

# MODERATING A STUDENT-RUN WEBLOG TO HONE THE CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS OF POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS STUDYING A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

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## Abstract

This paper explores ways of using a weblog to help Advanced Level (post-secondary) students analyse and write critical essays on Shakespeare's *Othello*, and sounds the possibility of extending/adopting a weblog with other literary texts. Examiners' post-mortem analysis of Advanced Level English examination responses, often highlight certain undesirable traits in students' work, the most common of which being that "candidates (do) not refer closely enough to the text and "many narrate the plot of the play". This project aims to address these issues by guiding students towards writing critical responses on assigned parts of a text which can be published and peer-reviewed. Previous research has shown that the ideal platform for this is a blog.

## Introduction

The University of Malta's Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) is a postsecondary qualification which students need to obtain at the end of a two-year course in order to continue their studies at tertiary level. Students choose five of six subjects; two at Advanced Level and the remaining ones at Intermediate Level. The sixth subject, Systems of Knowledge, is an interdisciplinary subject which is designed to link separate fields of knowledge.

MATSEC's Advanced Level English examination consists of three papers, the first of which is the one students tend to fear the most. For this paper, students are expected to write three 500-word responses; one on a Shakespeare play, one on set poems of a particular poet, and there is also a critical response to an "unseen" poem (i.e. one which students have not read or analysed before).

This may not be too daunting to students who studied Shakespeare and poetry prior to their entering Sixth Form; but, since only an English Language qualification is required to gain entry to post-secondary institutions, there are a number of students who choose to study English at Advanced Level with a rather superficial knowledge of literary devices and techniques. In addition to this, many students who did study

literature at school, may have had a modern dramatic text chosen by their teachers, so that their first-ever experience of Shakespearean drama is at Advanced Level.

One must also take into consideration the fact that the exams which secondary students need to pass in order to enter a postsecondary institution are offered at two levels of difficulty. “Paper A” exams are for the more academically able students whilst “Paper B” exams are set for students who find the subject in question more challenging. The difference between English Language and Literature Paper A and B examinations is significant, in particular when it comes to writing tasks which are reduced from 320-350-word essays to ones that require 180-200 words. Students who pass a Paper B exam can choose to continue studying that subject at Advanced Level, which is not tiered to suit students of different levels.

It is therefore understandable that a considerable number of students who choose to study English at Advanced Level find the prospect of studying a Renaissance play and then writing a well-structured response daunting; Early Modern English is challenging enough on its own, even without Shakespeare’s unique coinage, “boldness of imagery” and all the “figures of speech known in formal rhetoric” (Hudson, 1872, p.277). So, in addition to helping students clear these hurdles, (in approximately fifty hour-long lectures that are allocated to the subject), teachers of Shakespearean drama must also ensure that their students are taught to develop close reading and research skills, think critically, and write analytically.

In addition to this, what made the outcomes of this project more desirable than ever was the fact that the cohort of students used in this pilot-study had just returned to College after two years of online learning. Even before the pandemic, examiners had complained about the deteriorating levels of English at secondary level in Maltese schools. A 2015 University of Malta Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examiners’ Report lamented the fact “that 16-year old students should be leaving school on completion of their secondary education with a poor command of English is a matter of great concern” (p. 16), and this, in conjunction with the fact that some students may have suffered from a potential lockdown-related “learning loss”, meant that it was imperative to get this project up and running for this particular student cohort (although no studies were conducted in Malta, a study conducted by the Department of Education in UK (2021) found losses of up to two months in literacy in secondary-school students as a result of pandemic-related educational disruption).

Results of previous studies have shown that weblogs encourage students to act as authors as well as critical readers of texts created by their peers (Handsfield et al., 2009) and that blogs “can be incorporated seamlessly into content area classrooms to improve student literacy skills and provide an extension of thinking about classroom content” (Steller, 2015, p. 39). These findings gave rise to the idea of

setting-up a student-run weblog to help address most of the aforementioned issues that postsecondary teachers of Shakespeare face.

## The Advantages of a Student-run Blog

I had, in previous years, set-up a Facebook page to function as a repository for notes and critical essays, which I would then use to elicit student responses and move on to create discussions from said responses. This system, however, was not as successful as I hoped it would be. With few exceptions, students tended to be rather reluctant or too embarrassed to discuss, let alone question, anything I posted in such a public forum which was run by just one person, which gave the impression that their responses or feedback would be primarily with me rather than with each other. What they wanted, and expected, was for me to post study notes rather than discuss important parts of the play and substantiate their claims with evidence they found, which was the entire point of the project. In addition, Facebook was not the ideal platform to use for posts which were meant to be read in chronological order since at that time, Facebook arranged its posts in order of popularity.

## The Creation of Producers and Independent Learners

The suggestion of a student-run weblog appealed to me for a number of reasons. Unlike Facebook, a blog “is a website with dated entries, presented in reverse chronological order” (Duffy & Bruns, 2006, p. 32); but, more importantly the nature of a weblog made it possible for me to refine myself out of existence and allow the students to ‘run the show’ themselves. Churchill’s study has already shown that “through blogs, a teacher can create an ambience in which students feel themselves to be important parts of the classroom community and that their needs and opinions are recognized and addressed” (Churchill, 2009, p. 183); over and above this, a separate study by Hedberg and Brudvik (2008) shows that “the social software supported in Web 2.0 enables consumers to become producers” (p. 140). My presence being far less felt on a blog than on a Facebook page promised to make the students’ role as contributors to the resources and not just consumers far clearer and this, in turn, could help “promote [their] critical and analytical thinking” and ensure their “exposure to quality information” (Duffy & Bruns, 2006, p. 33).

## A Voice for All

Although it has already been observed that “blogging improved the writers’ sense of audience, created a sense of community and belonging that empowered and motivated the students” (Steller, 2015, p. 90) and that “there will be a natural tendency for reflection and analysis on the part of the student, given feedback systems are integral to the blogging interface” (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 235), my previous endeavors with Facebook showed that a considerable number of

students felt too embarrassed to comment online and refrained from exposing themselves on Facebook posts. Studies have shown that a weblog, on the other hand, encourages communication of reticent students by giving them the opportunity to post comments and contribute to a discussion anonymously. As Steller (2015, p. 33) has observed, “while awareness of audience is important, blogging can also paradoxically protect the more reticent writer by creating a sense of anonymity, a wall of separation that allows for both reader and creator to be more objective”. This feature was more important than ever with the students involved in this pilot project since they had just emerged from two years of online learning and few had ever met before in person. In view of this, the fact that studies have shown that “blogs strengthen communication among secondary and higher education students, enhance their social skills and their engagement in meaningful dialogue” (Michailidis et al., 2022, p. 665), was an added bonus for these students.

### Improves Writing Skills

Another reason why students could be more forthcoming with feedback in a student-run blog is because “students’ motivation to write may increase when they are able to publish their work online for an authentic audience” (Steller, 2015, p.39). Handsfield et al. (2009) have also noted that students tend to ignore their teachers’ responses but, in their blogs “they asked and responded to one another’s questions, and because they were writing for a larger audience (their whole class, instead of just their teacher), they became more careful writers. Students who previously did not proofread their writing soon began adding conventional punctuation” (p. 45).

These results and observations all pointed towards the setting-up of a weblog to help students address the challenges of a Shakespeare play.

## Setting Up the Blog

### My Role as Lecturer and Moderator

It was not difficult to convince my students that the “extra” work involved in writing detailed and well-structured blog posts would reap dividends seven months down the line, when their short academic year came to an end. All members of the group agreed to commit themselves to the project as they understood that a collective effort would ultimately result in a repository of very reliable information that would require several hours of work if done alone.

Each week two students volunteered to analyse the part of the play that had been discussed in class the previous week. The division of labour was left in the students’ hands and they would agree beforehand on who would focus on certain aspects of the play such as characters, themes, imagery and so on. When they were satisfied

with the level of detail in their work, they would write it down in the form of a short academic paragraphs paying particular attention to the four criteria MATSEC examiners consider when marking essays:

- Interpretation supported by appropriate evidence from the text
- Tools of critical analysis
- Organisation and Structure
- Expression

Building on Knobel and Lankshear's thesis (2014), Stivala (2008) argues that "the role of the teacher in a blogging task... is that of a moderator who establishes parameters, since the value of blogs in education lies precisely in the fact that bloggers "recognize that quality is judged by groups rather than by appointed experts" (p.496). The fact that these "groups" are comprised of classmates serves to motivate bloggers to produce better work even if a number of students choose to merely 'consume' rather than produce the posts. With this fact in mind, Williams and Jacobs (2004) have pointed out that "active participants may well *assume* a lurking audience as part of the accepted risk of rebuttal, in creating an argument or expressing a theory in making a blog entry. This risk, in turn, develops skills among active participants in critical thinking and argument creation" (p.246).

However, since part of the blog's *raison d'être* included training students how to write focussed and well-structured paragraphs, all parties concerned agreed that the latter two criteria on the examiners' list would fall within my remit as blog-moderator to correct in private. So students would first email their finished blog contributions to me to ensure that the levels of 'expression' as well as those of 'organisation and structure' met A' Level standards. Any parts of the submitted work which were found to be lacking in these two areas were highlighted and returned to the writers for correction.

Since it has already been noted that students' work is generally better when writing for an audience, the rationale behind my not allowing students to judge their peers' submissions on all four MATSEC marking criteria needs to be explained.

There were two reasons that led to this decision. Firstly, I wanted the students to focus mainly on content and to understand that they had to learn to use specific details from the play or from the works of literary critics to support an argument or a point being made. This measure ensured that students moved away from the temptation to "provide just a paraphrase of the given extract" or merely "narrate the plot of the play rather than focus on the extract itself" which, in the words of MATSEC examiners, led to "very lengthy and long-winded answers" (University of Malta Examiners' Report, 2020, p. 6).

Secondly, one had to bear in mind that this was a mixed-ability cohort and the levels of language proficiency ranged from weak to excellent. A heavily edited post done in such a public fashion would have risked demoralizing and embarrassing some of the contributors. It is worthwhile to note that the students, being aware of their audience, did moderate and correct each other's work before submitting a final draft to me and overall the quality of their work was of noticeably better quality than their weekly tutorial essays. However, despite this, there were a few contributions that needed significant re-editing multiple times. So while it has been noted that "by observing the behaviours of participants in a computer mediated community, 'lurkers' can become familiar with the ways of participating and overcome fears" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p.246), I could not risk the opposite happening.

The first blog contributors discussed the layout of the blog and created a template that their peers found convenient to use in subsequent contributions. Their assigned lines of the play were analysed and organised in sections that were headed "Character Analysis", "Main Themes", and "Imagery".

As can be seen in Figure 1, the contributions were analytical and discursive and it is clear that a conscious effort was made to avoid mere "narrating" throughout the blog's various sections; this lends credence to Duffy and Bruns' assertion that blogs contribute to the acquisition of students' "creative, critical, communicative and collaborative skills". (2006, p.33).

## Figure 1

### *Excerpt from the First Blog Post*

ellojc2021.blogspot.com/2021/09/post-2-commentary-on-ii-1-66.html

Iago's last speech leaves little doubt as to what he truly is. In a manner similar to Macbeth's witches, fair is (to Iago) foul, and foul fair. "Duteous and knee-crooking" servants are referred to as "knaves" who should be whipped; whereas self-serving servants "trimm'd in forms and visages of duty, (who) Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves" "have soul" are what Iago professes to be himself.

The distortion of a biblical quote "I am that I am" (Exodus 314) into "I am not what I am" immediately makes the audience aware of Iago's **evil nature**.

In addition to this, one's attention is also drawn to **Iago's high opinion of himself**. Despite his low rank, he feels that he has what it takes to be an officer, as he says " **by the faith of man, I know my price, I am worth no worse a place**".

Iago's **self-serving** character, is made clear in his boast that

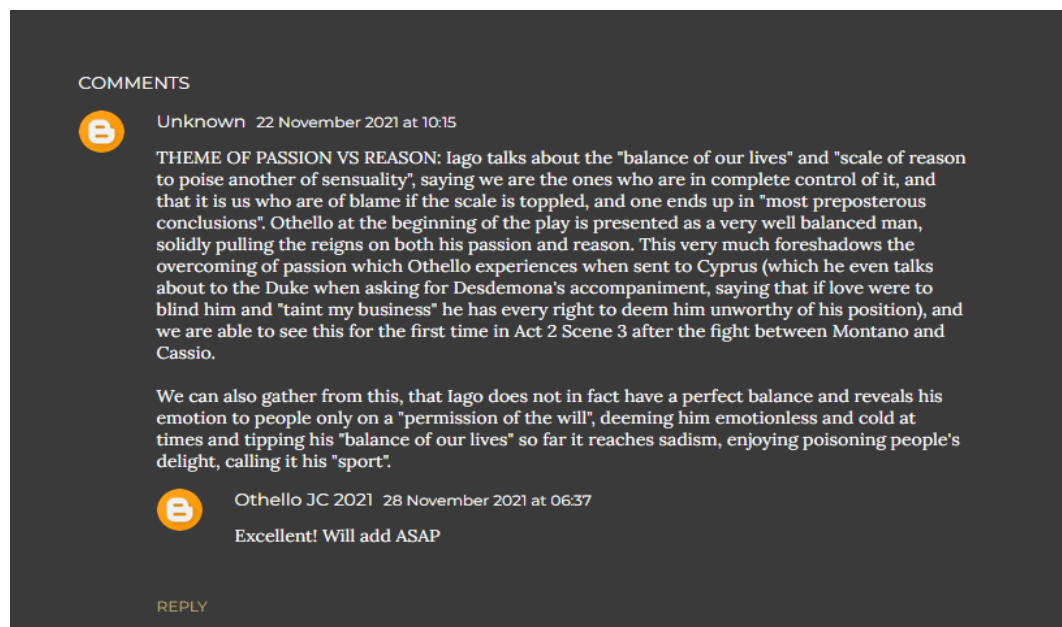
"In following him, I follow but myself;  
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,  
But seeming so, for my peculiar end."

Clearly, the audience are made aware who the villain of the story is from the outset.

As aforementioned, one invaluable feature of a weblog is its “Comments Section” which allows for anonymous contributions; this encourages even the most self-conscious of students to have their say without drawing attention to themselves. All valid observations and additional information that appeared in the “Comments” section (Figure 2) were added to the main text accordingly once they were approved by the moderator. It is clear from the feedback left in the “Comments” section that the blog “increased the participants’ motivation and encourage(d) independent learning and shared knowledge building by means of peer interaction.” (Neira-Piñeiro, 2015, p. 546.)

## Figure 2

*Contributions from Other Participants Appeared in the “Comments” Section*



## Post-Exam Questionnaire

A short online questionnaire consisting of four Likert-Scale statements (to which students could “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree”) and two open-ended format questions was sent to all forty-four participants after their final exams were over. There were thirty-six respondents, which tallies close to an 82% response rate.

The statements appeared in the following order:

- I used the blog regularly to revise *Othello*
- The students’ contributions were thorough and detailed
- The structure of the posts helped me understand how to write analytically and critically

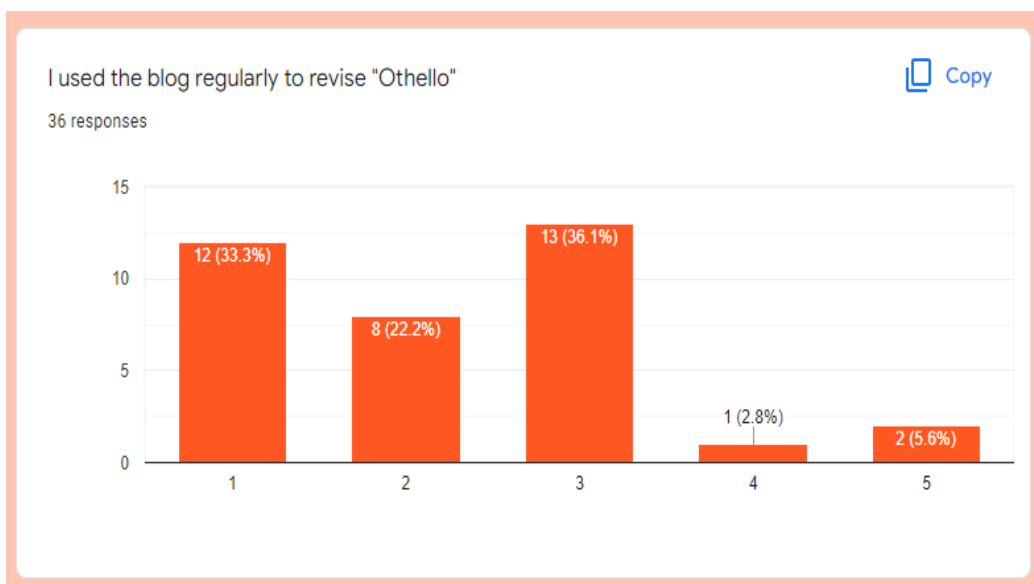
- The blog content provided all the information needed to answer the MATSEC exam question
- Are there any recommendations you can make to improve the system?
- Would you recommend the same approach (i.e. a student-run blog) for other texts?

### Analysis of Students' Responses

The results of the first question “I used the blog regularly to revise *Othello*” reveals an encouraging level of trust that students had in their own work (Figure 3). While 36% of students (13) sat halfway choosing to “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, 33% (12), thoroughly agreed that they used the blog regularly to revise the text, and a further 22% (8) of students “Agreed” to the statement. Only 5.6% (2) of the respondents chose to click on “Do Not Agree Whatsoever”.

**Figure 3**

*Histogram Showing Responses to “I used the blog regularly to revise Othello”*

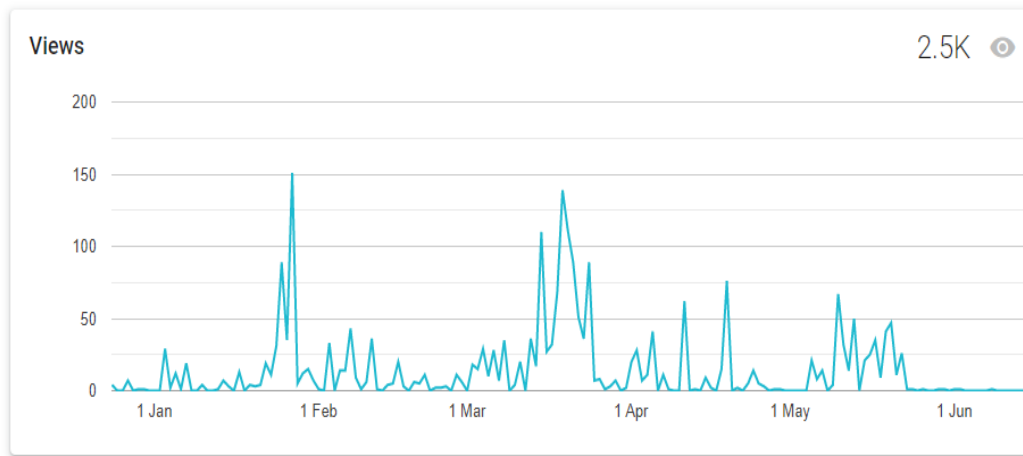


While the percentage of respondents who “Neither Agreed nor Disagreed” may seem rather high, it may point to the manner and study habits of Maltese students. The line graph in Figure 4 shows the days when students’ blog use peaked. Every peak in the graph coincides with the date of an assignment deadline (21<sup>st</sup> January) and a mock-test (March 14<sup>th</sup>) of the final exam. The lower peaks in May, spread over a larger number of days, reveal when most students started studying regularly for the first paper of their A Level exam (May 21<sup>st</sup>). The lower peaks in between the aforementioned dates account for the 55% of students who used the blog regularly or fairly regularly.



**Figure 4**

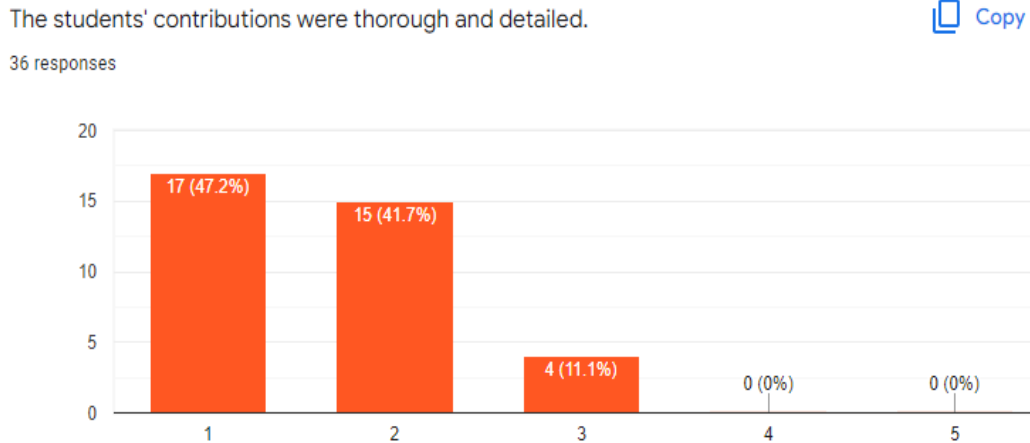
*Line Graph Depicting Students' Blog-use over the First Six Months of 2022*



The second statement, “The students’ contributions were thorough and detailed” received overwhelmingly positive answers. As can be seen in Figure 5, none of the students answered negatively and only four chose a neutral response. Forty seven percent of the respondents thoroughly agreed, while a further 41% agreed with the statement. These figures support the claims that the interactivity of a blog not only motivates students’ participation (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004) but it also stimulates their autonomy and responsibility (Neira-Piñero, 2015), resulting in posts that students felt were good enough to use as study material.

**Figure 5**

*Responses to “The students’ contributions were thorough and detailed”*



As seen in Figure 6, responses to the statement “the structure of the posts helped me understand how to write analytically and critically” were generally positive,

with 27.8% of respondents strongly agreeing with this statement, 36.1% agreeing, and 22.2% choosing to remain neutral while 13.9% did not agree. The students' overall positive endorsement of the blog, which is further discussed in the following section of this paper, supports the results and observations of Steller (2015) who claims that "awareness of audience leads to better writing, and that blogging can provide an authentic practice for the development of writing skills" (pp. 32-33).

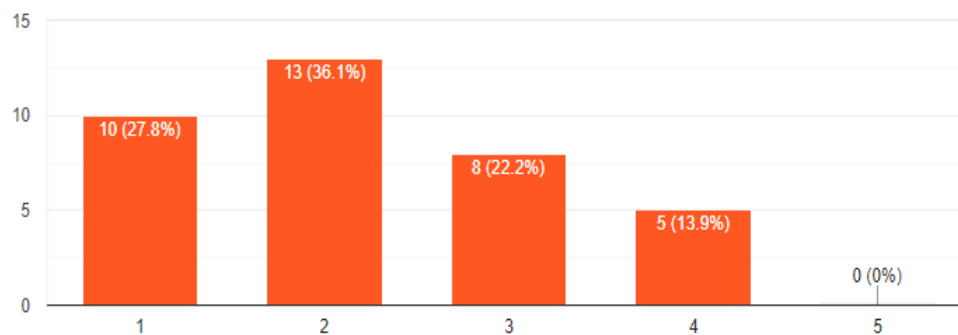
### Figure 6

*Responses to "The structure of the posts helped me understand how to write analytically and critically"*

The structure of the posts helped me understand how to write analytically and critically.



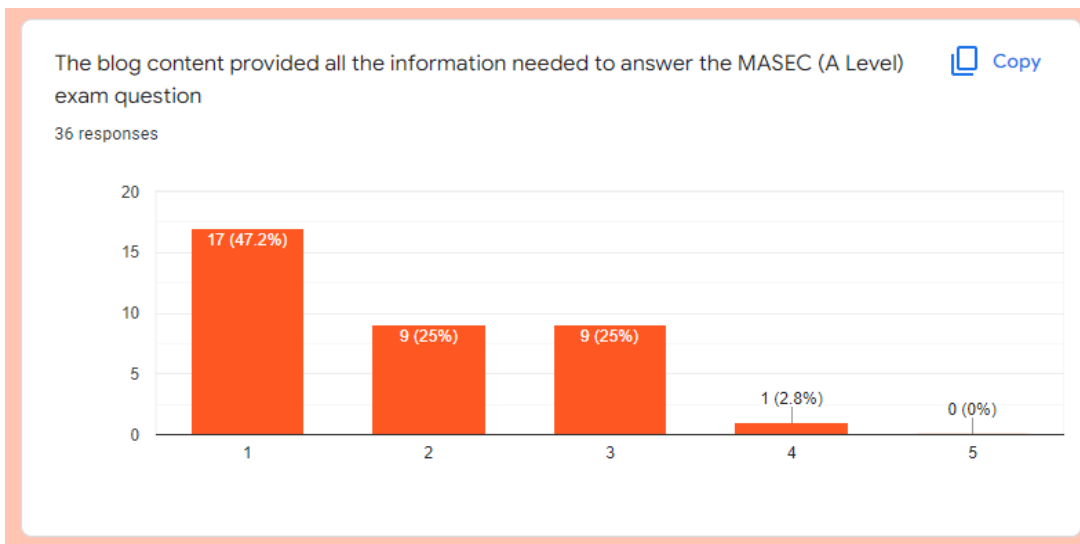
36 responses



The 63.9% of respondents who felt that the blog helped them learn how to write analytically and critically, along with the 88% of the student cohort that thought the blog posts were thorough and detailed, could be taken as an endorsement for the continual use of a weblog to improve writing as well as analytical skills. The responses help verify the observations that blogging also promotes "critical and analytical thinking" and also "increased access and exposure to quality information" (Duffy & Bruns, 2006, p. 33) which is further verified when one takes into consideration the fact that 72% of the respondents felt that all the information they needed to write an exam essay was in the blog (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Responses to “The blog content provided all the information needed to answer the MATSEC exam question”*



## Students' Feedback and Recommendations

Students were also asked to answer two open-ended questions, the first one being “Are there any recommendations you can make to improve the system?” Whilst the twenty-two responses to this question varied, there were some common answers which merit further attention.

A quarter of respondents suggested that more posts containing “quality sample essays” would help students understand “what being on the right track looks like”.

Other respondents (six in all) suggested that a summary of each post in point form would make it easier for all when there’s only enough time for a “quick revision”. One longer answer was more detailed in explaining why a summary of each post would be helpful (Figure 8).

## Figure 8

### *Students' Recommendations to Fine-tune Their Blog*

As a very exhaustive blog, it has fulfilled its requirements, it has really good arguments and ensures that students understand both the plot and how themes appear in each scene. However, I think students also require shorter type notes to be skimmed through in the days before the exams, so that the information is fresh in our minds. Maybe this could be added as an extra feature in which the students that are responsible for making the blog post for the week, also create some sort of table or list of the themes that appear in that scene, the characters that relate to the theme in that specific scene, as well as one or two quotes to back this up. This way, the long detailed blog can be used as a primary study resource (to be used during frequent revision throughout the year) and the short one can be used as a secondary resource (to be used throughout the days before the exam).

I think once the respective tutorial teachers assign an essay, the best ones should be chosen and posted on the blog, as the latest one on 'Othello's Self Deception' really helped!

There were twenty-eight responses (amounting to 64%) to the question "Would you recommend the same approach (i.e. a student-run blog) for other texts? (Ex: the novels, and poems?) Can you explain why?". Without exception, all responses were positive although some students thought that a blog of this nature would be better for poetry rather than for novels and vice versa (Figure 9). Overall, the feedback showed that students appreciated the value of their collective effort and felt that a student-run blog will ultimately give them the tools they need to get through what many consider to be an arduous two-year course.

## Figure 9

### *Students' Thoughts on Using Student-run Blogs for Other Texts*

Would you recommend the same approach (i.e. a student-run blog) for other texts? (Ex: the novels, and poems?) Can you explain why?  
28 responses

Definitely as the blog improves students' critical thinking and helps them study more effectively.

Yes, except for poems as I feel more comfortable with teacher's notes. But with anything else I think it would be really helpful to have all the notes together and online

Possibly for Wuthering Heights since it covers multiple themes and the characters and their relationships are rather complex.

I would recommend this for other novels and poems as at least students will have a better guide on how to tackle an exam question...since most teachers don't give out any notes.

yes - I feel like for the first year material covered (Wuthering and Heaney), I didn't feel as reassured as Othello as I was working off of my own interpretation and did not have the opportunity to review counter opinions. With Wuthering Heights, since it is a Gothic text which for some people (including myself) tends to be harder to follow, in comparison to Handmaid's which is contemporary, working with a weekly revision system of the blog could help with keeping up with the plot and characters, and actually understand the reasons of why things happen with more than just a face value opinion (why Heathcliff acts in the ways he does, how the 1st Gen affected the 2nd Gen, Symbolism etc etc)

## Conclusion

The pilot-project has further evinced that weblogs can be used as effective sources of learning. The fact that contributors' posts are open not just to the general public but, more specifically, to the scrutiny of peers, serves as an impetus to produce work of superior quality in terms of research as well as writing that meets high standards set by the students themselves. In addition to this, the very nature of this collaborative project seems to have made students take their individual assignments more seriously since they felt responsible for the overall quality of the final product that their peers intended to use to pass an exam. As Churchill (2007) points out, blogs can help students to feel that they are "important parts of a classroom community (where) their needs and opinions are recognized and addressed" (p. 183).

The students' feedback and records of use are a testament to how seriously they took each other's posts and contributions. Being an organic project, the students' suggestions on how to improve the blog can be taken aboard and implemented by the following year's cohort so that the blog is continually refined to meet their needs.

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