

Academic blogging: scholars' views on interacting with readers

Hang (Joanna) Zou & Ken Hyland

East China Normal University (China), University of East Anglia (United Kingdom)

joannazou1026@163.com, k.hyland@uea.ac.uk

Abstract

Academic blogs have become increasingly important as a means of disseminating research and attracting wider non-academic audiences or like-minded peers to new areas of scholarly activity. The heterogeneity and unfamiliarity of the audience means that writers need to present information in perhaps unfamiliar ways, creating interest and encouraging readers to engage with the topics. In this paper, we explore academics' perceptions of this challenge and particularly how they go about establishing a relationship which will hook and then persuade these new readers. Based on semi-structured interviews with 22 UK academics from a variety of disciplines, we explore the perceptions and practices of writers and how these differ from when they are engaged in writing research papers. We also compare their perceptions with academics who routinely read blogs as part of their scholarly work. The results show key ways in which writers go about interacting with readers and how they seek to draw them into the text through a range of rhetorical devices. We also observe that these rhetorical practices exhibit features of both academic and disciplinary conventions, suggesting that academic blogs are very much an academic genre.

Keywords: academic blogs, interaction, interviews, epistemic stance, engagement.

Resumen

Le Blog académique: les points de vue des chercheurs sur l'interaction avec les lecteurs

Le Blog académique est devenu de plus en plus important comme moyen de diffuser les résultats de la recherche académique vers les groupes non-

académiques en attirant l'attention de nouveaux lecteurs sur les activités scientifiques. En raison de l'hétérogénéité et de la méconnaissance des lecteurs, les auteurs des Blogs académiques doivent présenter les informations d'une manière originale et plus intéressante pour encourager les lecteurs à construire les sujets. Dans cet article, nous explorons les perceptions de ce défi et particulièrement de la manière par laquelle ils établissent une relation qui accrochera et persuadera ces nouveaux lecteurs. Sur la base d'interviews avec 22 chercheurs britanniques de plusieurs disciplines, nous explorons les perceptions et les pratiques des auteurs, ainsi que les différences entre celles-ci et celles qui ont lieu avec des articles de recherche traditionnels. Les résultats montrent comment les auteurs interagissent avec les lecteurs et cherchent à les emmener dans le texte à travers une série de stratégies rhétoriques. Nous observons également que ces pratiques rhétoriques montrent des caractéristiques des conventions académiques et disciplinaires et suggèrent que le Blog académique est aussi un genre académique.

Palabras clave: Blog académique, interaction, interview, position épistémique, engagement.

1. Introduction

Academic writing, once regarded as an impersonal discourse concerned only with the transmission of facts, is now widely acknowledged as embodying interactions between writers and readers. Written texts are a dialogue between a writer and an imagined reader in which writers frame arguments and express ideas to anticipate reactions to what they have written. So, in creating a text, the writer 'positions' him or herself by adopting a point of view to both the issues discussed and to others who hold views on those issues (Hyland, 2005), balancing their claims against readers' possible alternative opinions with judicious rhetorical choices. Identifying the consequences of these choices has become a cottage industry in applied linguistics, with studies exploring interactive features in a range of academic genres, recently extending to blogs.

Besides targeting and successfully reaching experts or like-minded individuals with an interest in academic areas peripheral to their own (Kirkup, 2010; Mahrt & Puschmann, 2014; Ranger & Bultitude, 2016), blogs, in fact, offer exciting opportunities for academics to take their work to audiences beyond their disciplinary comfort zone. But in this new rhetorical context, researchers are obliged to find new ways of interpersonally reaching a less predictable readership. Assumptions of an informed specialist

audience and the effectiveness of familiar conventions of disciplinary rhetoric no longer apply in this online environment. Information has to be presented differently and interaction constructed in new ways, especially with the potential for immediate, and possibly hostile, responses below the line. Some of these novel interactive forms have been explored through the analysis of academic blogs (e.g. Luzón, 2011; Bondi, 2018; Zou & Hyland, 2019, 2020), but these textual studies do not reveal authors' concerns, goals and perceptions of this still novel format. How do scholars attempt to speak to unfamiliar, probably non-academic audiences? What strategies do they use to engage readers and avoid critical reactions? To what extent are they influenced or constrained by the rhetorical conventions of their field?

In this paper, we explore these questions using semi-structured interviews with 22 scholars to understand how professional academics see interactions in blogs. In doing so we hope to inform and extend corpus-based research to provide a richer picture of how academics seek to interact with their readers.

2. The academic blog: What's new?

Many academics now see the use of social media as a key part of their work as universities increasingly try to shake off their ivory tower image and encourage greater engagement with the non-academic world (e.g. Lupton, Mewburn & Thomson, 2018). The academic blog is at the forefront of this engagement, allowing scholars to post their work, whether published or not, and discuss research topics and aspects of academic life. With the aid of software affordances such as filtering tools for searching and accessing material, hyperlinks to related research work, and the availability of immediate commentary, bloggers can present their work in novel ways to new readerships. Blogs are therefore playing a growing role in sharing and discussing disciplinary information, disseminating new research to heterogeneous audiences, promoting discussion and stirring public debate (Luzón, 2017; Mauranen, 2013; Puschmann, 2014).

The rise in the number of academic bloggers, the emergence of numerous respected blog sites, and the growing impact of blogs in scholarly communication have stimulated research into the discursive conventions of this genre. Studies have shown the hybridity of the blog which combines features from scholarly genres such as journal papers and conference talks (Grafton, 2009; Mauranen, 2013) and science journalism (Zou & Hyland,

2019). The features of blogs thus blend interpersonal strategies to offer a more informal style of communication while making fewer demands on readers' subject knowledge (Luzón, 2018; Walker, 2006). The use of technological affordances such as information archiving, opportunities for readers to comment and hyperlinks to support arguments are important, for instance (Bondi, 2018; Myers, 2010). Blogs are also interactively distinctive compared to more conventional academic genres, with more direct criticism, the use of affectivity, in-group cohesiveness, and confrontation to construe affect (Luzón, 2011), and more informal strategies such as questions and second person to engage readers (Luzón, 2013).

These studies are almost exclusively corpus-based analyses of large-scale distributions of lexico-grammatical features to reveal interesting features of the genre. There have also been a number of qualitative studies seeking to understand the perspectives of blog writers and readers. So, for instance, Kjellberg (2010) employed in-depth interviews and Riesch and Mendel (2014) followed case-studies to explore how academics see their activity and motivations for blogging. Davies and Merchant (2007), on the other hand, used auto-ethnography to learn how academic blogs are used by researchers and identified aspects of blogging as a literacy practice, such as how blogging is related to self-representation, how the software facilitates specific textual practices, and how blogging supports the development of social networks. In sum, blogs are an example of 'social software', that is, software supportive of conversational interaction, social networks, and social feedback (Boyd, 2003), assisting individual scholars to achieve their personal goals and create new alliances.

None of these studies, however, has sought to reveal how bloggers and readers understand the social relationships involved in this new way of communicating science and how writers consciously blend informal and academic discourses to convey their ideas in this genre. In this paper, we explore researchers' perceptions and their perspectives and beliefs about writing. We hope, in this way, to supplement the results of corpus-based text analyses and further our understanding of academic interaction in blogs.

3. Participants, methods and analysis

3.1. Participants

The participants were published academics from a spectrum of disciplines from three UK universities who had experience of either writing or reading

blogs. We aimed for a high degree of heterogeneity in seniority, experience and discipline to capture a range of academic voices. All participants were recruited by email and interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured format. We initially approached academic bloggers after reading their posts on academic blog sites such as *The LSE Impact blog*, *The Conversation UK*, and *ScienceBlogs*. We then used a 'snow-ball' strategy following recommendations and staff lists at the three universities. Table 1 presents information on the interviewees, Group 1 being those who write academic blog posts in addition to journal articles, and Group 2 being those who publish only in traditional formats but routinely read blogs as part of their scholarly activities.

We decided to include this second group of blog-reading academics to serve as an interesting counterpoint to the academic bloggers, soliciting their impressions of the strategies used and their impact on how they understood the blogs. As successful academics who regularly publish in research journals, their perceptions of the strategies writers use, and which they presumably regard as effective, are likely to yield interesting comments to support or challenge those of the blog writers. Together, we hoped these two perspectives, of writers and of readers, would offer a fuller picture of the interactional strategies bloggers employed to persuade audiences of their claims.

Group	Pseudonym	Title and academic field
Group 1	Amanda	Professor in art, media and American studies
Group 1	Alice	Reader in history
Group 1	Alexander	Senior lecturer in law
Group 1	Bob	Professor in education
Group 1	Benjamin	Lecturer in education
Group 1	Berthold	Professor in political, social and international studies
Group 1	Calvin	Professor in geography
Group 1	Candy	Lecturer in health science
Group 1	Charles	Senior Lecturer in law
Group 1	Daniel	Research fellow in pharmacology
Group 1	Dean	Professor in applied linguistics
Group 1	Dominic	Senior lecturer in international development
Group 1	Dora	Professor in physics
Group 2	Edwin	Reader in mathematics
Group 2	Elmer	Professor in mathematics
Group 2	Elwood	Reader in mathematics
Group 2	Flora	Professor in health sciences
Group 2	Francis	Professor in medical sciences
Group 2	George	Professor in applied linguistics
Group 2	Gordon	Professor in education
Group 2	Helen	Professor in language and communication
Group 2	James	Professor in sociology

Table 1. Interviewee information.

3.2. Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants were provided with a description of the project and asked for their consent. The interview schedule was informed by the academic interaction literature (e.g. Hyland, 2004; Hyland, 2005) and the questions covered participants' academic writing experiences, their perceptions of interactions in academic blogs and journal articles, their specific language choices and their perceptions of the influence of disciplinary conventions. Follow-up questions were used to explore responses in greater depth. Each semi-structured interview was audio-recorded and lasted for about 50 minutes in the participant's office.

3.3. Analysis

All the interviews were fully transcribed and the transcriptions were studied using thematic analysis. We were assisted here by the use of NVivo. As we gained familiarity with the data, we were able to generate codes, search for potential themes, then refine these and finally define and name them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The overall process consisted of repeatedly reading each transcript until all texts were categorised and all themes were identified. For each data-set, the two authors first open coded 6 of the 22 transcripts independently and discussed any different resulting codes. Once the agreement was achieved, the first author coded the remaining transcripts and shared the resulting codes with the second author for a second round of discussion.

Finally, two sets of themes, a functional main theme and subthemes, were identified. A main theme defined the functional area we were interested in exploring: interactions with readers. The subthemes represent how the participants see the distinct areas of the ways they tried to interact with readers. The themes were developed inductively by analysing the content of the transcripts, so they conformed with the principle that themes should be "identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The main theme was identified by reviewing the subthemes, which clustered together as attributes of interaction. For each subtheme, the data were analysed for mention of specific strategies or realisations and then sorted by whether these were mentioned by Group 1 or Group 2 participants. The analysis involved both inductive/descriptive and deductive/interpretative theme development (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Figure 1 shows the themes we arrived at.

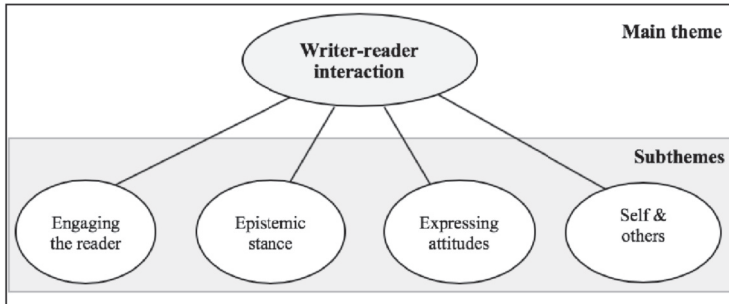


Figure 1. Thematic map of the analysis.

We labelled the main theme ‘writer-reader interaction’, with the four constitutive subthemes: engaging the reader, epistemic stance, expressing attitudes, and self and others. These, then, represent how these academics saw interactions in blogs. Each subtheme was then illuminated by identifying the relevant realisations mentioned in the interviews (Figures 2-5). In what follows we provide a description of each subtheme. We do so, using the words of the interviewees and supplementing the quotes with corpus findings where possible to compare researcher’s reflections and actual texts.

4. Subtheme 1: Engaging the reader

The sub-theme *Engaging the reader* is a key feature of this genre, as these respondents observed:

What’s most important for the blog is writing in an entertaining fashion or someone doesn’t want to read it. ... Even if you think your story is interesting, you have to make sure this is interesting to someone who doesn’t work in your area. So, it’s appealing, tells the story. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

So, you have to be much more direct, much more on the spot and much more forceful. While in academic writing, it’s like sending the boat to the ocean. Your article maybe read or maybe not be read. The interaction is not so obvious. It’s not so direct. **(Charles, Law)**

This first subtheme emerged from three underlying concepts in the data: ‘support through hyperlinks’, ‘explain more & assume less’ and ‘ask

questions’ (Figure 2). Detailed analyses of each concept are provided below.

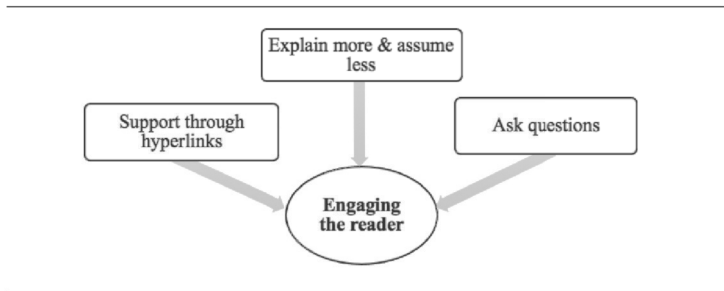


Figure 2. Sub-theme *Engaging the reader and concepts*

Support through hyperlinks

Most participants agreed that hyperlinks help in directing readers to manage their understanding and processing of a text. In the same way that article writers use tables, figures and other graphical paraphernalia to support their arguments, bloggers utilise the affordances of the media: hyperlinking to a paper or other source to solicit reader agreement:

I tend to use many tables and figures in an article. I refer the reader to Table 1 or Table 2 whatever.... In blogs, probably not, because people follow the hyperlinks, addressing people to that. **(Dominic, International development)**

Hyperlinking enables what Efimova (2004) calls ‘distributed weblog conversations’ which act as markers of personal recommendation. Hyperlinking to relevant documents thus helps keep the audience involved while alerting them to a related document, thus enabling the writer to capture and keep the reader’s attention, as one participant indicated:

People will only follow hyperlinks if they trust you. If they think it will take them somewhere relevant and worthwhile. So, it’s a way of pulling people in to your argument, not just providing evidence or whatever. **(Dean, Applied linguistics)**

Hyperlinking is one of the most useful affordances of academic blogs (Luzón, 2009) and our participants recognised the potential of supporting materials in aligning readers to their ideas:

It could be research articles. It could be other blogs about similar things. I think it's a mix thing because you expect the lay reader wants more lay information. If you link to some scientific publication, that's not really going to help them. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

Yes, we use a lot of hyperlinks. Hyperlink to articles that I am citing. I also use hyperlinks if I am talking about a person. I would link to the person's professional page. Occasionally, I link to figures or photos. But mainly, citing other people. **(Dora, Physics)**

Hyperlinks also help bloggers to stay under the tight word limits imposed on them. So while writers rely on space consuming graphics in articles, and the directives to ensure readers get to them at the right point, bloggers have the luxury of simply linking:

For instance, you know the last thing I did for a blog, you know, I wrote about 7000 words for a paper. But you only get 500 words in blogs, so you have to cut it down massively. You can only make a few key points. You can only use one example or one reference. So, you lose a bit of what, the weight of evidence. **(Bob, Education)**

Explain more & assume less

The Blog readers (Group 2 participants) valued space given to explanations and unpacking terminology and the writers (Group 1 participants) recognised that they could assume less shared knowledge when writing blogs. By increasing explanations, they could achieve greater readability and engage the reader more in the text:

I think I explain more when I write academic blogs. I have to explain the theory. I could see that lots of people would be lost without that. **(Candy, Medical Science)**

For the blogs, clearly you have to talk people through what you are doing, why you are doing it, you need to provide more information because you can't expect the same knowledge. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

I think in research articles you imagine you will build on knowledge. You can assume something. This is because I have a fair idea of who is reading. But you can't assume so much in blogs. **(Dora, Physics)**

The diverse, and perhaps only vaguely imagined, audience for academic blogs means that writers must work harder to achieve comprehension and agreement among readers. This is an audience with different processing needs, knowledge and rhetorical expectations to those who read articles, and this means that the abstraction, theorization and disciplinary-informed interpretations of research articles must be reworked and spelt out through justifications, elaborations, and explanations. Unfamiliar terms must be glossed, arguments clarified, and theories unpacked as writers engage readers through more coherent, reader-friendly prose and shared experience, as these interviewees explained:

I think you can relate to common experiences that people might have, but not assume a common understanding. **(Alice, History)**

When I am writing a blog, I might have to take a paragraph to explain theories, to explain their ideas, to explain who they are and what they did. So, I tend to slow down a little bit when I am talking in public blogs. In research articles, I can skip that. **(Benjamin, Education)**

So, you have to make sure that your article is accessible. You have to make sure everything is there in an engaging way. But with those who want to know more, you have to provide the way they can go and find that. You have to engage your audience but you have to be aware there are different audiences. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

Our respondents were highly sensitive to readers' needs and fully aware of the assumptions they make about their knowledge. Group 2 participants were also clear about what they shared with their readers:

I make assumptions of their knowledge all the time if I write for a specialised audience. We depend on shared background knowledge. **(James, Sociology)**

I think there are a lot of assumptions of knowledge in maths, always. I am writing for a really specialised audience which has a very high level of shared knowledge with me. And what that means is you can say something very quickly. **(Elmer, Mathematics)**

Appeals to shared knowledge are often used to position readers within the boundaries of disciplinary understandings, assuming agreement, constructing solidarity and recruiting the reader as a partner in the argument.

But even with a disciplinary audience in research articles, our participants believed it was unwise to assume too much:

But don't take too much for granted. That's why I think academic writing has to be explicit. You don't make it, on the whole, implicit. Explicitness. **(Helen, Language and communication studies)**

I would only write 'it is well known that' if I really really thought, you know, everybody in the community must know this. If I write 'it is well known that', I will try to back it up or give a reference in case the person doesn't know it. But he can go and read about it. I would use phrases like that only when I am really confident that anyone in my area really should know it. **(Edwin, Mathematics)**

These interview findings correspond with a recent corpus comparison which showed explicit markers of shared knowledge are more common in research articles than blogs as writers explicitly build solidarity with readers as members of the same community (Zou & Hyland, 2019). It also supports the findings from science popularisation studies that writers assume less and use strategies such as definition and explanation to help readers connect new knowledge to their existing knowledge (Hyland, 2010).

Ask questions

Participants described the importance of questions to engage and position readers when writing blogs. Many saw them as a way to challenge people's ideas or attract attention to an issue:

I think one of the purposes of blogs is to ask questions. And to challenge an assumption by asking questions.... Have they thought about this? What assumptions are going on here? How can you justify it? I think that one of the functions of the blogs is to challenge other people's ideas. You do that best by asking questions. **(Alexander, Law)**

But in blogs, all the time I ask questions: What do you think? What are your thoughts about that? I ask the reader to share their ideas. **(Benjamin, Education)**

Interviewees were sensitive to the rhetorical role of questions, either to pull readers in or to open up further debate:

One important thing is to be able to answer these questions. It's very very important to situate your points within the literature. You can answer them in two ways. One way is by putting these questions and then you explain what you mean. And the other way is actually, you know, in the conclusion of the article, you raise some questions. Just posing the question for future research. **(Charles, Law)**

But of course, its problem is if you are not providing a clear answer. ... You know, often I look at the blog and I would see the heading is a question. And then you read the thing. The question is there, fine. But there is no answer. It's just a way of getting you to click. **(Dominic, International development)**

When comparing their use of questions in blogs and research articles they agreed they were more likely to pose questions in the former. In the more informal and egalitarian context of blogs questions seem more natural and less misplaced:

As I said, I like asking rhetorical questions. I would ask rhetorical questions in blogs. I have occasionally done that in research articles. I don't think it's regarded as proper. And sometimes, I deliberately post questions in the hope that people respond. This is the situation I have seen. How would you deal with it? **(Dora, Physics)**

So, must be careful, not to overdo that in research articles.... In blogs, maybe a little bit looser. Yeah. Maybe more cautious in journals. **(Bob, Education)**

Corpus studies show that questions are far more frequent in blogs (Zou & Hyland, 2019). They also seem to be used differently. In articles questions tend to seek readers' collaboration in exploring an unresolved research issue, while in blogs it is often to attract initial interest in a topic and get readers thinking:

In research articles I'm more likely to offer the answers. So, that's less of a rhetorical device and more of a communicative device. I think there are differences, but I use it in both type of writing. The powerful use of a rhetorical question is you don't have to provide the answer because the answer already occurred to the reader. It is the reader who is providing the answer to the question. So, I use questions but I use them for different purposes. **(Calvin, Geography)**

Participants in Group 2, the non-blog writing academics, showed more reluctance towards using questions in research articles. For them, using questions is not common and may complicate the reader's understanding of the research:

I think one of the jobs is you are goanna make life easy for the reader. Everybody's life is hard, why make it difficult? So, tell them what they need to know, tell them simply, tell them clearly. Make sure your main points are absolutely upfront and clear and don't ask rhetorical question. **(Francis, Medical science)**

I try not to use so called rhetorical questions. Usually I use a question as question. I realised that questions are quite powerful. To frame a question clearly and well is half the battle in research. Framing a good question is a good art. **(Gordon, Education)**

These responses from Group 2 participants confirm previous research which finds questions are largely confined to the soft fields (Hyland, 2005), suggesting that even in blogs a writer's rhetorical practices are inextricably related to his or her discipline.

5. Subtheme 2: Epistemic stance

The subtheme Epistemic stance relates to the writer's assessment of the truth of a statement and contained two underlying concepts: 'acknowledge limitations & weaken claims' and 'be assertive' (Figure 3). Establishing truth, or how far a statement can be accepted, involves establishing a connection between evidence which supports a hypothesis and the hypothesis itself, and this is not self-evident but requires audience acceptance. Writers need to modify their assessment of how far they believe statements will be accepted as true and this is reflected in the way they modify claims.

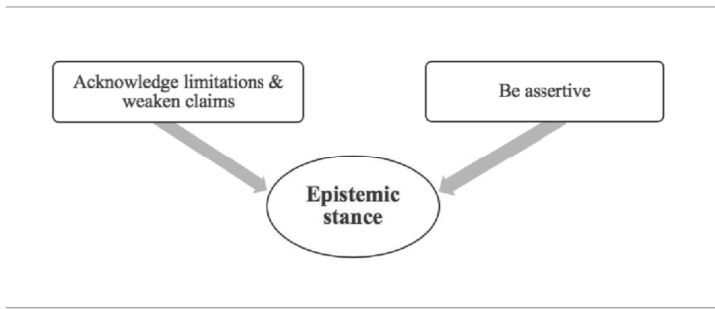


Figure 3. Sub-theme *Epistemic stance and concepts*

Acknowledge limitations & weaken claims

Participants recognised the need to downplay claims in blogs and be circumspect in judging their limitations. They also believed it was easier to acknowledge limitations when writing blogs than research articles. Clearly, the blog writers saw themselves as principally academic writers, observing the same standards of truth and uncertainty:

But I think it is important to be circumspect with the claim you make... So, I still think you should be cautious, and follow standards of academic integrity. It is important to be honestly careful when you write in any form. **(Bob, education)**

I try to be really careful in my blogs to make it clear when I am saying something.... Academic work is sometimes hard to read because you have to qualify so much. I still hedge in my blog writing and that's because it's a form of academic writing as well. **(Alexander, Law)**

I mean usually a good scientific article in the discussion section you will be making your claims but based on what limits you are able to say it. Similarly, when you are writing for a general audience, even if you make a real breakthrough. That's great but we still have to be careful about overstating. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

Hedges are rational strategies for dealing with academic interactions as they mark appropriate scholarly caution and are the most frequent stance resource for writers in both blogs and articles. They are, in fact, significantly more frequent in blogs, reflecting their more interactive and evaluative nature. This also, perhaps, acknowledges that readers can respond, publicly

and immediately, below the post (Zou & Hyland, 2019) and can be highly critical (Luzón, 2011):

You have to highlight the limitations of your study if your study disagrees with somebody else's. Then you need to try to explain why that might be to avoid attack. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

I would say what I am trying to do when I write is adding to a conversation. A debate. Maybe this involves different scholars who have different views. I express my views. So, I am not trying to cool everything down. It's not like I am going to the wall and I am trying to knock it down. I am trying to add one more brick. I am trying to contribute. I just see my work as contributing rather than criticising. But obviously, sometimes I will take a position. And that would be a critique but in a milder way in blogs. **(Dominic, International development)**

Both groups recognised variations in the ways claims are weakened in the two genres, but several also pointed to disciplinary differences between soft and hard sciences. What we found particularly interesting were the comments from mathematicians, who were unequivocal that modifying certainty was not relevant to writing in mathematics:

There is no weakening of your arguments, either you say this is right or you don't say it at all. Sometimes you might partially solve a problem in mathematics then you weaken it. And you say: look, I think this might be right with evidence but also might be wrong and here is small alternative suggestions. But the main part of the work in mathematics is normally: this is the result; this is correct and this is your argument why. **(Edwin, Mathematics)**

I suppose this is a subject difference. In mathematics, there isn't uncertainty. You know what you proved and either you proved it or you made a mistake. But of course, at the point at which you submit a paper, you don't think you make a mistake. So, I don't think there is any weakening of certainty. What can be modified is how important or significant it is. So, you prove something, why is it interesting? **(Elmer, Mathematics)**

The interview comments obviously support a wealth of discourse analytic literature confirming the influence of discipline in writing practices.

Be assertive

Almost all Group 1 respondents admitted to being more assertive when writing academic blogs than research articles:

I am more forceful in blogs because my research is about issues that are quite controversial. I tend to avoid being confrontational because I know that my blogs will be read by people who have very different views. So, I don't want to alienate people in my field. I am assertive, but I try not to be confrontational. **(Charles, Law)**

When I write a blog, I am looking for a response. So, in one sense, I am writing blogs in order to challenge particular arguments or particular people. Or I think I have important ideas to be heard. And I do want people to engage and read and react. This means being direct. **(Calvin, Geography)**

You write in a clear and quick way so sometimes it's a bit more assertive, more critical than it should. So, I found I do that quite a bit. I think some of the blogs I read do the same, present the ideas in a simple way. That can be sometimes seen as assertive. **(Benjamin, Education)**

Some of the interviewees believed that the reason for this assertiveness is because blogs are shorter. They allow less space for argument and evidence is replaced by commitment:

But you only get 500 words in blogs, so you have got cut it down by three quarters of what you have written in the article. So, you just need to make a few key points. You can only really use one example or one reference. So, you lose that bit of the weight of evidence. **(Bob, Education)**

More important, however, is the nature of the audience in blogs. Unlike the carefully moderated claims for a peer audience, blog readers have a less predictable knowledge base. Writers cannot present their arguments with the same assurance that their readers will recognize the significance of information in the same way as insiders (Zou & Hyland, 2019). Relevance has to be supplied in the text itself rather than presupposed in the context and so claims are presented with greater assurance to ensure readers will not miss their validity:

For a blog to work communicatively, it needs to be decisive. It needs to be clear, somewhat bolder and in that sense, more rhetorical in the way I write it. I suppose the purpose of the blog is to be persuasive. **(Calvin, Geography)**

And I think with a blog, what I would tend to do is to cut out much more of the ambiguity. **(Alice, History)**

For this reason, boosters such as definitely, extremely, amazing litter blogs and, where research is transferred from articles, the original claims are often strengthened to adjust new information to readers' assumptions. Once again, the interview data corroborates corpus findings which show more frequent uses of boosters in blogs to help upgrade propositions and emphasize their significance, uniqueness or originality (Zou & Hyland, 2019). In research articles, on the other hand, participants say that claims are strengthened by providing stronger justification or warrants:

I suppose I try to manoeuvre the reader in a way. I would give them more than one possible explanation. And I would give a stronger justification. So, I might say something like: this maybe because of this or because of that, however, given that this happened, this is likely to be the more possible explanations. So, I suppose I kind of lead them along. **(Francis, Medical science)**

6. Subtheme 3: Expressing attitudes

The sub-theme Expressing attitudes contained two concepts: 'evaluate statements' and 'be lively' (Figure 4).

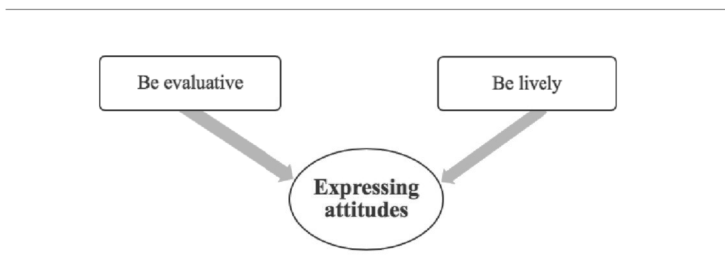


Figure 4. Sub-theme *Expressing attitudes* and concepts

Be evaluative

Almost all Group 1 informants concurred that the blog is a more conversational platform for evaluating ideas and that this allows them to use a more personal voice:

There is a place for your voice as a researcher, your evaluation, your understanding. You've got more space to be personal in blogs cos it's a different sort of writing. So, I think you can be emotional, yes in blogs, more emotional. And so, the language can be a little bit less precise and a little bit more reflective, more yourself. You can be a little bit more personal. **(Benjamin, Education)**

I think I use more emotive expressions and be a little bit open in blogs. I am very open with my feelings. **(Candy, Medical science)**

The blog is a more interactive and evaluative site compared with research articles and permits writers to create a sense of proximity and informality. The following responses explain why blog texts contain more attitude markers, indicating the writer's responses to or evaluation of ideas, pointing out what is unusual or valuable and encouraging readers to engage with the topic (Luz̄on, 2013; Zou & Hyland, 2019). To a greater extent than articles, blogs show writers striking a balance between detached information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation. As our subjects stated:

The blog shows what my own judgements and positions are. They are evaluative and critical. I make them rhetorical. More illustrations and more direct language. **(Calvin, Geography)**

I think the objective versus the subjective way you write is important. I think it's nice for the lay person reading to have an insight into what this person does. So, I think yeah, there is room for that. But not in the research article, the whole point of that is to be objective. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

While this is a small-scale, qualitative study, we were still struck by the disciplinary variations these participants exhibited regarding the expression of attitude. Group 1 and Group 2 participants from soft disciplines were uniformly positive about taking opportunities to express attitudes in research articles and blogs. These interviews concur with text analysis findings that writers use attitude markers more frequently in 'soft knowledge' disciplines:

It's absolutely necessary. But I think sometimes it is appropriate and sometimes even useful. You don't just express opinions but give your views on results, conclusions, data, claim or other things in the text using these personal perspectives. So, I am not against it. **(Gordon, Education)**

In contrast, participants from the hard disciplines, were adamant about avoiding explicit affect, particularly in research articles:

Actually, I think that probably could be a little more emotional sometimes in mathematical research article writing. People are very sober. Even when people are talking about some great piece of absolutely ground-breaking or historic work, people still talk about in very sober terms. **(Elwood, Mathematics)**

Be lively

The injunction for blog writers to be lively was emphasised by many of the participants. This was a highly valued attribute and seen as necessary to make the blog attractive and encourage general readers to invest their time in reading the piece. This is an expression of positivity, demonstrating that the writer is outgoing, energetic, and enthusiastic about the topic:

But blogs should always have some sense of liveliness, I think. **(Alexander, Law)**

I think you might make it a slightly more conversational. You might be more inclined to try to make it exciting. You are trying to lure people into reading the research, looking further into other things. **(Bob, Education)**

Blog usually reflects some personal views of the person who writes it. ...There are differences between blogs and scientific articles. A lively style in the blog is a generally a good idea. **(Edwin, Mathematics)**

The blog is perhaps the most accessible and animated genre written by academics, conveying the writer's expertise with greater sparkle than a research paper. Academic blogs borrow from the wider blog genre where conversational sharing and intimacy are paramount and there is a clear expectation that a topic will be presented along with the writer's personal experience of the issue. Without the need to carefully relate ideas to previous

research and adherence to disciplinary conventions, authors can express themselves more freely:

I think the research article tends to be analytical, more critical. It is far easier to tell stories and to draw people in that way in a blog. Telling a story helps to get an audience. But journal articles are probably read by few hundred people. It is very a different approach than blogs.
(Berthold, Politics)

Blog writing is a completely different way of writing. What blogs share is a real openness and freedom of communication. I enjoy reading them because it's freer writing. In The Conversation website, researchers are much more opinionated. They would be much clearer.
(Flora, Health science)

So, there is a great feeling of personal freedom in writing a blog. With the journal article, you want to communicate your research, your findings or your arguments. But always at the back of your mind are the academic standards that you have to adhere to, to get peer reviewed. With a blog, in a sense, there's no such obstacle. It gives me freedom how I express myself. **(Calvin, Geography)**

Academics thus feel a sense of liberation from the constraints of research writing when tackling a blog, but they have to control very different rhetorical strategies to enliven their prose and represent themselves as not only informed, but also as dynamic and knowledgeable.

7. Subtheme 4: Self and others

The sub-theme *Self and others* contained two concepts: 'mention the self' and 'mention the reader' (Figure 5).

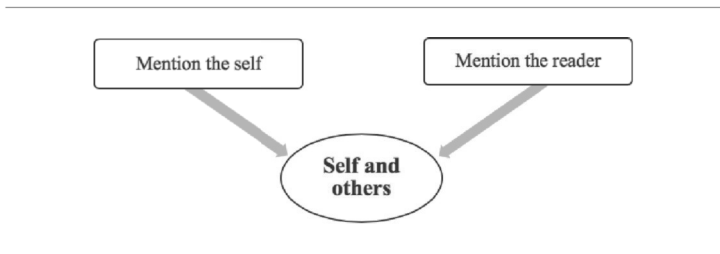


Figure 5. Sub-theme *Self and others* and concepts

Mention the self

Noticeably, all participants identified the importance of expressing ideas as personal views and the need to use more first person pronouns in blogs than research articles:

When it comes to academic articles, I would say the paper argues that..., but in blogs, it's mainly I. **(Charles, Law)**

I think when I am writing a blog, I will usually write in the first person. Not always, but I'm certainly much more willing to embrace that direct, person-to-person style. This is me, Calvin speaking, and I am not shamed to declare this is who I am and this is the judgement that I am making. So, there is the classic distinction between the subjective and the objective. But the blog has to be subjective. **(Calvin, Geography)**

The interview responses lend support to corpus findings that blog posts display considerable use of the first-person pronoun, while they are uncommon in research articles (Luzón, 2013; Zou & Hyland, 2019). We can also see from these responses that the more frequent use of self-mention is closely associated with blogger's attempts to engage with, and gain approval from, a diverse audience. Meeting readers' expectations of greater connectedness through the freer and more informal nature of the genre is a key way to achieve this:

And it doesn't feel completely honest to remove yourself completely from the text because we shape what we write. You know, we aren't impersonal. **(Alice, History)**

With blogs then, there is always the personal, I think. More personal view about things.... Telling a personal story or identifying yourself as the person who has done the research, rather than hiding behind it. **(Berthold, Politics)**

Participants recognised the stark contrast with the conventions of writing in more established research genres, although the more impersonal we seems to be regarded as perfectly acceptable in both genres:

You always never see that in maths articles. It's always "we" or "it was done", you know. "This is done." ... Definitely it's almost never "I". **(Edwin, Mathematics)**

Basically, I am happy to use we. But in some publications, there are the conventions of saying ‘this article argues’ etc. **(George, Applied linguistics)**

You know, when I am talking in a blog about the research we produce, I always want to make it clear that it’s a team effort. It’s a research group. Now, I am running the research group, so I have to bring in the funding. That means it’s important to acknowledge other people involved. ...So, I have to acknowledge that you can’t do things without those people. While in research article, on the other hand, you should be writing in third person. **(Daniel, Pharmacology)**

The use of plural self-reference can therefore indicate a collective contribution in blogs and reduce immodest personal intrusions in articles. In both cases, however, this can be more engaging than an objective ‘abstract rhetoric’ where agency is attributed to tables or data, and emphasise the author’s position (Hyland, 2001).

Mention the reader

Similarly, in line with its more dialogic nature, mentioning the reader directly through the second person pronoun “you” is far more common in blogs. The perception of the blog as a genre for self-expression, together with the more general readership of the academic variety, means writers must adjust the ways they present information:

I don’t think I use that in research articles. But I think in some of my blogs, I probably use ‘you’. I can imagine some of my blogs would talk about ‘you’ to create a relationship. **(Calvin, Geography)**

I tend to finish my blogs with a kind of cool form. I would say what do you think? What are your thoughts? I will interact about it. In a research article, I never say “you”, I never do that. **(Benjamin, Education)**

Sometimes we use “you” when we write research articles maybe. But on rare occasions.... I don’t think I can do that though. No. I like to think of them as unseen and anonymous, could be anybody. **(Amanda, Art, media and American studies)**

These interview comments also concur with corpus data concerning ‘you’, underlining the greater informality and interpersonal proximity of blogs

(Zou & Hyland, 2019). Group 2 participants' responses, from both soft and hard disciplines, also confirm a reluctance by researchers to engage readers in such an explicitly direct and personal in articles:

You don't need to address readers. You never address them directly. You never say: by the way, you notice this. You never say 'you'. I think I have never seen that in scientific articles. **(Edwin, Mathematics)**

Big differences here if you write for academic readers, I would not use the word "you" or personalise too much. 'You' is OK for blogs. So, there is a definite divergence about the audience. **(Flora, Health science)**

Participants also commented on the importance of inclusive we as an effective interactive device to engage readers and relate to a shared experience. This is a feature more common than 'you' in both blogs and research articles (Zou & Hyland, 2019) as it helps construct the illusion of collaboration between the author and the audience. It pulls readers into the text by giving them an active role in the research, as this participant noted:

"We" is used quite frequently. If you are explaining some steps in how to do something, then you might say "next we do this" and the "we" is meant to be the author and the reader together. When you are reading for example, then it's very much an active process. You can't do it passively. The author is showing the reader the direction of the journey. **(Amanda, Art, media and American studies)**

A blog is more written to activate common knowledge. Using "we" to include them is a good choice to arouse their common knowledge. **(Daniel, Pharmacology).**

8. Final observations

The academic blog is a relatively new, but increasingly important, academic genre which seeks to extend the reach of research findings beyond a narrow elite to the wider public. In this paper, we have attempted to build on previous corpus-based studies by exploring academics' understanding of the role and realisation of interacting with the reader in academic blogs. We have shown how academic bloggers see the need to engage readers and at the

same time express their stance and attitudes to what they are discussing and to the readers themselves. They see liveliness, attitude and clear perspectives on the validity of ideas as crucial while recognising the need to involve readers and draw them into thinking about the issues and perhaps engage them in a dialogue. The extent to which these efforts were successful is confirmed by our group of scholars who are regular blog readers. We see our findings as contributing to the literature on interaction in writing and the work on academic blogs, helping to explain previous corpus results concerning textual choices and the decision-making that lies behind them.

Clearly affordances of the medium, particularly hyperlinks, global distribution and the potential for immediate response, all influence the rhetorical choices writers make. Equally, however, we can see in these choices the hidden hand of more familiar discourses. While these writers mentioned that they tried to be more personal, attitudinal, sparkling and direct in blogs, they also pointed out the need for accuracy and the importance of appropriately hedging claims and recognising the limitations of their arguments. These are the cornerstones of research writing more generally:

I think as an academic, you don't lose that. You just try to make what you are saying accessible to a different audience. Other people wouldn't be aware of your work, you try to get them to engage.
(Berthold, Politics)

At the moment, you know, the people who are blogging did their academic paper first, and write the blog about it afterwards. So, yes, it affects them. Blog writing is definitely influenced by disciplinary conventions.
(Elmer, Mathematics)

Therefore, while the characteristics of blogs discussed by our participants: the freer style, the informality, the greater intimacy, immediacy and directness, are in some sense particular to blogs, the strategies employed to achieve these are not. The research on academic interaction shows that many of the discursive features used to accomplish interactional ends are also present in more traditional research genres. They are for example, central to the expression of stance and engagement (Hyland, 2005). We are, then observing realisations along a rhetorical cline of these themes and strategies rather than how they construct entirely distinct genres.

This observation is supported by the fact that several participants recognised that it was their disciplinary rhetorical practices, rather than simply their

academic practices, which informed their blog writing. This is implicit in many of the quotes we have included in this paper, but more obvious in these:

In that sense, I would say humanities academic writing is more similar to writing blogs than natural science writing. Because blog writing is affected by disciplinary writing. **(Calvin, Geography)**

I think discipline is a good word because I think it disciplines my writing in a sense and keeps it focused. **(Francis, Medical Science)**

Interestingly, as Calvin above observes, the features required in blog writing are those that are often valued in the humanities. These stress a more personal and engaging voice and so, despite the popularity of hard science blogs among the general public, blog writing might be easier for those writing in the softer sciences who are perhaps more attuned to the needs of a more discursive interactional environments. They are also dealing, in the main, with topics which are closer to readers' daily lives, and are therefore more amenable to more conversational modes of persuasion. At the same time, however, the genre provides scientists with the licence and opportunity to realise a different side to their writing and exercise a more open and engaging rhetorical personality.

These rhetorical connections between disciplines and blogs and between research articles and blogs clearly deserve further study, opening interesting avenues for both corpus and interview research. But whatever interactive strategies we find, it is clear authors are academics and remain within the boundaries of broad academic conventions. An academic blog, in other words, is not only a blog, but also, in important ways, very much academic.

Article history:

Received 4 September 2019

Received in revised form 6 January 2020

Accepted 23 April 2020

References

- Bondi, M. (2018). "Try to prove me wrong: Dialogicity and audience involvement in economics blogs". *Discourse, Context & Media* 24: 33-42.
- Boyd, S. (2003). "Are you ready for social software?" *Darwin Magazine (IDG)*. URL: from <https://stoweboyd.com/post/2325281845/are-you-ready-for-social-software> [03/01/2020]
- Braun, W., & V. Clarke (2006). "Using thematic analysis in psychology". *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77-101.

- Davies, J., & G. Merchant (2007). "Looking from the inside out: Academic blogging as new literacy" in C. Lankshear & M. Knobel (eds.), *A New Literacies Sampler*, 167-198. New York: Peter Lang.
- Efimova, L. (2004). "Discovering the iceberg of knowledge work: A weblog case" in *Proceedings of the Fifth European Conference on Organizational Knowledge, Learning and Capabilities (OKLC04)*, Innsbruck, 2-3 April 2004.
- Fereday, J. & E. Muir-Cochrane (2006). "Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development". *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(1): 80-92.
- Grafton, K. (2009). Situating the public social actions of blog posts. In J. Giltrow & D. Stein (Eds.), *Genres in the Internet* (pp. 85-111). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Benjamins.
- Hyland, K. (2001). Bringing in the reader: Addressee features in academic articles. *Written Communication* 18(4), 549-574.
- Hyland, K. (2004). *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Hyland, K. (2005). "Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse". *Discourse Studies* 7(2): 173-192.
- Hyland, K. (2010). "Constructing proximity: Relating to readers in popular and professional science". *English for Academic Purposes* 9: 116-127.
- Kirkup, G. (2010). "Academic blogging: Academic practice and academic identity". *London Review of Education* 8(1): 75-84.
- Kjellberg, S. (2010). "I am a blogging researcher: Motivations for blogging in a scholarly context". *Frist Monday* 5(8). URL: <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/2962/2580> [03/01/2020]
- Lupton, D., I. Mewburn & P. Thomson (2018). *The Digital Academic: Critical Perspectives on Digital Technologies in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Luzón, M.J. (2009). "Scholarly hyperwriting: The function of links in academic weblogs". *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 60(1): 75-89.
- Luzón, M.J. (2011). "Interesting post, but I disagree: Social presence and antisocial behavior in academic weblogs". *Applied linguistics* 32(5): 517-540.
- Luzón, M.J. (2013). "Public communication of science in blogs: Recontextualizing scientific discourse for a diversified audience". *Written Communication* 30(4): 428-457.
- Luzón, M.J. (2017). "Connecting genres and languages in online scholarly communication: An analysis of research group blogs". *Written communication* 34(4): 441-471.
- Luzón, M.J. (2018). "Features of online ELF in research group blogs written by multilingual scholars". *Discourse, Context Media* 24: 24-32.
- Mahrt, M. & C. Puschmann (2014). "Science blogging: an exploratory study of motives, styles, and audience reactions". *Journal of Science Communication* 13(3): 1-17.
- Mauranen, A. (2013). "Hybridism, edutainment, and doubt: Science blogging finding its feet". *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 13(1): 7-36.
- Myers, G. (2010). *The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Puschmann, C. (2014). "(Micro)blogging science? Notes on potentials and constraints of new forms of scholarly communication" in S. Friesike & S. Bartling (eds.), *Opening Science*, 89-106. New York, NY: Springer.
- Ranger, M., & K. Bultitude (2016). "The kind of mildly curious sort of science interested person like me": Science bloggers' practices relating to audience recruitment". *Public Understanding of Science* 25: 361-378.
- Riesch, H. & J. Mendel (2014). "Science blogging: Networks, boundaries and limitations". *Science as Culture* 23(1): 51-72.
- Walker, J. (2006). "Blogging from inside the Ivory Tower" in A. Bruns & J. Jacobs (eds.), *Uses of Blogs*, 127-138. New York: Peter Lang.
- Zou, H. & K. Hyland (2019). "Reworking research: Interactions in academic articles and blogs". *Discourse Studies* 21(6): 713-733.
- Zou, H. & K. Hyland (2020). "Think about how fascinating this is': Engagement in academic blogs across disciplines". *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 43: 100809.

Hang (Joanna) Zou received her PhD under the supervision of Prof. YANG Yanning in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from East China

Normal University. She was a joint PhD student at the University of East Anglia under the supervision of Prof. Ken Hyland from 2018 to 2019. Her current research interests include academic discourse analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics. Her recent publications have appeared in *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and *Discourse Studies*.

Ken Hyland is Professor of Applied Linguistics in Education at the UEA. He is best known for his research into writing and academic discourse, having published over 240 articles and 28 books on these topics with 41,000 citations on Google Scholar. A collection of his work was published by Bloomsbury in 2018.

