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## Reading Blogs to Learn: Seeking Knowledge From a Community of Strangers

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*This week's guest post comes from **Margy MacMillan** is a (recently retired) professor, librarian, and I-SOTL Outreach Associate at Mount Royal University in Calgary. She is an advisor to Project Information Literacy, which recently released a report about blog readership among college students.*

Blogs aren't dead. You know that since you're reading one right now. A recent study from Project Information Literacy (PIL) suggests that reading blogs to learn is more widespread than accounts of their demise might suggest. Published in the October issue of [First Monday](#), the study by Alison J. Head, Michele Van Hoeck, and Kirsten Hostetler claims that recent college graduates are not only reading blogs, they're reading with a very specific purpose in mind: to learn about something they need to know.

The study, as part of a larger PIL federally funded [investigation](#) of how people keep learning after graduation, surveyed more than 1500 graduates and conducted in-depth interviews with 63 to uncover patterns in their blog reading and motivations. It turns out almost two-thirds of the group used blogs, mostly to find information, tips, and step-by-step instructions to accomplish tasks in daily life and at work, and specifically, hobbies, DIY projects, and finances. The motivations closely matched patterns in [Staying Smart](#). PIL's larger study of information seeking published in 2016. PIL's earlier study sparked the following questions: what makes blogs attractive sources for this kind of learning, and how could readers' reasons inform the use of blogs in education?

In the *First Monday* piece, the authors provide useful theoretical frameworks for understanding blogs as sites for communities of practice. They claim that blogs have become a hybrid of oral and textual communication, serving as a medium with cognitive authority - both through the author as expert, but also as vetted by the community and against other sources. Still, to some extent, these features can be seen in other forms of social media; people on Twitter follow

authoritative tweeters. Others (and some of the same Twitter users) may reinforce face-to-face communities or generate new ones in Facebook.

So what is it about *blogs*?

One data point stands out: the researchers found no relation between blog use and consulting friends and family. How do you make sense of that? Perhaps blogs offer the right combination of authority and anonymity for answers to those life questions recent graduates may not be comfortable asking people they know. It could be that friends and family members are not the most credible sources of advice. But one thing is certain. While readers of a particular blog may feel as though they are members of a community, they need not be visible - indeed many writers and commenters may be anonymous. Very few participants in this study reported posting comments, preferring to lurk and soak up what they might learn. The findings suggest that blog readers are seeking expert, communally validated knowledge through a forum where they can read and ask questions without revealing themselves, or at least while controlling how much they reveal.

Another explanation for the results may be found in Mark Granovetter's seminal [work](#) on weak ties as productive sources of information. People with whom you have strong ties, characterized by frequent communication and deep sharing, tend to be like you, and have similar experiences and knowledge bases. People with whom you have weak ties are likelier to have knowledge and experience that you don't already possess. While it's unlikely that blog users are deliberately seeking out weak ties as better sources of new information, the blog author or an active blog community may provide a weak tie-like benefit. The more often a blog answers a particular question well, the more likely it is that a blog reader will return with new questions. Future research studies building on this piece could probe whether it is only the blog author, or a larger subset of a blog community that serve as weak ties for the reader.

What's particularly interesting here is that blogs may have a unique role in the general information ecosystem, but higher education classrooms are different. In the classroom, blogs are most often used to prompt writing as reflection. In fact, recent SoTL studies have looked at their effectiveness (e.g., [Sturgill & Motley](#)). Often, these blogs are private and read only by the instructors and students. They mimic the classroom community where there is little anonymity, even in large classes. Blogs are a safe space where students can write for each other, or at least for someone other than the instructor, and ideally develop confidence, an awareness of audience, and their own authoritative voice. In these cases, however, students may not necessarily cast each other as community-validated experts, and their peers may be closer to strong ties than weak ones. Students may miss the "weak tie" benefit, instead viewing blogs as exchanges between people with the same level of knowledge. This could devalue blogs as useful sources, a perception that would affect later use. Further, this practice is compounded by proscriptions against using blogs as scholarly sources in academic work, which further negates their role as useful sources of expertise.

Although most of this study's survey respondents used blogs, over a third did not. What are these people missing, and does it place them at a disadvantage? If readers find blogs useful places to learn, as the study concludes, we should think about how to instill a blog habit in students that will serve them after they graduate. Perhaps closed blogging (the kind used in classrooms) should be opened up as students progress through higher education. Students could also identify and review blogs to practice critical thinking and to develop evaluative skills for rigorously determining the authority of a blog. There could be larger critical questions about how authority in blogs is constructed, whose blogs are followed or otherwise publicized, how conversations differ from blog to blog, and how these differences reflect the communities involved. This way students could study blogs to better understand their own role as legitimate peripheral participants, and to more actively engage in and understand their own learning processes.

*Studies cited: Head, A. J., Van Hoeck, M., & Hostetler, K. (2017). Why blogs endure: A study of recent college graduates and motivations for blog readership. First Monday, 22 (10).*

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