students elected to use Blogger.com (Google) and one student created her blog in WordPress. Before departing, students were required to post three blog entries: one of their choosing on the day they created the blog, a chapter summary from a travel guide about Australia and a summary of in-class presentations.

Pre-trip Preparation for Argentina

The pre-trip preparation for Argentina was similar to that for the Australia trip. A 14-day faculty-led study abroad trip was planned to Argentina, with an emphasis on the Argentinian beef and sheep industries. Students ($n = 19$) on this trip were also required to enroll in ASI 660 and met weekly in the semester prior to the trip (Spring 2013) to learn about Argentina, the sites they would see and international travel in general. The SLO for the course were for students to: 1) gain direct exposure to many facets of the livestock industry in Argentina; 2) gain awareness of the challenges facing people involved in agriculture in Argentina, as well as awareness of the international opportunities that exist between the United States (US) and Argentina; 3) develop an appreciation for the differences and similarities between livestock production systems and management practices in the

US and Argentina; and 4) become familiar with the diversity of Argentinian culture and customs. These were identical to the SLO for students participating on the Australian trip, with the exception of SLO 5, which was only provided to students travelling to Australia.

Blogging Down Under

Students departed for their 10-day trip to Australia on May 21, 2012. The trip included educational stops at abattoirs, ranches, feedlots and a university. The itinerary included planned cultural experiences in Melbourne and Sydney and at the Great Barrier Reef. Students were instructed to post at least 1 blog entry each day. Blogs were to be fewer than 500 words and were to include at least 1 photograph. To assist in the mechanics posting blogs, the faculty instructor took 4 iPads on the trip, all with international data service. Students also were allowed to bring their personal laptop or tablet computers. Students were instructed to compose their blogs in the app Pages or Notes, then copy the entry into their blogs to conserve data usage and prevent students from losing entries if they experienced a loss of connectivity. Students were given a copy of the grading rubric for the blogs and were told to write about what they saw, learned and did. They were instructed that personal impressions should be included in their daily blogs, but no further instruction was given regarding the content of the blog entries. Blogs were each worth 10 points: 5 points for quality of content, 1 point for remaining under 500 words, 2 points for including a photograph and 2 points for completion on each respective day. Students were also required to post a final blog entry about their overall impression of the trip and corresponding course, as well as a final analytical review. In total, blog entries were worth 150 of the 650 total points possible in the class.

Due to major problems with data service and limited wireless internet availability in Australia, students were not able to post their blog entries each day as planned. As a result, the instructor viewed student entries in Pages or Notes to ensure that blog entries had been composed on a given day. When connectivity was available, students uploaded their entries into their blogs. Aside from ensuring that they were completed daily, none of the blog entries were graded while the students were in Australia; the faculty instructor read and assigned point values to the blogs after the trip was completed and when connectivity was reestablished.

Daily Journaling in Argentina

Students departed for their 14-day trip to Argentina on May 20, 2013. Prior to departing for Argentina, blank journals were distributed to all students. The trip included educational stops at ranches, feedlots, sheep operations, dairies, a research station and a tea plantation. The itinerary also included planned cultural experiences in Buenos Aires and a visit to Iguazu Falls. Students were instructed to compose a handwritten journal entry each day. Students were encouraged to include their own personal impressions, rather than just a regurgitation

of the daily itinerary. Little specific instruction was given regarding the length of journal entries. Journals were to be graded on specific details of each farm visit. Personal insight regarding culture, travel, cattle and history were to be addressed. Grammar and spelling were to account for $\leq 10\%$ of the overall journal grade. Journal entries accounted for 100 points of the 500 total points available in the class. While in Argentina, journals were not checked to determine if students were completing the journals daily as instructed or waiting several days before completing their entries. Journals were collected at the conclusion of the trip and graded by the instructor.

Data Collection

After completion of the trips, two independent faculty members with no connection to either course, either group of students, nor the trips themselves completed independent evaluations of the blogs and journal entries. Because the trip to Argentina was longer in duration than the trip to Australia, only the journal entries for the first 10 days of the Argentinian trip were evaluated and all 10 daily blogs of the Australian trip were scored. Evaluators read the 10 daily blogs or journal entries for each student and identified which SLO were specifically addressed in each blog (SLO-#days); for example, the evaluators might note that Student A addressed SLO 1 on days 2, 3 and 7, for a total of 3 days. After determining which blogs addressed each SLO, the independent evaluators also assigned an overall score based on how thoroughly each student appeared to have achieved each SLO in the blogs (SLO-quality). These scores ranged from 1, where the SLO was never addressed, to 10, where the student showed great reflection and appreciation for the SLO. Because the same faculty personnel were assigning both of these scores, they were not assumed to be independent. The faculty leader of each trip also assigned a score ranging from 1 to 10 for how well each student achieved each SLO based on his perceptions during the trip without consideration of blog or journal entries (SLO-instructor).

Aside from evaluating blogs and journal entries for attainment of the SLO, blogs and journal entries were also evaluated for the amount of thought and reflection apparent (REFLECT); the level of enthusiasm communicated (ENTHUSE); and proper use of spelling, punctuation and grammar (GRAM). These evaluations were completed by the same 2 independent faculty members and the faculty leader of each study abroad trip. Scores ranged from 1 to 10 for each category. Only blogs written on days 1 and 10 of the trip were evaluated for these criteria, allowing comparisons to be drawn from the beginning of the trip to the end (or day 10, in the case of the Argentinian trip).

Statistical Analysis

All data were analyzed with SAS (SAS Inst. Inc., Cary, NC). To determine whether any of the variables associated with SLO achievement were related to each other and to final percentage earned in the course

(PERC), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated within trip between SLO-instructor, SLO-#days, SLO-quality and PERC. The change in the scores assessed for REFLECT, ENTHUSE and GRAM was calculated by subtracting day 1 values from those recorded for day 10. A t-test was used on these values to determine if student performance changed on each trip from day 1 to day 10. Correlations also were calculated between PERC and the improvement for REFLECT, ENTHUSE and GRAM to determine whether independent evaluations of student writing would be reflective of PERC.

Results and Discussion

The faculty-led study abroad trips to Australia and Argentina shared many similarities: both included a semester-long preparation course, focused on the cattle and sheep industries, took place in the spring immediately following the end of the semester, required students to write about their experiences, used SLO 1 through 4 and included approximately the same number of students. There were also differences that could not be controlled. One trip occurred in 2012 (Australia) and the other was in 2013 (Argentina); different students participated in each; and the faculty leader for each trip was different. Thus causation for differences noted cannot necessarily be attributed to blogging or journal-writing alone. Thus statistical comparisons were only made within trip and not across trips.

Student Learning Outcomes

For all SLO, the correlations between SLO-instructor and PERC ranged from 0.38 to 0.55 for students participating in the Australian trip (Table 1; $P < 0.10$). This relationship was even stronger for students traveling to Argentina (Table 2; $P < 0.01$). This was not surprising, as both assessments were completed by the faculty leaders of the trips. Because both faculty leaders were familiar with the students, their performances throughout the semester on various assignments and their conduct while abroad, the faculty leaders knew which students were truly engaged in the course. Those students were most likely to receive greater scores on the SLO-instructor assessments and to earn greater percentages in the courses. The other consistent trend for all SLO on both trips was that SLO-#days and SLO-quality were correlated ($P \leq 0.0012$). This also was not surprising, as the more times a student addressed an SLO throughout the 10 days of blogging or journal writing, the more the faculty evaluators associated a particular student with a specific SLO and thus the greater SLO-quality score they were likely to assess. The two scores assessed by the faculty leaders of the trips (SLO-instructor and PERC) were consistently correlated, as were the two scores assessed by the faculty evaluators (SLO-#days and SLO-quality).

When the scores assessed by the faculty evaluators were compared with those assessed by the course instructors, the results were inconsistent. For the

Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients (with P-values below) for the Australian trip between instructor's assessment of student (n = 20) attainment of each student learning objective (SLO) without regard to blog entries (SLO-instructor), the number of days that students addressed each SLO in their blog entries (SLO-#days), the faculty evaluators' assessment of each student's overall attainment of each SLO based on blog entries (SLO-quality), and each student's final percentage earned in the course (PERC)

Assessment	SLO 1	SLO 2	SLO 3	SLO 4	SLO 5
SLO-instructor and SLO-#days	-0.16 (0.50)	0.32 (0.18)	0.20 (0.39)	-0.40 (0.082)	0.43 (0.056)
SLO-instructor and SLO-quality	-0.063 (0.79)	0.36 (0.12)	0.13 (0.59)	-0.25 (0.28)	0.51 (0.022)
SLO-instructor and PERC	0.55 (0.013)	0.38 (0.096)	0.40 (0.080)	0.39 (0.088)	0.51 (0.022)
SLO-#days and SLO-quality	0.67 (0.0012)	0.82 (< 0.0001)	0.89 (< 0.0001)	0.79 (< 0.0001)	0.92 (< 0.0001)
SLO-#days and PERC	-0.071 (0.77)	0.51 (0.023)	0.14 (0.54)	-0.29 (0.22)	0.17 (0.47)
SLO-quality and PERC	0.11 (0.64)	0.55 (0.012)	0.28 (0.23)	-0.43 (0.062)	0.30 (0.20)

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients (with P-values below) for the Argentina trip between instructor's assessment of student (n = 19) attainment of each student learning objective (SLO) without regard to journal entries (SLO-instructor), the number of days that students addressed each SLO in their journal entries (SLO-#days), the faculty evaluators' assessment of each student's overall attainment of each SLO based on journal entries (SLO-quality), and each student's final percentage earned in the course (PERC)

Assessment	SLO 1	SLO 2	SLO 3	SLO 4
SLO-instructor vs. SLO-#days	0.62 (0.0045)	0.27 (0.26)	0.48 (0.04)	0.48 (0.036)
SLO-instructor vs. SLO-quality	0.82 (< 0.0001)	0.32 (0.19)	0.67 (0.0016)	0.62 (0.0046)
SLO-instructor vs. PERC	0.59 (0.0080)	0.67 (0.0017)	0.64 (0.0034)	0.66 (0.0021)
SLO-#days vs. SLO-quality	0.80 (< 0.0001)	0.93 (< 0.0001)	0.91 (< 0.0001)	0.91 (< 0.0001)
SLO-#days vs. PERC	-0.017 (0.94)	0.24 (0.32)	0.0079 (0.97)	0.36 (0.13)
SLO-quality vs. PERC	0.39 (0.10)	0.24 (0.32)	0.27 (0.25)	0.49 (0.031)

Australian trip, the correlation between SLO-instructor and SLO-#days trended toward significance only for SLO 4 and 5 ($P \leq 0.082$), but in the case of SLO 4, the correlation was negative. The correlation between SLO-instructor and SLO-quality was 0.51 for SLO 5 ($P = 0.022$). The correlation between SLO-#days and PERC was significant only for SLO 2 ($P = 0.023$). The correlation between SLO-quality and PERC was significant for SLO 2 ($P = 0.012$) and trended toward significance for SLO 4 ($P = 0.062$), but this correlation was negative. All other correlations for the Australian trip were small and non-significant. These inconsistencies make it difficult to discern clear patterns between the various observations made by the instructor and the assessments made by faculty evaluators based on blogs alone. Because students were not given instructions to write specifically about the various SLO, it is possible that even those who achieved the SLO might not have conveyed that attainment through their individual blog entries. If blogs are to be used to assess student attainment of SLO, it appears that it would be helpful to give students specific guidelines regarding the content of their blog entries to ensure that the SLO are addressed.

Faculty evaluators' and the faculty leader's assessments of student performance were more consistent for the Argentina trip. The faculty evaluators' assess-

ments of SLO-#days were correlated with the faculty leader's SLO-instructor assessments for SLO 1, 3 and 4 ($P \leq 0.04$). The same SLO (1, 3 and 4) were also correlated when SLO-instructor and SLO-quality were compared ($P < 0.005$). In the case of the Argentinian trip, neither of the faculty evaluators' assessments were correlated with the final percentage earned by students in the course. Because the faculty evaluators' assessments were similar to those assigned by the faculty leader in his SLO-instructor evaluations, it is somewhat surprising that the faculty evaluators' assessments were not correlated with PERC for any of the SLO. This is likely due to other factors influencing student grades aside from SLO attainment alone. Students on this trip also were not specifically instructed to address the various SLO in their journal entries, so this cannot account for the differences noted between the two trips. Perhaps when students felt they were writing their entries for the benefit of the instructor, rather than friends and family members reading the blogs at home, they were more likely to address issues related to the course, rather than simply writing about what they thought others would enjoy reading.

Content and Quality of Entries

When the faculty evaluators and faculty leader of the Australian course independently evaluated the blogs, they detected improvement in every category evaluated from day 1 through day 10 (Table 3). Despite the improvement in each of these categories, in most cases, the correlations between these criteria were small and non-significant (Table 4; $P \geq 0.070$). Although others have reported that survey participants think using social media in the college classroom will decrease quality of communication (Settle et al., 2010), we found the opposite to be true. Students must be provided opportunities to practice writing if they are to improve their skills (Haug, 1996) and perhaps realizing — based on comments posted to their blogs — that friends and family were actually reading their entries encouraged students to put more effort into their blogs. The length restriction of the blog entries also may have reduced intimidation felt by students and aided in focusing their thoughts. While some Argentinian journal entries were lengthy on day 1, very few exceeded 500 words by day 10, however, so brevity of entry does not entirely account for differences noted between trips.

The same trend was not apparent with the journal entries submitted by students participating in the Argentinian trip. From day 1 to day 10, there were

not improvements detected in any of the parameters evaluated and the amount of REFLECT declined. As the trip advanced, the journal entries became progressively shorter. Although the students continued to address some SLO, it was quite apparent that the level of effort put into the journal entries was declining for many students by day 10. The journals were not checked daily, but the faculty leader noted that on some days students appeared to be “catching up” on their journals; in other words, rather than writing about their experiences while they were in recent memory, students would wait several days before they composed journal entries. Without feedback from others (instructor, friends, or family), student motivation to write journal entries appeared to wane as the trip progressed. In the case of this trip, some of these criteria were correlated with one another. REFLECT and ENTHUSE, GRAM and ENTHUSE and GRAM and PERC were all correlated. Essentially, those students who continued to put some effort into their journal entries tended to continue to show more proficiency in all these areas than students who had regressed to short, meaningless entries.

One might expect ENTHUSE to be greater at the beginning and wane throughout the trips as students became more tired, but this was not the case for either trip. Although the level of ENTHUSE held steady for those students in Argentina ($P = 0.22$), those in Australia demonstrated an increase in this parameter ($P < 0.0001$), as evaluated by the faculty evaluators and instructor. Some of this difference might be attributed to the fact that the students in Australia were about to return home while the students in Argentina had 4 days remaining in their study abroad experience. While in Australia, students were receiving comments from family members and friends who were reading and enjoying the blogs from home. This feedback may have motivated students to put more effort into their daily entries. Starting a blog can be overwhelming and frustrating to those not familiar with this form of social media, but students likely gained confidence with each blog entry posted. Students also may have been a bit nervous and apprehensive about the trip on day 1, but by day 10 when they had made good friends and not only survived but also enjoyed the trip, their posts likely reflected this increased comfort level. As a result, the quality of entries improved. Page and Benander (2011) reported that students with highly structured reflections showed more recognition, analysis and synthesis. Providing more guidance about the content of blog entries may have further increased the amount of REFLECT and enhanced the use of blogs to evaluate the attainment of SLO.

Students in Australia showed more improvement throughout the trip in REFLECT ($P = 0.0025$) and ENTHUSE ($P = 0.0003$) than students who turned in handwritten journals following the trip to Argentina. These differences could have been associated with the differing trip duration, the differences between travelling to an English-speaking country and a non-English speaking country, or any number of variables.

Table 3. Least squares mean (LSMEAN) for improvement in scores (1 to 10) regarding reflection and thought (REFLECT); enthusiasm (ENTHUSE); and proper usage of grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GRAM) detected by 3 faculty evaluators from d 1 to d 10 in student blogs (Australia) and journal entries (Argentina)

Factor	Australia		Argentina	
	LSMean	P-value	LSMean	P-value
REFLECT	0.65	0.041	-0.86	0.029
ENTHUSE	1.37	< 0.0001	-0.54	0.22
GRAM	0.53	0.0037	0.17	0.54

Table 4. Pearson correlation coefficients (with P-values below) calculated for the relationships between the improvement detected from d 1 to d 10 in student blogs (Australia) or journal entries (Argentina) by faculty evaluators for amount of reflection and thought (REFLECT); enthusiasm (ENTHUSE); and proper usage of grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GRAM), and the final percentage earned in the course (PERC)

Factor	Australia	Argentina
REFLECT and GRAM	-0.41 (0.070)	0.38 (0.11)
REFLECT and ENTHUSE	0.34 (0.14)	0.88 (< 0.0001)
REFLECT and PERC	0.072 (0.76)	-0.066 (0.79)
GRAM and ENTHUSE	-0.074 (0.76)	0.45 (0.05)
GRAM and PERC	-0.043 (0.86)	0.45 (0.05)
ENTHUSE and PERC	-0.049 (0.84)	0.026 (0.91)

While we cannot determine the cause for these differing observations, differences were detected through the use of student written blogs and journal entries, supporting the use of these as assessment tools.

Blogging, due to the brief nature of entries, is relatively quick to grade compared with more lengthy written journals. The typed blogs eliminate some challenges associated with deciphering handwritten journal entries. Blogging also provides students an opportunity to practice their writing skills with a live and engaged audience. On the other hand, requiring handwritten journals to be turned in at the conclusion of a study abroad trip eliminates concerns about connectivity and technical difficulties. Perhaps daily feedback regarding journal entries would have encouraged students in Argentina to continue to put forward good effort in completing their journal entries, but this would require more micromanagement on the part of the instructor. Had the instructor not checked blog entries daily on the Australian trip, the quality of student effort may have declined by day 10 and students may have procrastinated composing their blog entries. Because the quality of writing produced by college graduates is a concern (Haug, 1996) and is important to recruiters hiring students (Leggette et al., 2011), blogging may be used as a tool to help students develop writing skills and social media competencies that will be valuable to them beyond their college experience. Requiring handwritten journal entries may accomplish the same objectives, but concurrent faculty feedback might be necessary for students to maintain the effort level required to achieve improvement in these areas.

Summary

Daily blog entries and handwritten journal entries by students participating in faculty-led study abroad trips can be valuable tools in evaluating student attainment of SLO when used in conjunction with a faculty leader's assessment. Blog entries may be better-suited to this purpose if students are specifically instructed to write about their experiences relative to each SLO. Students completing handwritten journal entries might benefit from faculty encouragement during a trip to maintain their level of effort by day 10. Blogging, as measured by these evaluations, appeared to stimulate an improvement in written communication skills of these students, as measured by grammar, punctuation and spelling. The amount of reflection and enthusiasm also increased from day 1 to day 10. Thus, despite significant connectivity problems, posting daily blog entries in this format appeared to be useful in improving student skills and in aiding instructors in assessing student achievement of SLO.

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