I’ve Written My Talk

Blogging, Writing and Temporality

Between the poles of speaking and writing, where do we place a published version of a written talk given about blogging? I find, as I write this up, that I can’t keep a straight writerly face. I’m unable to render the layers of past and present into a seamless tense, a smooth representation of speaking about writing, or writing about speaking. Mostly, we know how to read and write the conventions for ‘writing up a talk’, but the subject of blogging seems to call forth a different kind of reflection. Or does it?

When I was invited to take part in a university research forum on blogging, I first thought I would simply talk from some notes, in keeping with the relative informality of blogging as a medium. That’s often the best way to give an academic presentation, in any case. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised I was falling into the trap of thinking that blog criticism should somehow match the tone and style of a blog.

How could we best engage in blog criticism? I had no idea. I was also unused to talking about my own writing: as a literary scholar I’m used to talking about texts or ideas, not about myself. I was afraid I would become too informal, be under-prepared, and perhaps even
delude myself that my blog (Humanities Researcher, at http://stephanietrigg.blogspot.com) could speak for itself, and that I would end up quoting large chunks of it uncritically. So I decided to give blogging the courtesy of the extra time and thought it takes to put sentences together, as I tried to untangle my thoughts about the medium.

When I give my title as ‘I’ve written my talk,’ I don’t mean to suggest that I see blogging as any kind of simple transmission or transcription of speech, or anything unconsidered, casual or immediate. A blog’s characteristic form of address is not directed into the largely impersonal world of the academic book or article, though, so it does ‘speak’ to a rather different understanding of community, one that is shaped actively, even daily, by its readers and their interventions.

After Derrida, it’s hard to think of speaking and writing as mutually exclusive opposites; but in practical terms, we may fruitfully place them at two ends of a spectrum, each borrowing turns of phrase, forms of address and narrative and discursive structures from the other. Blogging ranges across this spectrum, from formal prose, academic discussion and journalism at the writerly end, to conversational chat at the other. The conversations that take place in many comments boxes often resemble instant messaging or texting, and in that way seem more closely related to the immediacy of speaking. Some blogs feature long entries and attract only a few comments; some are primarily visual in orientation; others form constellations and communities of active readers, where the main life of the blog is found in the discussions and conversations amongst the blog’s readers. Others are collective blogs, where the nature of the conversation is different again. My favourite example here is In the Middle (http://jjcohen.blogspot.com), a medieval studies group blog that was started as an individual blog by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen of George Washington University. Several of his readers were making such terrific interventions that he invited them onto the team – around about the time he took up the position of chair of his department.

My own experience of blogging is a relatively restricted one. Humanities Researcher falls squarely into the category of ‘academic blog’; I also tend to read academic blogs, and only occasionally tap into blogs of political and social commentary or more personal blogs. This has
implications not only for the range of topics I blog about, but also the
voice in which I write, and comment on other blogs.

The formal properties of blogging, and the ease with which a
community develops around a blog certainly produce the sense that
blogging is conversational. Because one blogs into a community that
writes back, it’s much easier to imagine that community, in Benedict
Anderson’s sense, than it is in the case of academic writing. The fact
that most of my blog readers who respond use pseudonyms is neither
here nor there. My blog readership exists only and exclusively as a
community through the blog, and so the real names and identities
of participants are largely irrelevant. There are exceptions, of course,
when blog communities meet up at conferences, or more informal
gatherings.

The voice of academic or scholarly prose is a very formal, even
anonymous voice, where personal opinions are expressed only as theo-
ries and arguments. Academic writing, like academic reading, is slow.
It’s expected and assumed that each sentence, each word is carefully
chosen. Only a few blessed souls are able to turn this out quickly.
When it is done well, of course, this is its beauty. And when it is done
poorly, it can be unreadable. But I’m often at my happiest when I’m
crafting sentences of academic prose, moving slowly, re-reading and
re-writing. Many academics I know can be divided into two camps:
those who prefer to read, and put off writing as long as possible; and
those, like myself, who love to write, and get frustrated when they have
to slow down to read other people’s writing.

By contrast, blogging for me is fast writing. It offers the hit and
the rush of putting words together, without the compulsion to go back
and qualify every stage of every argument, or to add another footnote.

More generally, we might distinguish between academic writing
and blogging through their different temporalities, their different uses
and understandings of time. Academic writing is not only slow; it is
also performed over a long period of gestation, perhaps of years on a
book project or a problem.

One of the books I’m working on at the moment, for example,
I began researching in 2001. It’s only now that I feel I’m ready to pull
that project to completion. It will have taken me seven or eight years
to write that book; it will take at least a year after completion for it to be published; and then about a year after that till the reviews come in. By contrast, I can post a blog entry about my work, or my teaching, or anything at all, and be reading responses within the hour.

There is something about a blog entry, too, that occupies a different kind of temporal space from the chapter draft. Theoretically, it is possible to retrieve and archive blog entries, but the medium and the form of the blog do not encourage or facilitate such retrieval, and when you do find an entry on the topic you’re searching for in an unfamiliar blog, and it’s several months old or older, it’s often frustratingly difficult to find your way up to the most recent entry. And that’s where you want to be, because you want to know if the blogger is still blogging, and what they are blogging about today. By contrast, chapter drafts can be called up again and again, re-written, re-ordered and re-numbered until they reach their final form. A blog entry scrolls further and further down the screen, becoming harder and harder to retrieve. And because it’s already been ‘published’ (the blogsport interface actually uses this term), it seems like an act of bad faith to recall and edit. If I’m struggling a bit with tense and temporality as I write up this talk, the problems of converting a blog to a book would be much worse. This is one of the reasons why a blog can’t easily make the transition to a book, though it is often suggested that a good blog should be aspiring to print. On the contrary, there might even be an argument for saying that if a blog reads like a book, then perhaps it isn’t a very good blog.

However, I’m going to make an emphatic distinction. Blogging is a more immediate medium than academic writing; but it is no less mediated, for that.

For me, at least, even though my blogging style is more colloquial and more chatty, and I’m more opinionated, and say more personal things when I’m blogging, blogging is still irreducibly about writing, rather than speaking. It offers all the pleasures of writing, not least of which is a writerly persona I’m pretty careful about. That persona draws heavily, even so, on my teaching persona, so I would never argue that my blogging voice is substantially freer than the voice in which I write my scholarly texts. It is just as constrained, just as
conditioned by generic restrictions and conventions as any other, even though those generic conventions may code such a voice as more free, and even though in comparison with my academic writing voice my blog will appear more chatty and conversational. When I began my blog, its voice began as the voice developed over twenty years of full-time teaching and a carefully cultivated public persona, from talking in the classroom, with all the liberties and constraints that involves.

In general, the relation between the personal and the academic in my blog is a relationship that has been made possible by two factors. First, the feminist emphasis on the authenticity of embodied and gendered experience means that writing about the body, or the self, in an academic context is no longer the radical act it was twenty years ago. Second, recent developments in academic writing have sought to open up other ways of writing, to loosen the straitjacket of bloodless impersonality and jargon-ridden impenetrability. When I started my blog, I was involved on the edge of several projects about humanities research in Australia, and the way scholars could become better at communicating their research to a broader public, and I planned to use the blog to think about this topic too.

Even so, my blog is positioned right at the most conservative end of the writerly spectrum of blogging. I began writing under my own name, for example, from a position right in the middle of the academy, writing for early career researchers and post-doctoral grant applicants. My blog began as a way, as I thought, of saving time, of saying in public things I found I was saying in private, again and again. This was when I was a ‘grant shepherd’ in my department, and trying to coach first-timers through the Australian Research Council’s grant application process. I began by tracking the progress of a research application I was putting together, and by posting successive drafts on the web. Thus from the beginning I never took up blogging’s capacity for play, for pseudonyms, for anonymity. The blog was designed in part to make it easier for others to get used to having people reading their work, to lead by example, as it were.

I began in July 2006, having not read more than two or three blogs. One of these was Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog (http://houseoffame.blogspot.com), an extraordinary tour de force of parody and
imitation, written in Middle English. In April 2007, the Chaucer blogger ‘outed’ himself on In the Middle, by writing about the process of writing the Chaucer blog, but in the voice of Holden Caulfield (http://jjcohen.blogspot.com/2007/04/chaucer-speaks.html). The other blog I read was Kerryn Goldsworthy’s Pavlov’s Cat.

My blog began as a means of communication, a form of teaching, even. But it rapidly became more personal, as several months after starting my blog I was diagnosed with early stage breast cancer.

At this point, it would have been easy to stop blogging. I stopped teaching; spent a week disentangling myself from committees and other projects; stopped writing my book, and between October last year and January this year spent a good part of most days in hospital or with doctors, or recovering from surgery, or undergoing daily radiotherapy over seven weeks. But I never considered stopping the blog.

I didn’t mind stopping working on my book: cancer has a way of helping you re-shape your priorities. My surgeon told me that cancer changes your life, and I found myself embracing those changes willingly. In fact I was keen, if not even desperate, to learn my cancer lesson. But I did experience an overwhelming urge to keep communicating about being ill. It’s not that unusual: there are many precedents for the generative narrative force of illness. Two recent local examples: Inga Clendinnen, Tiger’s Eye: A Memoir (Text Publishing, 2000) and Pamela Bone, Bad Hair Days (MUP, 2007). When I was sick, I also finally got around to reading Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor (1978) which I found hopelessly outdated in its attitude to cancer; and also Norman Cousins, Anatomy of an Illness, As Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration (1979). So prevalent is the expectation that people who get sick turn into writers that the sub-editor who wrote the by-line for an essay I wrote for the Age simply assumed that writing began with illness: ‘When academic Stephanie Trigg discovered she had breast cancer, she started a blog that became a meditative lifeline between her personal and professional lives.’ (‘Life Lessons’, Sunday Age, 10 June 2007). It’s like childbirth in that regard: all our stories are unique, but grounded in the most fundamental aspects of our mortality. I also felt unable, in the end, to disentangle what was happening to my body from what was happening to me in my academic life, as for
the first time I became someone who felt disengaged from the university. Maintaining the blog was a way of charting that process, while I began to forge a different kind of relationship with the academy.

I didn’t blog about it much, but my University and my Faculty were both undergoing a massive re-structure and major curriculum reform. I was heavily involved in those processes when I was diagnosed (I remember sitting through a ghastly presentation of on-line learning software in the days between ultrasound and biopsy, and feeling decidedly disconnected), and found that undertaking those kinds of reforms was already forcing me to look again at my teaching and my relationship to the university from a greater distance. This is one aspect of ‘change fatigue’ in a stable workforce: it can rupture the strong ties of loyal institutional subjects like myself, even though the compulsion to go on ‘teaching’, through the blog, was irresistible.

In any case, I was soon spending more time with the medical profession than the academic one, and I found it endlessly intriguing to think about the ways the doctors and nurses engaged with their patients, to speculate about hospitals and clinics as institutions, and to compare their practices with the ways my colleagues and I engaged with our students.

I don’t think it was a case of just keeping on blogging, keeping on writing about whatever was happening to me: be it a grant application, a difficult class or breast surgery. I think the relationship between my blog and my cancer experience is a little more complex than that, though I’m not sure I’ve fully plumbed all its dimensions. The blogging voice I had developed, even in the few months between July and September, and the responses to that voice in my comments box, already showed me that there was some kind of interesting channel between the academy and the broader community that I could open up; a space in which I could reflect on my life in the university with a little critical distance on it. Or perhaps it was just the bridge between an established academic and the more junior scholars and graduates who were reading the blog. I can remember from my own experience as a student what a huge gulf there seemed to be between me and my professors.

It was Kerryn Goldsworthy who helped me see more clearly
what I was doing. Very soon after I had announced my diagnosis, I had written about some of the new words I was learning in the weeks before surgery; and she wrote in my comments box.

Stephanie, my dear, this is a heroic bit of writing. For you to respond to this development with such well-directed curiosity and interest and analytical thoughtfulness is a triumph of the intellect in a time and place where we see, daily, the intellect being deliberately and perversely devalued and unused. Of course there’s also a place for emotional and instinctual responses to such things, but it’s amazing, and more heartening for your friends than I can say, to see you bringing all your knowledge and training into play like this, and gaining strength and clarity from that as you so obviously are. I salute you and send my love.

It’s vainglorious boasting to quote these lovely words; and I apologise for that. This was perhaps the single most important thing anyone has ever said (or written) to me about the blog. I took such pride in the possibility that my academic training might be put to use that Kerryn’s comments were deeply enabling for me. I loved the idea that my friends and family might be heartened by my writing. But most of all, I loved the idea that my blog might be useful in some way.

I know that many women are terrified of breast cancer, but I never really felt afraid, and so I felt a strong compulsion to say to them: ‘don’t be afraid’. My medical prognosis was never dreadful; and after successful surgery, was really very good indeed, so I’ve been pretty confident, all along, that the story wouldn’t end in too many tears. But I was the first person in my family or immediate circle of friends to go through this, and I found it relatively easy to use the blog to teach my way through the experience.

When I wrote about my blog and the experience of cancer for the essay in *The Sunday Age*, I received some wonderful feedback, but one man wrote a letter the next week saying that he had a much worse medical history, and we didn’t see him complaining. I thought my blog could be helpful, but it wasn’t, and I was deluding myself. I mention this because although it was clear that this man wanted to list his own complaints, it did give me pause: perhaps I was being patronising?
I knew very well that my own experience of cancer was right down at the ‘good’ end of the spectrum (borderline stage I/IIA, for the initiates). In contrast to many other patients, my cancer story has been relatively simple, and my health prospects are excellent. I’ve been conscious of this all along.

Even so, it’s been a difficult year; and the blog covered only part of the experience. And perhaps if illness or treatment had been tougher, I wouldn’t have been able to blog at all. It’s far from full disclosure, too. I didn’t write when I felt exhausted, or down, or not very often, anyway. I wrote about abjection, but only after the fact. There was one moment, for example, about two weeks after surgery, when I looked at myself in the mirror and saw only my two long black scars – along the breast and under my arm – and the concave shape in the side of my breast…and I started to black out. All I could see before me were medieval images of the Crucifixion, and the wounded, opened body of Christ; and I had to hold on to the bathroom bench to stop fainting. It took a few more weeks before I was able to blog about the moment.

Another time I was describing the effects of radiotherapy on the wounded breast, and started making comparisons with the healthy one, and stopped. It wasn’t a medical breast, and so it didn’t belong in the blog.

Nor have I written very much about the instant menopause that’s been induced by the hormone therapy; I’m not yet in the right mental space to do that. Even that reluctance has told me something about illness and ageing, neither of which I’d really had to contemplate before.

I hardly write about my partner and child. I never put up photos of my family, out of respect for their privacy (and concern for the less benign uses of the web). I think it’s not unusual that my partner doesn’t read the blog, though he sometimes makes suggestions about what I could include. My son reads it occasionally. I sometimes mention my friends by name; mostly I try and respect their privacy, too. Like many bloggers, I’ll often think, ‘that would make a great entry’, but I regularly end up withholding, or drafting an entry and then deciding not to post.

There are high points and low points, of course, in the blog.
There are lots of dull patches. But one of the high points, I think, was the last entry before I went into hospital last year when I wrote about my mother sewing a handkerchief for me which I took into surgery. I wrote about this little hand-made object, and the way I thought of my mother stitching in the prayers and good wishes of all my friends and family. It was both sentimental and heartfelt, sentimental in a good way, perhaps. And as someone pointed out to me, it was the opposition between this traditional and intimate piece of women’s work and the global technology of blogging on the web that might have made this moment so powerful; and certainly a lot of people have talked about it with me.

Thus it gives a false impression to talk about a blog only as a form of writing; it is a blog’s interactions with community, and the immediacy of those interactions that make it such a distinctive form.

I like thinking of my blog as a form of communication from the academy outwards. And I am pleased, too, that such interactions are increasingly recognised by the university. At Melbourne, we talk about ‘knowledge transfer’. This is an awkward phrase, but to the extent that it seeks to foreground closer engagements between the university and the community, it is a good initiative. This form of engagement is now recognised as part of our workload and performance indicators. I’m still sufficiently identified with the university to be pleased that it wants me to be blogging (though no, blogging isn’t taken into account when our workloads are calculated).

I have between 60 and 70 visitors a day, on average. That’s not that many, compared to some of the really popular blogs like Pavlov’s Cat or In the Middle. I don’t know who my visitors are, mostly. I use a sitemeter to keep a rough track, and I would say perhaps half my visitors are from Melbourne, and many of these are using the edu.au network. Oddly, though, very few of my colleagues seem to read, or admit they read it, and none of them has posted a single comment. Several have spoken to me about the blog; and when I wrote on the blog for The Sunday Age, I received lots of emails, even one from my vice-chancellor. My graduate students tell me many others are readers of the blog, but there is still something about the academic life that inhibits most of them from commenting on it. More recently, though,
students are starting to tell me in person they are readers and of course, I’m thrilled: an audience of graduate students and early career researchers was what I had originally envisaged.

Other friends, too, read it, and then email me about it; or refer to it. My parents and sisters read it. And curiously, I have one or two very close friends who have hinted at a slight resentment that they hear more about what’s going on in my life from the blog than from me personally. For them, it’s both too personal and too communal. Some have responded in the form of long and chatty emails, replying, if not exactly in kind, at least to the spirit of the blog.

A number of people commented, during the most intense cancer months, that my blog was brave. It took me a while to see this. I guess they meant bravery in the sense of making the personal public. But I was simply fulfilling my overriding desire to communicate, to make sense of what was happening. And again, they were reckoning without the strength that cancer gave me. Like a muscle that gets stronger with use, I have without doubt become more resilient through being ill. The experience has given me a much more secure sense of my place in the world, of what I might have to lose, and what I might have to give. So I never felt particularly brave; I just felt this extraordinary compulsion to communicate. I also became less anxious about preserving a polished, professional identity. I simply care a whole lot less about that than I used to.

And I’ve been rewarded, too. The day before I flew to Sydney for the seminar on blogging, I blogged, around midday, that I had just sailed through the twelve-month mammogram, ultrasound and physical examination with my surgeon. I am, for the moment at least, cancer-free. Almost immediately I started to receive congratulatory phone messages and emails; and people in my department (some of whom clearly were reading) coming up to congratulate me. The immediacy of this joy was wonderful.

My collaborator on another book project once expressed concern that blogging would take too much time away from our work. It’s a common enough remark, actually. Academics typically say, ‘I don’t know how you find the time to blog,’ giving the impression that they themselves are spending at least ten hours a day at their research. But
really, it’s a bit of a furphy, the question of time. How much time does it take to watch TV, to go for a walk, to write a conference paper, to read a book? Time and work are infinitely elastic. And in any case, if, as I suspect, writing the blog is going to make it easier for me to finish my book, it’s time well spent. It’s time spent practising with sentences; it’s time spent making sense of the world; it’s time spent communicating with some of those who will be readers of my book. Above all, it’s pleasurable. It’s pleasurable to be pushing away at some of the boundaries of the academic life in a medium and a voice I feel I can control. It’s pleasurable to try to make sense of mortality, and the relationship between our scholarly labours and our lives. It’s also needful work for me: calming, and challenging at the same time.

How long will I keep the blog going? I honestly don’t know. I find I plan, at most, one entry at a time. I find I’m curious to know how this blogging voice might affect my academic prose, when I take up my scholarly writing again. My hunch is that I will find it easier to write in an open, more confident, less formal style. But I’ll never be sure if that’s because being sick has made me less fearful, or whether the blog has given me a new voice.

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