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Blogging and Legal Education

By: Jennifer Koshan

I was at the [Canadian Association of Law Teachers](#) (CALT) conference in Ottawa earlier this week and participated in a roundtable on blogging and legal education. Other participants included University of Ottawa's Angela Cameron from [Blogging for Equality](#); Paul Daly from [Administrative Law Matters](#); and Moin Yahya from the [University of Alberta Faculty of Law Blog](#). Suzanne Bouclin from the University of Ottawa chaired.

I started off the discussion by describing the ways that [ABlawg](#) engages law students. We employ a student coordinator who spends about 10 hours per week summarizing Alberta court decisions, posting, moderating comments, and maintaining the [ABlawg](#) website. Student bloggers are recruited through volunteer organizations such as [Student Legal Assistance](#) and [Pro Bono Students Canada](#), and some of them continue to blog for [ABlawg](#) after graduation. Some professors have also incorporated blogging into our courses; for example my constitutional clinical students were required to synthesize their 50 page briefs on the rights of farmworkers into shorter, more accessible blog posts (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Interestingly some of the students questioned the value of this exercise at the time, but the blog posts led to attention from media and Alberta politicians, and an invitation to submit a book chapter consolidating the students' work. Faculty members also use blog posts in the classroom as the basis for problems, moot/factum exercises, and as supplementary reading. [ABlawg](#) includes a category of posts on [legal education](#) as well.

Paul Daly noted that he began [Administrative Law Matters](#) three years ago to fill a gap in Canadian law blog market in the area of administrative law – an area that intersects with many other areas of law. The blog has been a great success, winning the 2014 [Clawbie](#) for Best Law Professor Blog. Paul described the blog as a personal notebook in the sense that it helps him with class preparation, conference papers, and idea development. In order to maintain an audience, one needs to post commentary fairly quickly after decisions are released and write in a clear, accessible style, which is a very important skill for academics. Blogging on legal decisions is of value to students, academics and the legal community, as case comments are no longer very popular in Canadian law journals. Paul also maintains a [Teaching / Student Corner](#) on [Administrative Law Matters](#).

Angela Cameron explained that [Blogging for Equality](#) is a collective project of a number of feminist academics at the University of Ottawa. The blog began a few years ago after a group of feminist law professors attended a workshop with journalist Shari Graydon on how to get women's voices heard in the media. The posts on [Blogging for Equality](#) are in the nature of op-

eds – usually 500 words or less. The focus of the blog (which Angela coordinates along with her colleagues Vanessa MacDonnell and Jena McGill) is social justice issues. In addition to using the op-ed format, posts include information hubs on particular issues and a recent feature identifies the “[latest and greatest](#)” articles on SSRN. Angela and her colleagues use their blog as a teaching tool – especially posts of original content – and have assigned blog posts as evaluation components in some courses, allowing students to develop the useful skill of writing pithily. The audience for Blogging for Equality is largely students, academics, NGOs and activists, both Canadian and international.

The University of Alberta’s Moin Yahya noted that his [Faculty’s blog](#) is also a collective effort, and has an intentionally freestyle format, which facilitates the engagement of young faculty and students / alumni. The blog contains everything from op-eds on legal decisions to ruminations on sports and popular culture. Moin stressed the importance of daily content to keep the audience engaged. In terms of student involvement, Moin described a course he ran in the winter of 2015 on the Magna Carta, which required a small group of five students to write daily blog posts on different aspects of that document (which celebrates its 800th anniversary this year and will make a trip to Edmonton in the fall). The students were evaluated both on the substance of their posts and on the number of hits they attained, and developed a number of skills – writing, editing each other’s work, interviews with human subjects (requiring ethics approval), copyright issues, and dissemination of their posts via social media. For a summary of the Magna Carta course project see [here](#).

The Q + A following the presentations raised a number of interesting issues. A discussion about the various approaches to archiving blog posts led to representatives from Carswell raising the possibility of including blogs in the Index to Canadian Legal Literature. Audience members wondered about the time commitment for blog coordinators, especially to moderate comments, which revealed a range of approaches from no comment functionality (Blogging for Equality) to moderated comments (ABlawg) to a more liberal approach (University of Alberta). Blog coordinators also take different approaches in terms of how much editing they do before submissions are posted. Questions were raised about how much students get out of blogging, especially in writing short pieces (if that is all they do), and Moin gave a strong defence of the merits of having students blog on a common theme over the course of several weeks as an organic, multi-faceted approach to legal research and writing. University of Ottawa’s [Craig Forcese](#) – who runs his own blogs and participates in some collective ones – talked about the ways that blogging can connect with larger academic research projects, and noted that when the media misinterpret or quote selectively from blog posts there is always an opportunity to correct the error (unlike traditional op eds). I indicated that many ABlawg authors had worked their blog posts up into peer reviewed articles, which also allows afterthoughts and comments about the position taken in an initial post to be reflected in the final product.

I will close with an observation an audience member made about Rod Macdonald, “[mentor to generations of lawyers](#)”, to the effect that academics should strive to embrace new ways of communicating our work as modes of communication change. It was agreed by participants that law blogging is an important way to do so, with some concrete benefits for law students and law teaching.

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