Telling Your DukeEngage Story:
Blogging, Photography and Reflection

Cover Photo: April Edwards ’08, Muhuru Bay, Kenya, “Hands”
As you course through your DukeEngage experience—one that will likely prove eye-opening, challenging, and transformative—sharing visual or written stories about what you’re learning about your project, your location or yourself can be a meaningful opportunity for those who wish to blog, do photography or journal.

Students, for example, in the DukeEngage pilot project blogged regularly about their experiences, reporting happenings from New Orleans and Kenya to Yemen and Durham. These blogs proved to be great “connectors” for friends and parents back home as well as the general public interested in students’ insights about their experiences.

Likewise, a good number of photographs taken by DukeEngage students in the pilot group also appeared in printed and online materials, in DukeEngage presentations across campus and across the country, and in media stories about the program.

We know that some students also kept journals filled with memories and observations about their experiences, which tie nicely to the vital personal reflection component of the DukeEngage program.

In the following pages, you’ll read about tips for approaching these activities as well as instructions about how to utilize the DukeEngage blog interface. Whichever you try, whether one or all, you’ll be among those contributing to a wonderful historical record about DukeEngage and to overarching conversations about civic engagement at Duke and beyond. We hope you enjoy telling your story!
Personal Reflection

DukeEngage projects will likely encompass transformative moments. Yet, how exactly does a moment become transformative? We believe that the meaning you make of the moment, the questions you raise, and the conclusions you come to are crucial factors in how an interesting moment becomes a life impacting lesson. A practice of private reflection, such as journaling, supports meaning-making, deep questioning, and authentic learning. In short, private reflection is essential to transformation.

Be uncensored, raw, and honest—this is the only true guideline for private or personal written reflection. Unlike blogging, which is public and may be intended to share information among others, the primary purpose of private reflection is to increase the quality of the conversation that you have with yourself.

The process of writing in a messy, raw manner creates a window into your consciousness that you may not normally access in your day to day mode of interacting. Because you are being honest and uncensored, you will likely discover new questions, emotions, and ideas. These insights can form the basis of a solution, a friendship, or graduate school application.

Previous DukeEngage students recommend that you keep a journal during your civic engagement experience. Those who didn’t write in one regretted not carving out space to process and contemplate their experiences. They wished that they had a record of the growth and change that they underwent. And, as they wrote job cover letters or continued next page
graduate school applications based on their DukeEngage projects, they were kicking themselves for not documenting their service experience as they went along. Don’t let this happen to you! Read on for some easy journaling tips:

- Stream of Consciousness—keep your pen moving for five minutes without stopping to think or censor yourself. If you can’t think of anything to write, simply keep writing “I can’t think of anything to write” until a new thought comes up.
- Forget About Grammar—and spelling, and complete sentences, and paragraphs. Make flow charts, draw diagrams, make lists of words that keep popping into your mind.
- Be An Imperfectionist and A Hypocrite—contradict yourself. Change your mind.
- Record “Funny” Feelings—are you feeling a bit off? Are there one or two thoughts or images that seem to keep popping into your head? Start with these broad, perhaps unspecific feelings, and let the writing take you somewhere new.
- Write Down “Burning Questions”—these may be questions that do not have readily apparent answers. What are you wondering about? Where is your mind wandering?
- “Objectively” Describe An Event—write down just the facts, just what someone on the outside would have observed. Then, write down all the possible interpretations of the event or interaction from the perspectives of the different people involved. Lastly, evaluate- what do you think is the most likely explanation? What would you now do differently? What learning did you take away?
Photojournaling

Throughout the summer, you will have the opportunity to capture images that offer a lasting and meaningful interpretation of your civic engagement experience. These images can serve as a personal, historical record of your program or might be suitable for use in a more public forum—whether a supporting photograph to incorporate in a blog post or an image for featuring on the DukeEngage web site or in one of the program’s myriad publications.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you document your DukeEngage experience through photography:

• Pictures of people—of you, your student peers and of community members—offer the most compelling insights into a student’s DukeEngage experience.
• Take as many photos as possible. That one magic image can often be found in a series of photographs of the same subject or event. Keep clicking.
• Do your best to ask before taking an individual’s or a group’s photo. While this may be difficult due to language barriers or proximity, it’s common practice to obtain permission when photographing people.
• Along those lines, DukeEngage will not use any photo that depicts suffering due to disease or any other distress. Such photography can be intrusive, so in these cases it’s best to put the camera away.

For more info on photography tips with a cultural emphasis, visit: http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photo-tips/portrait-quick-tips.html

About Photo Resolution

As you take photos, consider the ways they might be used. For any web-based applications, such as blogging or adding to Facebook or a photo sharing site, a low-resolution (72 dots per inch or DPI) photo is sufficient. If you’d like to submit photos to be used in future DukeEngage publications, a high-resolution (300 DPI) photo would be required to meet print quality standards. It’s often best to take photos at the highest resolution and then scale down using photo editing software.
Blogging

One of the easiest and most far-reaching ways of telling your story is through blogging. While some individuals and groups in the DukeEngage program have already set up site-specific or personal blogs, the DukeEngage web site also will benefit from active blogging by students, site coordinators and faculty to offer others insights into the uniquely nuanced experiences you’re likely having wherever you may be.

If you’re considering blogging about your DukeEngage experience, you’ll find blogging tips and specific instructions about how to blog on the DukeEngage site below and in the following pages.

10 Quick Blogging Tips

1. Make your headlines catchy
2. Share your thoughts, ideas and observations
3. Write conversationally, but not too informally
4. 250 words is enough
5. Be revealing, but not too revealing
6. Link where possible
7. Include bullet point lists where it makes sense
8. Make your posts easy to scan
9. Drop in keywords
10. Edit your post
Blogging Tips – an elaboration

1. Make your headlines catchy.
Your headline should provide insight into the content of your blog. Check out national newspapers/magazines to see how they do it.

2. Share your thoughts, ideas and observations.
People like blogs because they are written by real people who are sharing ideas and observations, often with passion and conviction. While “reporting” blogs are interesting, introducing questions and stating opinions can help a blog be even more compelling.

3. Write conversationally—but not too informally.
A conversational tone will make your blog relatable. But don’t be too informal (i.e. slang that some won’t understand, curse words, etc.). Some find it helpful to imagine their blog as a conversation they might be having with a close mentor or good friend.

4. 250 words is enough.
A long post is easier to forget and harder to get into. A short post is the opposite. If you have much to blog about, consider breaking them up into different blogs with different headlines, etc.

5. Be revealing—but not too revealing.
Since blogs are public in nature—and searchable online—be mindful that anyone (a parent, a future employer, etc.) could eventually read what you write. While the most intriguing blogs are personal in nature, save the most personal information for your journal or private conversations with those closest to you.
Blogging Tips – an elaboration

6. Link where possible.
Support your post with links to other web pages that are contextual to your post.

7. Include bullet point lists where it makes sense.
We all love lists—they structure information in an easily digestible format by breaking up the black or gray space you get when writing in paragraph form.

8. Make your posts easy to scan.
Every few paragraphs insert a sub-heading. Make sentences and headlines short and to the point.

Think about what keywords people would use to search for your post and include them in the body text and headers. Make sure the keyword placement is natural and does not seem out of place.

10. Edit your post.
Good writing is in the editing. Before you hit the submit button, re-read your post and eliminate redundant or wordy info that you don’t need. While personal writing is just for you, you’re blogging for an audience that will read your blog with a critical eye.
Blogging on the DukeEngage site: Getting started

Any DukeEngage student who signed up online for workshops is already registered on the DukeEngage site and can begin blogging at any time! For anyone who has not yet registered, My DukeEngage, the DukeEngage “intranet,” requires Duke NetID authentication. To register, go to https://dukeengage.duke.edu/register (NOTE: Make sure you type the “s” after the http).

Once registered and/or signed in, choose My DukeEngage, then select “Blogs.” Once there, you can set up your profile page, choose the site that you may be associated with if you’re in a group project, add a new blog post, and even drop in a photo of yourself to associate with your blog.

You can also monitor comments associated with your blog. Aside from seeing how others might be responding to what you’ve written, you can also be on the look-out for spammers.

Blogs will be incorporated and searchable in various ways on the DukeEngage site. Each week, a new “featured” blog will appear on our main page. At the blog site, entries are searchable by site, by person or by tag line (so please add tags accordingly).

It’s that easy....so feel free to start blogging about your DukeEngage experience!
Managing Your Blog

Once signed in, it's easy to manage your blog. You can create a new blog post (see button at left) or edit a blog you have previously published. You can also monitor blog comments or create your blog profile, including dropping in a photo of yourself.

Using Photos With Your Blog

Blogs are even more compelling if you have great images to associate with them. One common problem, however, is that images inserted into blogs have too high a resolution—more appropriate for a print publication—and this can affect download time. Try scaling down your blog images to about 400 pixels wide to ensure ease in downloading when people visit your blog. If you don’t have any photo editing software on your computer, feel free to visit picnik.com, a free online photo editing web site where you can resize, etc.
Comments & Spam

Comments that are not considered spam go live automatically. You can still unpublish or delete those comments later. While spam is filtered out automatically, please check your post as often as you’re able and delete any spam that manages to squeeze through the filter. Any potential spam message will be “unpublished” and so should not compromise the integrity of your blog post.

“Mapping” Your Program

If you are in a group project, you are able to associate each blog post with your site. At the bottom of each post you’ll find a “Map It!” section. It preloads with the last site you selected. Choosing this will enable a map showing your site to appear next to your post.

If you’re an individual projecter, merely select “Individual Project” from the list. A map won’t appear next to your site, but blogs written by individual projecters will be searchable under that category.