

Title:

**A Year In The Life Of: An Online Diary Of Keele Biochemistry Students' Lives**

Running Title:

**A Year In The Life Of**

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To access the blog <http://ayearinthelifeof.pbworks.com>

username: JADE

password: JADE

## **Abstract**

Students often find the transition from School to University and between levels difficult. During Year 1 in particular, retention levels can be impacted significantly if students have problems integrating socially, as well as academically. Universities are taking many and varied approaches to easing this transition, including a number of peer-to-peer initiatives, because by sharing their experiences, students may overcome some common issues. Web2.0 technologies provide tools to reach mass audiences, or can be restricted to small target groups such as student cohorts. In this pilot project, two 1<sup>st</sup> year and two 3<sup>rd</sup> year Biochemistry students have recorded their year in a series of posts in an online wiki-diary/blog. An in-depth content analysis of the blogs highlighted eight key categories and the frequency of comments within each category was scored. The 3<sup>rd</sup> year students spent more time commenting on workload, personal approach to study and career preparation, than their 1<sup>st</sup> year counterparts. The readership of the online diaries was disappointingly low, perhaps due to the relative inaccessibility of the pages, precluding the planned reader-based evaluation of the project. In an informal interview, the bloggers revealed their motivations for taking part and reflected on the perceived benefits. Overall, they enjoyed the exercise and felt that that had developed several of Keele's graduate attributes.

## Context and Objectives

Many students are school leavers making the transition from the heavily structured secondary education system to the more self-directed learning environment of HE. One of the first challenges they face is not an academic one, but an abrupt change in personal circumstances – they have left the security of the family home are learning to fend for themselves and make new friends. With only 5% of Keele Biochemistry students leaving the course early, the retention figures are significantly better than the national sector average - 23.1% of students entering full time higher education (HE) in the biological sciences sector in the UK in 2010/11 were no longer in HE just one year later (HESA, 2013). However, there is still value in promoting activities that might help vulnerable students remain on the course or enhance their experience of the wider aspects of student life.

### ***Peer-based approaches to tackling the transition issue***

Keele's School of Life Sciences already has an excellent personal tutoring system in place, but is keen investigate novel ways to involve students more in the process of helping their peers make the transition onto and through the course. Who better to help a student through a transition period than a student who has been through or is going through the same thing? Thus, the major aims of this project were to generate a student-produced resource that could be used to ease transitions, whilst also giving the student contributors an interesting opportunity to develop some of [Keele's graduate attributes](#).

Many universities, including Keele, have established peer-mentoring or buddy schemes, be they face-to face or e-mentoring, discipline-specific or generic. For example, new psychology students were each paired with two current student mentors (Hughes & Fahy, 2009) and novice student nurses paired with more senior students within a clinical practice setting (Giordana & Wedin, 2010). Whilst peer-mentoring schemes can be very effective, they can be quite “expensive” in terms of the human resources required i.e. lots of mentors are needed.

In addition to face-to-face schemes, a number of technological innovations have been trialled to assist with transitions. For example, Manchester University hosts a range of student-produced videos on [YouTube](#) and its [own pages](#) and Keele's project “[We Are Keele](#)” shows snapshots of student life. Scott et al. 2012 reported on a project where cohorts of biological sciences students were given flipcams and tasked with submitting regular video diaries. Their aim was not to produce induction material for other students, but to build a record of the ongoing process of student integration in a more real-time fashion than by using retrospective surveys. The students revealed their thoughts on social issues like missing family and friends and academic issues - all things that were likely to be affecting the wider cohort. A student sharing their experiences regularly throughout the year is likely to be a much more effective transition tool than snapshots, but is video the best format?

Web2.0 technologies offer a real-time ongoing experience, without the hardware and electronic storage space requirements of video diaries. Web2.0 internet sites differ from traditional static websites in that users can create and modify content to produce dynamic, evolving webpages. Two types in particular could be ideal for an online diary.

Blogs display material in reverse chronological order and provide the facility for users to post material and for readers to comment on these posts. Two major types of blog have emerged: filter blogs that convey factual information e.g. news items, politics etc. are a forum for public debate and in personal journal blogs, individuals record aspects of their life (Herring et al., 2005). A number of custom platforms, such as [WordPress](#) and [Blogger](#) offer free online blog spaces affording users some degree of control over who can access and post comments to their pages. Additionally, the major virtual learning environment (VLE) providers to HE (Moodle, Blackboard (BB9) and WebCT) provide blog facilities, although from personal experience, the BB9 blog tool is less visually appealing and user-friendly than the commercial blog platforms. Blogging has entered mainstream education as an innovative approach to reflective writing (Wiid et al., 2013) or, as reported by Bill Dixon at the [2013 Keele Teaching Symposium](#), to promote student engagement with key issues. Blogging has also been seen as a useful medium for producing student diaries and the student information website [Studential](#) provides a portal to a range of public-access student blogs.

A wiki is an online collaboration tool where a number of individuals can contribute and edit material on a page or group of pages, akin to collaborating on a word-processed document. Unlike blogs, wikis are static editable pages. The most famous example of a wiki is, of course, [Wikipedia](#), the online “encyclopaedia of almost everything” that is often the first port of call for any new enquiry.

In this project, four biochemistry students have used a wiki platform to record an online journal of their year at Keele, which was initially only accessible by fellow biochemistry students and the staff teaching them. By sharing their experiences throughout the year, it was hoped that their fellow students would be able to identify with the bloggers. Analysis of the blog content provided an insight into the issues affecting the students throughout the year. Participation in the project was beneficial to the bloggers, by providing an opportunity to develop their IT skills and some of Keele’s graduate attributes.

## **Methods**

### ***Ethical clearance***

Ethical clearance was sought and granted from the appropriate research ethics committees.

### ***Choice of platform***

The platform of choice had to be easy to use and flexible enough for contributors to be able to customise their own spaces. Moreover, there had to be a way of protecting the students' identities and keeping the space private – at this pilot stage external access was not desired .

There are a number of excellent blogging platforms available but after trialling several, a wiki platform, [PBworks](#), was chosen. The decision was based on the prior expertise of the project leader and the facility to create classroom user accounts, rather than having to use your email/username. This was key for anonymising both participants and readers.

A link to the wiki page was posted in the Biochemistry area of the School of Life Sciences KLE noticeboard. User accounts were set up for years 1-3 and staff viewers, so that individuals could log on to view the wiki without being identified. Emails were sent to all students at various times during the year to invite them to view the blogs.

### ***Inviting participants and Induction***

The project was introduced to new 1<sup>st</sup> year students at the Biochemistry induction meeting and to other cohorts by email. The low-key e-mail invitation approach taken was a deliberate decision, based on that fact that the project leader would be using the material generated by the bloggers to write an assessed report and did not want to pressurise the students into something that she would benefit from. Students applied by submitting a short introductory piece. The project was supported by a Keele Teaching Innovation award, so students were offered a pro-rata remuneration for participating in the project and a prize for the best page.

At an induction meeting, successful applicants were given training on how to use PBworks and issued with an information sheet, consent form, Guidelines and a Code of Practice agreement, which were produced with reference to several sources (Ripp, 2011; Allsopp, 2009; Scocco, 2007). It was important that the students perceived themselves as the owners of their own blogs (as opposed to participants in the leader's project), able to determine the frequency of blogging and content for themselves. To avoid any potential power issues, they were assured that the project leader was available any time for technical support, or advice on what to post, but would otherwise take a very hands-off approach. All of the induction material can be found in Appendix 1.

Students were issued with a username and password to maintain their anonymity. They were given the option of whether to use a cartoon or their photograph on the entry page to link to their own pages. The concerns about protecting students'

identities were unfounded, as all four students were happy to use their own first names and two provided photographs as links to their pages.

### ***Evaluation***

A content analysis approach (Norton, 2009) was taken to do an in-depth investigation of the blog content by assessing the emergent categories and then quantifying the frequency of comments in each theme. Essentially, the text of all four student blogs was pooled in a single document and upon reading through all the comments, a list of categories encompassing all the comments was produced. The text was then broken down into text units ranging from a few words to several sentences and then these units were placed in each of the categories.

It was planned to evaluate the project both from the bloggers' and the readers' viewpoints. To ascertain the viewers' opinion, the intention was to set up an anonymous online Survey Monkey questionnaire, with both grading-type (e.g. Likert) and free response questions. For the bloggers, an informal debriefing session was held at the end of semester 2 where, over lunch, we discussed a number of key questions.

## Results

Following several calls for applications, four students (two first year and two final year) were recruited. Although this was fewer than anticipated, and gave no representation from the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, there was reasonable coverage of interests and backgrounds.

Ayo, the only male of the group, was a school leaver studying Biochemistry and Biology. His page was identified by a covert photograph of himself in fancy dress. Ayo posted several times in semester 1, but did not update his page in semester 2

Also a school leaver, Nadine was studying Biochemistry and Forensic Science. She chose not to provide a photo or cartoon to link to her page. Nadine did not post at all in semester 1, but did produce a long post at the start of semester 2

Both of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, Jess and Leanna, were regular bloggers, posting short updates almost weekly, with occasional breaks when their workloads were high.

Jess was studying Biochemistry and Human Biology and used a cartoon as the link to her page.

Leanna, a major route Biochemistry student, had just returned from a one-year sandwich placement in France and so was entering her final year with a completely new group of classmates. She was happy to use a photograph as the link to her page.

### **Analysis of blog style and content**

As is evident from the [blog](#) (enter JADE in both fields when prompted for username and password), the students adopted diverse styles and discussed different things. For example, Ayo's short posts each had a separate descriptive title whilst Nadine's witty blog used font size and bold text for emphasis and her introductory paragraph also used lots of "....." and large spaces as a way of building suspense. Leanna's blog was peppered with lots of pictures and was the most in-depth and informative blog. Jess's blog was the most informal and her picture-packed blog posts were given chronological order titles and she made use of different fonts and colours for emphasis.

An in-depth content analysis was undertaken to determine the main topics covered in the blogs and the frequencies with which these occurred. Eight categories emerged into which a total of 542 text units were placed (31, 34, 188 and 289 for Ayo, Nadine, Leanna and Jess respectively). Table 1 shows the categories, with some examples of the text units placed in each category. These are the students' own words (and spelling)

Figure 1 shows the frequency of units in each category. Looking at the pooled data (black column) the most common category was "workload", closely followed by "personal approach to study". However, looking more closely at the data from the individual blogs, it was clear that there were big differences between the content of the first year and final year blogs in some categories, which skews the pooled data. For example, the pooled "workload" category was highly influenced by the two final year students and was actually a minor category for the first year students. Indeed, text units falling into the "personal approach to study" and the "workload" categories

accounted for just under 50% of Jess and Leanna's text units. Jess made frequent reference to how she was coping with her workload (she included a photo of her sticky notes planning out the week). Her enthusiasm for her project and some of the work she is doing came across really clearly.

The 1<sup>st</sup> year bloggers' pages appeared to have a higher frequency of biographical information than the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. However, examination of the raw numerical data (appendix 2), showed that both of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year bloggers actually had about twice the number of biographical text units than the 1<sup>st</sup> year pages, so although the biographical text units represent a smaller percentage of their total comments, they did reveal more biographical information overall.

Apart from an account of her journey to Keele, Nadine's blog focused mainly on advice about preparing for exams. Her blog content showed more similarity with Ayo's blog than to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year blogs, with 3 of the 8 categories well matched. With the exception of the two categories "career preparation" and "hobbies", Leanna and Jess had remarkably similar text unit profiles. Leanna was applying for and attending interviews for PhDs and gave advice on interview preparation based on her own experience. She had also done an industrial placement in France and discussed her experiences and career development opportunities. Jess was applying for a place at dental school and her blog described the application process. Neither Ayo nor Nadine wrote much about career preparation - they had only just started their degree programmes, so their careers may not as high a priority for them as it clearly was for the final year bloggers.

In terms of hobbies, Jess revealed much more about her social life and pastimes than the other students, although Ayo's brief blog, which covered some of his social experiences in semester 1, showed a similar profile to Jess for hobbies and emotions. Jess divulged more information that might be considered personal (e.g. emotions, health issues, hobbies and mentions of family etc.) than the other bloggers. In addition to photos of places, she posted random shots, like her noticeboard covered in post-it notes, photos related to her lab work, cartoons, videos etc., all of which reflected her personality. Leanna also posted photos regularly, but they tended to be scenic photos, like the snowy scene at Keele and places in France, in line with the more informative nature of her blog.

### ***Student evaluation of the project***

To maintain reader anonymity, several usernames were set up for each year group, meaning that different students could use the same log-in details or an individual could use different log-ins each time. Technically, there was no way to determine how many different students had accessed the page, only the total number of hits. Disappointingly, there were very few regular visitors to the students' pages and no comments were left. This precluded any meaningful evaluation of the blog pages from a reader's standpoint.

During a debriefing session, the bloggers were asked about their motivation for taking part in the project. One of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year students was already involved in ambassador work with school pupils and thought that participating in the blog project would give her the opportunity to develop her skills with university students. Other comments included that it was "something new to try"; it was an extra-curricular



activity that they could record on their CV and that it would be interesting. Table 2 places their motivations in context with those described in a large scale study of journal-style bloggers' motivations (Hollenbaugh, 2011)

Not only did all the students enjoy participating in the project, they all felt that they had benefitted in some way. One student said that she used her posts as a "procrastination tool". This was a disturbing revelation, as it was certainly not the intention that the blog would distract students from their work! Thankfully, she qualified her statement further by saying that she found it a useful way to break the tedium of study, with the added benefit that by writing her posts she was doing constructive reflection. The students also found it useful to read over what they had written earlier in the year and see how they had progressed. By looking at the other bloggers' pages, they were able to get a different perspective on things. One of the formal aims of the project was to help the bloggers develop some of the graduate attributes. It was encouraging to note that by participating in the project and thinking about the material they had posted, the students felt that they had developed eight of the attributes, either fully, or partially (see Appendix 3 -yellow highlights show the parts of some attributes that were considered met).

The students were asked if they had identified any barriers preventing them from posting more often. Workload was the main issue and even the final year students who were regular posters, did miss the occasional week when deadlines were looming. The final year students spent an average of 20 minutes per post, (<10 hours over the two semesters), which in their opinions was not a big time commitment. One 1<sup>st</sup> year blogger said that their long post had taken about 45 minutes, perhaps too much time to be spending regularly. The other 1<sup>st</sup> year blogger said that they did not post often because they were not sure that what they had to say would be useful. The 1<sup>st</sup> year bloggers were candidly asked if they would have posted more often, if they had been given subtle reminders every now and then! They both said yes, but that reminders might have made the exercise seem more of an obligation and may have taken the enjoyment out of it.

The students had looked at the other blogs and some knew that their friends had looked at their posts. One student admitted that they had not told their friends that they were blogging. All of the students felt that the relative inaccessibility of the blog page was a major barrier to readership and all have agreed that the blog should be placed in a more accessible place and should be opened to a wider audience. One student suggested that it might be a useful recruitment tool and so I have placed a link to the page on our most up-to-date welcome web page.

## **Discussion**

"A Year In The Life Of", an online diary of student life, was launched in October 2012, with the aims of easing student transitions through university, identifying the key factors affecting the students throughout the year and developing graduate attributes in the student participants. Having completed the first year of what is hoped will be an ongoing project, there are a few lessons to be learned.

The most disappointing aspect of the project was the poor readership, as it meant that one of the project aims could not be fully addressed. In an attempt to restrict the audience to Biochemistry students and to protect the identities of the bloggers, the

link to the “Year In The Life Of” page was placed in the biochemistry folder on the School KLE noticeboard. To access the page, the students had to log into their Keele accounts and then click through several folders to reach the link. Given that the target audience was what Prensky would describe as “digital natives”, who “are used to receiving information really fast” (Prensky, 2001), perhaps this tortuous route to the blog link was an own-goal! The link to the page has now been placed on a non-assessed teaching module (NAT) on the KLE on which all Life Sciences students have been registered. The viewer figures have already increased dramatically.

PBworks, as the platform of choice worked really well, with the facility to control access through a single entry point and the students finding it easy to customise their pages. However, one of the disadvantages of the static nature of a wiki page was that the text became rather lengthy. A workable solution might be to retain the entry point via PBWorks, but to link out to external blogs hosted on WordPress (as the project leader has now done with her own blog). The students would then be the owners and administrators their own blogs and could access them directly, but the project leader could still control access to the front page. This would represent a major difference to the existing set-up, in that the project leader currently owns the “Year In The Life Of” wiki workspace and the students wrote pages within that workspace. Cornell University student blog [“Life on the Hill”](#) appears to use a similar format, with WordPress blogs hosted within the Cornell domain.

#### *What the bloggers said and what they gained from the experience*

Analysis of the blog content revealed differences in the factors affecting the 1<sup>st</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, with workload, personal approach to study and career preparation being the dominant themes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year blogs, whilst Ayo’s blog had greater emphasis on his social life than his studies. This is perhaps not surprising given the intense workload of a final year student, the fact that they have had several years to develop their higher level study skills and that they are thinking about the next steps careerwise. The nature of the material discussed also seemed to reveal differences in the students’ personalities.

The relative anonymity of the internet has been suggested to make people more likely to disclose personal information than they might do face-to-face (Bargh et al., 2002). However, in contrast to the assumptions of the online “disinhibition effect”, in a quantitative analysis of 154 blogs, it was found that blogs that were more visually identifiable (i.e. by including photographs) were more likely to disclose personal information than blogs with few visual identifiers (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013). However, some of the blogs analysed showed “discursive anonymity”, in that the bloggers revealed little identifiable biographical information: these bloggers tended to be more disclosive than bloggers who used their real name, but not photographs. The authors interpreted their findings by saying that “visual cues were perceived by bloggers as less identifying than discursive cues” (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013). A simpler explanation might be that people who are willing to show photographs to strangers may be naturally more open and willing to share than people who are only feel able to share if they remain anonymous. In this study, Jess was the most disclosive of the bloggers and used lots of photographs that reflected her personality and sense of humour (although none in which she was clearly identifiable). Leanna was the one who used an identifiable photograph of herself and whilst she does

reveal some information about her personal life, it is less so that Jess. Nadine does not show a photo and she discloses no personal information, so her blog does not show any signs of the disinhibition effect – Nadine’s blog was effectively a single post, so this finding must be treated with caution.

All of the students in the current study enjoyed blogging and, as discussed earlier, perceived that they had developed some of the graduate attributes. During the debriefing session, they revealed their motivations for volunteering for the project and reflected upon how they had used their blog. Whilst the project leader’s decision to take a hands-off approach was the right one, in future it might be better to have a debriefing meeting at the end of the semester 1, so that issues like a student not posting because they didn’t think they had anything useful to say could be addressed. In that particular case, the student was apparently seeing the blog as a way of reaching a target audience, rather than as a tool for developing their own skills.

Hollenbaugh, 2011, analysed the motivations of personal journal-style bloggers and identified 7 key factors, which were then also correlated with age, perceived loneliness, disclosiveness and gender (summarised in Table 2). The statements highlighted in yellow reflect things that the bloggers in the current study mentioned in the debriefing meeting, showing a good correlation with Hollenbaugh’s findings. As none of the students were what might be construed as of lonely, it was not surprising that they displayed none of the exhibitionist traits.

## **Conclusion**

Four students produced online accounts of their academic year, revealing some of the key factors that affect students. It seems that at 1<sup>st</sup> year level social life is as important as academic life, but by 3<sup>rd</sup> year academic life takes precedence. Whilst the readership was disappointing, the bloggers all enjoyed taking part and felt that they had developed their graduate attributes. The project will be continued but will be opened to a wider audience and made more accessible.

## **Acknowledgements**

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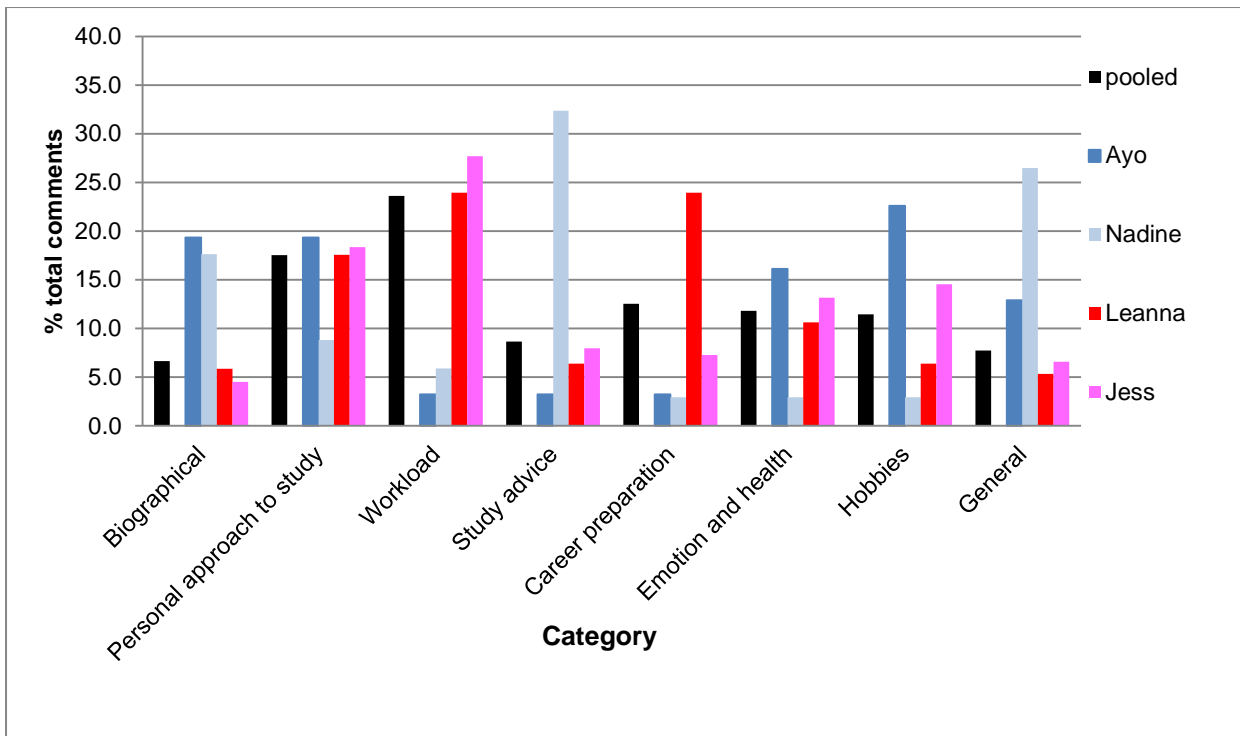
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**Table 1 Examples of comments (text units) placed in each category**

Category	Sample text units
<b>Biographical (personal information, family background etc)</b>	<p>"I'm currently a third year"</p> <p>"I started the degree immediately after my A-levels"</p>
<b>Personal approach to study</b>	<p>"I created a schedule, showing all my exams/ essays and how I intended to revise for or complete them"</p> <p>"I try to take regular time outs when I am working, for food &amp; procrastination so that I keep more focused on the task at hand."</p>
<b>Workload (references to material being studied, preparing ICA etc)</b>	<p>"there is a lot of self-study required for the projects on top of the course assessments for my modules"</p> <p>"Luckily, I have around one lecture per day (Monday to Friday)"</p>
<b>Study advice</b>	<p>"Don't set unrealistic goals for your revision, as it will dishearten you."</p> <p>"My advice to future third- year undergraduates is to distribute the modules (as far as possible) to 4 per semester"</p> <p>"For finding statistics to do with the NHS &amp; diseases, I have found the NHS Information Centre website is incredibly useful (<a href="http://www.ic.nhs.uk/">http://www.ic.nhs.uk/</a>)."</p>
<b>Career preparation (both personal preparation and advice for others)</b>	<p>"I have asked for feedback as to how I can improve and information on their selection criteria, because I fully intend upon re-applying"</p> <p>"the additional laboratory experience is a great addition to your CV"</p> <p>"This week I've also used the Find a PhD website to look for postgraduate courses. <a href="http://www.findaphd.com">www.findaphd.com</a>"</p>
<b>Emotional and health</b>	<p>"I think "stressed" would be an understatement right about now"</p> <p>"For some reason I had convinced myself that I wasn't going to make friends"</p>
<b>Hobbies (includes hobbies and other non-academic activities)</b>	<p>"My flatmates dragged me out on Monday night for the Keele Life Sciences Society (KLSS) Social"</p> <p>"..visiting world-famous museums, art galleries and places of historical interest most weekends more than made up for it!"</p> <p>"...a messy game of beer pong"</p>
<b>General (witty comments, weather etc)</b>	<p>"The weather in Newcastle seems to have taken a bizarre turn...I expected snow during the weeks just before Christmas; rather than in January (?!)"</p> <p>"Wooo Keele! And what is your course I here you saying well it is.....Wait for it.....Wait for it....."</p>



### Figure 1 Content Analysis

The pooled and individual blogs were subdivided into text units, (ranging from short phrases to several sentences) and each text unit was then placed into one of the eight emergent categories. The solid black column represents the % text units falling into each category from the pooled data. The remaining columns show the % text units falling into each category in the four individual blogs (blues for 1<sup>st</sup> year students and reds for 3<sup>rd</sup> years).

**Table 2 Motivations for blogging and personality type.**

Motivation	Examples	Types of personality
<b>Helping</b>	<p>To motivate others</p> <p>To help others</p> <p>To share information that may be of use to others</p> <p>To share my knowledge and skills</p> <p>To show others encouragement</p> <p>To communicate about a special interest or issue that I care</p>	More common in older bloggers
<b>Social Connection</b>	<p>To share information with my friends and family who do not live near me</p> <p>To communicate to my friends and family</p> <p>To share information with people that I don't talk to on a regular basis</p> <p>To communicate to many people at once, rather than telling one at a time</p>	<p>More common in bloggers who did not display characteristics of loneliness</p> <p>More common in disclosive bloggers</p>
<b>Pass time</b>	<p>To pass time</p> <p>To occupy my time</p> <p>Because I have nothing better to do</p>	<p>More common in younger bloggers</p> <p>More common in lonelier bloggers</p> <p>More common in disclosive bloggers</p>
<b>Exhibitionism</b>	<p>For attention</p> <p>To gain fame or notoriety</p> <p>Because I like when people read things about me</p>	More common in lonelier bloggers
<b>Organisation/archiving</b>	<p>To record my thoughts and feelings so I can reflect on them</p> <p>Because it helps me organize my thoughts and feelings</p> <p>Because I can read what I wrote in previous posts</p>	More common in female bloggers
<b>Professionalism</b>	<p>To help me get a job</p> <p>To put my professional resume online</p> <p>Because I have to for a class or job</p>	Least frequent reason
<b>Feedback</b>	<p>To get more points of view</p> <p>To get advice from my readers</p> <p>To get feedback from others who have similar experiences</p>	

The yellow highlights indicate motivations that our student bloggers mentioned. Adapted from Hollenbough, 2011