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This article reports on the experimental use of blogs as a teaching tool in a course on negotiation and mediation. The blogs were of two kinds: individual "journal" blogs accessible only by the student author and the course instructor, and a class or collective blog, accessible by all members of the course. The use of blogs builds on the familiar use of journals as a tool for reflection and personal review and adopts the technology of online communication with which the student body is increasingly familiar and comfortable. The article reports on the student response to this development and the perceived impact on extended peer-to-peer communication, cooperation, and skills development. This note also briefly places this experiment in the wider context of the widespread use of blogging, online social networking, and — more ambitiously — the promotion of critical and deliberative skills through the use of information communications technology.

Key words: negotiation, teaching, blogging, social networking, deliberative skills.

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Introduction: Why Blog?

In this article, I will describe the experimental use of two forms of blogs as part of the teaching process in the course I taught on negotiation and mediation at my former university's law school. Because of the enthusiastic reception my students have given to this innovation and the benefits it offers in terms of ongoing communication and support between class members, I plan to use this teaching tool again in this and other courses.

Blogs and bloggers have received "mixed press."[1] Blogging has clearly captured the imagination and enthusiasm of the online world as a medium for connection, self-expression, self-indulgence, and — fortunately — rich and critical distribution of information. As legal scholar Cass Sunstein has suggested, one positive view of blogging is that the "blogosphere serves as a huge market" (Sunstein 2007: 139), and alongside the well-established online market for products and services, the blogosphere can, at its best, operate as a marketplace for ideas. This is consistent with earlier aspirations of Internet pioneers who hoped the Internet would enlarge political and democratic participation and function as an "electronic town hall" (Becker and Slaton 2000). Proponents of blogs argue that they foster wider citizen participation and, even if in a fragmented way, contribute to deliberative democracy. Legal scholar Jack Balkin (2004: 2) wrote that "the digital revolution makes possible widespread cultural participation and interaction that previously could not have existed on the same scale."

In this respect, blogs form part of what we might regard as the "third phase" in the development of online communication and, consequently, online negotiation and dispute resolution. In the first wave of development, Internet users developed internal protocols for responding to the inevitable "flaming" (insults and hostility) and miscommunication that occurred in the burgeoning "virtual community" (Perritt 1993; Macduff 1994). Such controls included the development of online etiquette ("netiquette") rules and requirements that individuals must register and agree to follow a set of rules in order to participate in online discussions.[2]

The second wave of development has revolved around the burgeoning world of online commerce. This phase has seen the development of protocols and structures for the management — and in some cases mandatory arbitration — of commercial and consumer disputes that arise in the Internet world.[3] The disputes that arise here can be of varying complexity because cross-border online transactions raise issues of jurisdiction and law that are more complex than online commercial transactions within a single jurisdiction.

This phase of development has also fostered the emergence of the "fourth party" in online communications.[4] While the familiar third party in interpersonal conflicts is the mediator or facilitator, the suggestion is that the Internet itself serves as a fourth party, as a repository of information, as a neutral place to "meet," or even as a merely technical conduit and algorithm for determining outcomes between "best offers."

This phase involves both the ongoing development of rules and practices to govern and protect online commerce (consumers in particular) as well as the development of rules to govern the Internet itself. In both cases, the policy and jurisprudential challenge is to find that equilibrium between the avowed open texture — even the anarchy — of the Internet on the one hand and the clear need for regulation and protection on the other. It will be obvious that the Internet repeats, in virtual spaces and communities, the same questions that have shaped the jurisprudence of political communities.[5]

In the same way that the ancient Greek market or *agora* was the place to meet and the forum for public discourse, the modern electronic agora serves a parallel purpose, but the electronic agora is susceptible to control, misuse, and trivialization. Unlike the ancient agora, the modern counterpart allows citizens to use technology not only to enhance their connections with distant others but also to retreat from participation and face-to-face contact through selective newsgathering, highly selective engagement with typically like-minded others, and an ironic *dis*-connection from the world through the use of the technology of connection. As Merlyna Lim (2005: 44) has written, "The Internet appeals to isolated individuals by helping them to connect with people worldwide with whom they share some commonality. It also leads these individuals to spend more time with this de-territorialized community at the expense of interaction with their immediate physical environments. In cyberspace, communities are no longer tied to nations."

In the absence of the conventional shape and presence of physical communities, and in the face of Internet users' capacity to forge closer virtual links with those outside their real communities, I believe it is necessary to imagine ways in which those same technologies that foster dispersed affiliations can be used to reinvent "cyber citizens." How can Internet communication facilitate new forms of social, civic, and political engagement? Will the Internet fulfill the expectation of Frances Cairncross (Cairncross 1997: xvi) that it will "increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote worldwide peace"?

The optimistic version of these developments in online and remote communication center on the facilitation of contact and the dissemination of information, especially in settings in which more conventional forms of media are constrained, such as in Burma. The pessimistic view is that the very same technologies permit a retreat from connection and from participation in what Sunstein has suggested is the ideal of the republic of ideas. One concern is the potential for bloggers and denizens of "social networking" services such as MySpace and Facebook to retreat from face-to-face contact and substitute this with enhanced connectivity to a world of online "friends" and like-minded people (Sunstein 2007). Another issue is the proliferation of voices out there in the electronic marketplace. "Blogging has become such a mania that a new blog is created every second of every minute of every hour of every day," wrote Andrew Keen (2007: 3). "At the time of writing there are fifty-three million blogs on the Internet, and this number is doubling every six months. In the time it took you to read this paragraph, ten new blogs were created."

Blogging, then, holds a dual promise: one, the potential for almost instantaneous access to informed comment, new resources, like-minded colleagues, and hitherto unimagined connectivity; the other, the potential for a noise-to-signal ratio that outstrips the utility of the medium and renders the alleged marketplace of ideas suspect in its flooding of the airspace with more "information" than is useful to the creative and political life of the community. Ironically, this proliferation of voices and opinions — the blogosphere in which everyone's opinion is nominally equally accessible and equally worthwhile — is achieved through a medium that fosters a *retreat* from the direct encounters of the marketplace.

So, why blog? And, more particularly for the purposes of this article, why use blogging as a teaching and learning tool? The simpler answers are that blogging has become a familiar tool for the generation of students now coming through the university, and the Internet and the related tools of mobile phones, blogs, podcasts, and websites provide an increasingly familiar space for accessing information and engaging in dialogue. For those happily referred to as "digital natives" (Van Slyke 2003), the online world is a place in which they feel "at home" and choose to access music, videos, and information. And, while the written journal was already an established part of participation and assessment for this negotiation course, its electronic version turns out to provide all of the same advantages, as well as some unique features, including immediacy of comment and communication to the instructor and direct communication between members of the class. The wider and perhaps unintended consequence is that the use of this medium, shaped by certain expectations of civility and participation, has fostered a degree of collaboration and peer-facilitated learning that exemplifies the potential of blogging as an educational tool.

My grander aspiration — although I did not explicitly state this as part of the classes' teaching and learning goals — was to foster the spirit, tools, and experience of this kind of participation, ideally as a proxy for the world of online participation that is likely to become even more common in the near future. Specifically, I sought to foster both the practice and experience of collaboration and participation (the outward perspective) and, second, to foster the kind of self-reflection and awareness that journal keeping promotes. Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman (2001: 4–5) have argued that the Internet possesses "a vulnerable potential" for this larger civic and democratizing role, that is, of civic engagement and deliberation, and that the creation of "civic commons in cyberspace . . . could become part of the democratic furniture: an integral component of the representative system (the commons) and an open space for the represented to gather and talk (the civic commons)."

The central importance of negotiation and dialogue and — through the Internet and other forms of electronic communication — the creation of *spaces* for dialogue have been key components of this experiment. The technology of the Internet has provided the virtual and physical space; the ongoing educational task has been to build students' capacities to engage in those dialogues and negotiations, avoiding the temptations, which the Internet offers, of retreating into one's familiar and unthreatening "enclave" and of characterizing "the other" as not worthy of dignified engagement.[6]

The Class Experiment and Experience

Since its inception some eighteen years ago, this course in negotiation and mediation has used student journals as a core part of the learning process. Most negotiation teachers will be well aware of this practice, which has become a widespread practice in negotiation courses around the world.

The concept of the journal is introduced to class members in this way, in the course outline.

> The journal is possibly the most unfamiliar and unusual requirement, yet it may turn out to be the most useful in terms of noting the development of your skills and understanding. . . . The object of the journal in this course is to provide a place where you can maintain an ongoing commentary on your progress, the course, your reading, your preparation for negotiation sessions, and on parallel experiences in everyday life that may or may not reinforce the things we do in class.

The standard format for the journal has been hard copy, either handwritten or typed, and submitted to the instructor twice during the course of the semester. Over the years, class members have consistently observed that they found the journal to be surprisingly useful, that it enabled them to explore their more personal responses to the experience of negotiation and mediation, and that it gave them a place to "think aloud" about everyday negotiations and those going on in public life. There have always been, as might be expected, variations in the degree to which students felt at ease with this kind of exercise: some had never kept any kind of personal journal and expressed doubts as to whether the instructor *really* wanted their opinions, while others found this to be a perfectly familiar and fluent form of expression, resulting in a regular stream of consciousness, even if not always directly on point. I found it necessary to make clear that, notwithstanding the similarities in reflection and subjective commentary, these journals were more than mere "Dear Diary" exercises, that this was a critical and analytical activity that required integrating insights from personal experience and academic reading with what we might broadly see as a civic interest in conflict, transactions, and negotiations.

One further advantage of the hard copy mode of journal keeping is that those students so inclined were able to add newspaper clippings and other items to create what was, at the time of reading, and is likely to remain for the students, an intriguing collage of negotiation-related events and information. This exercise drew students' attention to the daily occurrence of dispute resolution processes at local, national, and international levels and provided opportunities to apply the tools being learned in classes to those events.

But the written format had disadvantages. One was loss of immediacy: because they were submitted just twice in the course of the semester, there was an inevitable delay between the creation of their journal entries and between the execution of the class exercises that the entries discussed and my comments on them.

Another disadvantage was that the written journals remained a wholly private enterprise. Because I offered the students an assurance that their journals were confidential, when student entries revealed interesting insights, accolades for fellow students, or information about new resources (i.e., relevant web links), it was necessary for me to invite the student author to then share that comment or resource so that it could become part of the entire class's resource base.

Here the blogging tool seemed to provide an answer. While retaining the objectives of observation, reflection, confidentiality (via a separate personal blog), and commentary, blogging seemed to offer:

- a technology that many of the students already used through their own blogs, or their Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, or other online communication;
- an immediacy of feedback and comment that was not available in hard copy; and
- the potential — through a collective blog — for the class to engage each other, pool ideas, and give each other feedback, which was simply not an option with the hard copy journals.

Accordingly, I introduced four elements in the electronic classroom, two of which we can characterize as blogs.[7] One was the *individual* blog, which each student was expected to maintain on a regular basis and which *only* that student and I could read and to which I could respond, and the *collective* blog, to which all students had equal and open access, and which I also could read and comment on.

I described the second blog to the class in this way: "This multi-author blog serves two purposes: it's a forum for a rolling conversation about issues and questions in negotiation, mediation and dispute resolution; and it's one part of the journal assessment outlined in the course handout. As it's an open discussion, I ask you all to observe the protocols and conventions of online conversation, avoiding flaming, personal attack, offensive language, and so on. Comments that are found to be inappropriate will be taken down."

The two other elements of my electronic classroom, which did not carry any weight for assessment purposes, were a "What I'm reading" link, which invited students to provide links, on a separate "page" and not as part of their collective blogs, to web resources, recommendations for books and articles recently read, and, where copyright permitted, soft copy of downloaded articles; and a "research papers forum," in which class members were invited to describe their intended topics for their three thousand word final essay, and to which others could respond with suggestions or offers of resources.[8]

Some Preliminary Impressions

The Advantages of Blogging

As I mentioned previously, many of my students were already participating in social networking sites and already had some familiarity and comfort both with the use of blogging-type tools *and* with a certain degree of online self-disclosure.

Students indicated that a major advantage of the class blog was the immediacy it offered, in both their recording and my responses. While I could not respond to every individual or collective blog entry, I tried to do so when specific questions were directed to me. Hard copy journals certainly allowed many of the same questions to be raised, but there was typically a delay of some weeks between the time the question was noted, the journal was submitted, and I read and returned them. Critics might argue that this typifies a world of short attention spans and immediate gratification — but more constructively, it links the learning and reinforcement far more directly to the practical experience in class that may have provoked the question.

Student entries began to appear on the blog, both the individual and collective blogs, within thirty minutes of the end of the class period. Students reported personally that they felt compelled to respond immediately to an observation or insight from the class or to pick up the thread of a discussion that had begun in relation to a recommended piece of reading or analysis of negotiation practice, which, I believe, exemplifies a rare and exciting degree of engagement with personal learning.

The blog also fostered a continuity of conversation. While the hard copy journals were a form of delayed-response conversation with the instructor, the collective blog turned out to be a way for students to converse with each other — and with me — well after class hours. Typically one student would take the initiative to write a comment on some aspect of the negotiation or mediation simulation in class, and over the next few days, that comment would elicit responses from more than twenty members of the class. The opening contribution often took the form of praise for the skills of a fellow class member. One student wrote, for example, "Wow you mediators are doing a great job! I really didn't envy you guys today, especially having been a mediator last time, I can't imagine having to deal with five quite different groups and many different types of interests. All of your recapping was really useful I think, but at the same time also reminds all the groups about a particularly important point to them, and so starts the process right back at the beginning."[9]

To which others responded in this vein: "With five parties all with completely different interests, it is pretty hard to get anywhere fast. You can definitely see how these types of mediations take days at a time. . . . I thought R did an especially good job, I think with that many parties it is quite important to take quite a firm hand as the mediator. I realize that is a tricky balance to strike, being firm, but also not too interfering. [I]t would be interesting to see some of the mediators on Tuesday perhaps try a bit more of an "iron fist"?? Just a thought."

So, not only did the students interact with each other outside of class via the blog, they actively explored different styles and process options that they then sought to implement in later classes.

Blogging, like electronic mail, carries with it substantial miscommunication risks. In my review of all the entries, however, I found only one such occurrence in the first semester and one in the second semester, and both cases occurred quite early in the semester. I chose not to comment or intervene and was pleased that the students involved immediately recognized and rectified the misunderstanding and, having done so "in public," as it were, provided a model for how to do so for the rest of the class.

The first misunderstanding arose in the course of a conversation about gender differences in negotiation — a topic that can generate as much heat as light. In the end, the exchange elicited some twenty-six blog entries that covered not only the substance of the topic but also the nature of the disagreement and misunderstanding as well as process observations on how these misunderstandings arise and how they can be managed. This is more than I could hope to cover simply by devoting a class or two to the topic.

This exchange also illustrated or reinforced issues relating to the perils of Internet communication. "With respect to your comments about the net," wrote one student, "I could not agree more. Isn't it interesting how the style of communication has to change? Without the added input of verbal clues and intonation you form an entirely different focus on the argument. Intentions can be lost and words can be misinterpreted. I think if we were to have had the conversation face to face the result would have been very different."

Thus, the students not only covered a substantive question of gender and negotiation arising from a class simulation, they also addressed a practical negotiation arising out of a misunderstanding and differences of opinion, and then illustrated the benefits of open dialogue and apology.

In sum, while the blog was designed to achieve the same pedagogical goals as the journal, the key differences were the blog's immediacy — both of the students' observations and my reading of them and the way it enabled students to engage with each other. To the extent that the class blog allowed the students to address each other directly, it encouraged a greater degree of analysis of the negotiation process and dynamics, in part primed by the request at the outset that feedback, if it was to be at all helpful, needed to be specific, focused, and constructive.

Except in the two cases noted above, where differences of interpretation or misunderstandings had occurred, the class blog did not give rise to direct student-to-student negotiation. The students did, however, initiate a practice of putting up the results of their separate in-class negotiations on the class blog, which then led to further discussion and analysis. Online negotiations are a logical next step in this experiment.

Blogging Participation

Class members (with one exception) took to this format with apparent enthusiasm. (Note that the semester was twelve weeks long and twenty-nine students were enrolled in the class in each semester.) Table One (below) highlights some usage statistics.

Table One
Blogging Usage

Week Four	
Private blog entries	127
Page views	678
Discussion threads	13
Public blog entries	108
Week Six	
Private blog entries	244
Week Eleven	
Private blog entries	446
Page views	1,884
Discussion threads	38
End of Week Twelve	
Private blog entries	595

The students were surprised by the amount of work they had put into this enterprise, both in the individual and collective blogs. "I went and added up all the words I've written in this blog," wrote one student. "[h]oly moley! I have managed to write (at my count) around 14,200 words!"

"This journal has been great for getting me to think about the ongoing issues as the class moves forward," another commented. "Usually in a class you tend to ignore everything until its time to study and then you rush and cram all the information in and forget it instantly. This approach really reinforced what we were learning and allowed me to get better with each negotiation."

For instructors, keeping up with and responding to this flurry of writing can be daunting. But for me, the payoff was clear: this innovation amplified the constructive, positive, and cohesive aspects of this class.

Impact on Learning

My findings about the impact of blogging on student learning are more impressionistic than they are empirical. First, while students in this course have typically been cautious about trying out negotiation techniques and strategies that may feel unfamiliar, the blogging, especially the students' interactions with each other, seemed to encourage many of them to experiment and to do so effectively by announcing either on the blog or in class that they would try something new. At the very least, my impression is that the regular contact between the class members and the way in which they supported each other in trying new things emboldened them and encouraged experimentation.

Second, in their individual journals, students considered specific tools discussed in class, how these might be used in future classes and how such tools might work in their own lives. For example, in one session we explored the use of framing and reframing to defuse contentious language and ensure parties were addressing the same issues. One student wrote (the first "you" she refers to is the instructor):

> The class we had on reframing was really useful for me. I think you're right in that my boyfriend is framing what I'm saying in a way that shows he is insecure about our relationship. He has lately been saying things like "I knew you were going to say . . ." which shows that he is probably storing stuff up that he's been bothered about before. Instead of retaliating with "well, then there's no point talking to you," I have tried to ask him more about what he means. Why did he think I would say that? Are there things he wants to discuss that don't relate directly to the current situation? . . . I think reframing can really detoxify such emotional negotiations as the ones I'm having at the moment!

Students often ask me whether the skills practiced in the classroom setting apply in the "real world" — despite my assurances that simulations are often based on real-life negotiations and that I have years of experience in commercial, environmental, and ethnic dispute settlement. The recognition that these skills will work with partners, parents, and supervisors is often more convincing.

I also invited students to use their final blog entries to reflect on their overall learning. One student wrote, "I think I have developed my questioning skills a lot more through out the term. I now make a real effort to ask questions that focus on interests and the reason behind what someone wants. It has made a big difference in my discussions/disagreements with friends and family also."

Another wrote about the role of relationships: "Relationships can sometimes be the most important part of the negotiation. Given the size of this country and even the world, it's unlikely any negotiation will ever be done in true isolation. Your conduct and how the other party feels at the end of it is thus absolutely vital. Of course, there will be some situations where the relationship is the ultimate object of the negotiation — something that hadn't occurred to me so much before this course but now seems too obvious."

Finally, other students focused on emotions. "Emotions are a vital thing to keep under control," wrote one student, "either by ignoring them and focusing on logic, or acknowledging them and trying to work within those frames. Which way works best for me I'm not sure, but realizing their presence is very important."

Defining interests, building relationships, and attending to emotions are issues covered in nearly every negotiation course. In this class, the constant and shared reflection on these skills reinforced students' learning and seem to have diminished the likelihood that students will revert to their default negotiation styles.

Peer Feedback

As noted earlier, the public blog allowed students to comment on each other's ideas and to also invite the instructor's comments on their conclusions. One especially instructive example of this arose from a mediation practice session that, by general consensus, was "too easy." The class had previously worked on a multiparty resource planning dispute involving potentially incompatible interests and the prospect of either stalemate or sidelining of one of the parties to reach a majority decision. After that more complicated exercise, students found the two-party mediation that followed relatively straightforward.

By this later stage of the course, the students seemed increasingly keen to be "tested" and were thus disappointed that the next exercise seemed so straightforward. Also, by the final year of law school, they had become a little cynical and suspected that something that appeared too easy in fact contained hidden traps. While their cynicism might be regrettable, their caution is useful.

One student wrote:

> Law school . . . has trained us up to find the issues, to critically think about seemingly simple situations to find the problem. So I suppose that we law students, more than the average person on the street, feel uneasy with 'easy' fact scenarios. . . . However, it is true that a negotiation doesn't always have to involve extreme trade-offs and it can be simply a matter of putting the pieces together. I know that in our negotiation we kept expressing surprise that it was going so well. I, for one . . . was happy to find the issues slotted together so well. However, that wariness I felt that I was missing the point led me to agree to 'park' issues, all hinging on the show-stopping sticking point that I was anticipating. It wasn't until all issues had been talked through that I was happy to actually finalize what we had agreed upon.

In class we explored what was meant by "success" in negotiations, but one thread in the class blog took this further by raising the question of the advocate's or lawyer's ego as a factor in negotiation success. One student wrote:

> I think this exercise illustrates how important the concepts of ego and winning are in negotiation. The purpose of a negotiation is really to represent your client (or yourself) . . . through achieving an outcome that best satisfies their needs. It seems that everybody achieved this — yet negotiation dissatisfaction was high. It seems . . . the reason . . . is that we are not machines, simply seeking to maximize utility, but actually . . . achieve personal satisfaction from receiving a negotiation outcome that is not just good for our clients, but is good for our clients at the expense of the opposing party. This is a really interesting concept. It shows that one of the aims of negotiations, in practice, is not just to assist our client, but to undermine the opponent in some way. So perhaps the lessons from this negotiation exercise is . . . be satisfied if you do well and stop using the success of others as measure of your own success.

What students also appeared more willing to do, once the norms of the class blog had been established, was to concede their own doubts while also affirming what they saw as good practice in their colleagues. While the former was possible in the hard copy journals, it has less impact than when shared with others, and the latter — the constructive comments — were acknowledged as a relatively rare experience in the otherwise competitive atmosphere of law school.

"I acted as a mediator in this mediation," one student wrote. "I knew straight away I could have done a better job. I think I was a bit 'possum in the headlights' when I sat there as I didn't really know how to handle the situation. . . . However, just by observing the mediation unfold and watching the other mediators, I definitely learned a lot. I know that if I were to be a mediator next time, I would definitely improve by continuously recapping with the parties the points they have made . . . and I would have been a lot tougher . . . I was particularly impressed with how R mediated, she did a good job at listening to what the parties were actually saying, recapping and really working to try and help them to sort the problem out."

Conclusion

The Risks of Blogging

I suspect that some of the enthusiasm expressed by my students in their comments reflects, in part at least, the novelty of the kind of experience and the ease with which these "digital natives" engage in this form of communication. I have identified at least six possible reservations about the use of blogs, each of which can, I believe, be addressed with careful management of the tool.

First, online, non-face-to-face communications incur a greater risk of miscommunication. Their immediacy and speed can also encourage reactive, impulsive communication. Thankfully, this did not seem to be a problem in this course, with the exception of the two incidents I noted earlier — in both cases, the students took their disagreements offline, only to return when the misunderstanding was settled. One, as indicated earlier, involved a misunderstanding over a comment made in relation to gender and negotiation and arose out of what one student later conceded was his own careless use of language. The other potentially more difficult case arose from one person's perception that a denigrating comment had been made about her cultural group. As the two students recognized, after their offline conversation, this conflict resulted from both the flippancy of a particular comment and a heightened sensitivity, each of which can be exacerbated by online communications. These kinds of miscommunication risks can be partially addressed by issuing a clear statement of expectations about the language and tone of the blog, but such preventative measures cannot fully anticipate the unintended blunders. For that reason, mechanisms do need to be in place to ensure that the issues are addressed and that errors do not degenerate into "flaming."

Second, blogging carries with it the risks of enclave formation (Lim 2005; Keen 2007; Sunstein 2007) and the inhibition of dialogue. This is a risk if bloggers "push" information rather than engage in dialogue, that is, if there is limited or no opportunity for a response to the entry and if the communication is limited to or predominantly between those who share a relatively narrowly defined interest or opinions. These risks are less present, however, in a learning setting in which students were encouraged to communicate with their entire class.

Third, some educators may fear that the process of learning could become too technology driven. Simply because it is possible to set up an online class blog should not in itself to be a compelling reason to do so, unless doing so offers significant learning benefits. Teachers — especially technology enthusiasts — will want to ensure that cart and horse are proceeding in the correct order and that we do not become so mesmerized by the technology that it drives the learning process.

A fourth and related point is that journal keeping by blog does require a degree of comfort with the technology. In each class in which I used this process, a few students expressed initial reluctance to participate because of their wariness of the format. The less "tech savvy" students risk being sidelined by the process unless the actual process of blogging is made relatively simple, as it was in this case.

Fifth, in every class there will be students who are more reticent and less willing to speak up, and that reticence may continue in the online format. And, because the blog entries are automatically "signed," their non-participation will become more visible both to the instructor and to fellow students. On the other hand, those reluctant to speak out in class are often more able to find their voices in the relative safety of a blog written at home or in the university library. Instructors should not only create the expectation of regular online participation but should also encourage (offline, in person, and in private online communications) the quieter students to engage.

Finally, this method of journal keeping and assessment is time consuming, both for students and especially for the instructor. Both the private and collective blogs created the expectation that the instructor would be online daily and would respond almost immediately to questions raised and comments made. Most of my students also told me that they spent a lot more time on this enterprise than they had anticipated. In the absence, at this stage, of empirical evaluation, the question of the correlation between effort and outcome must be raised. If their comments alone are taken as an indication, the students saw this as a worthwhile exercise. But caution would lead us to ask whether this reflects the digital natives' comfort with this format and their desire (by analogy with Facebook) to spend time in the virtual world with virtual "friends."

Following that last note of caution, I suggest one way to refine the use of the collective blogs. (I used this technique in a graduate course that I taught in international conflict resolution.) In this case, the class blog was subdivided into topic-centered blogs. The thread of conversations tended to be briefer and more clearly addressed to specific issues or theme related. While having such focus can inhibit the expected free flow of blogging, it promotes more concise commentary, encourages the more specific development of class or seminar discussions, and provides the instructor with clearer insight into students' analysis.

Students' Assessments

By way of informal assessment, I asked students to tell me in their individual blogs whether they found both the journal exercise and its online version useful. One student wrote:

> I would like to suggest it is a great idea. I feel that I was more likely to write in it more often as whenever I checked my emails or used a computer I could quickly add a few comments without sitting down and writing a huge entry. It was quick and easy and the continual feedback from you was great. It was also really interesting to be able to interact with each other and make comments on each other's thoughts. I think we got a lot more discussion than you really would in a class situation. Also, I often find that people are more honest or at least their answers are more in-depth and well thought out because they don't have the pressure of responding immediately with everyone looking at them.

Another wrote that:

> I have found the blog great . . . it has kept me engaged in the content of this course and has certainly motivated me to do outside reading on various issues or even take part in things I might not other ways partake in. In terms of the online format — even better . . . it is a tidy, focused way of communicating and organizing my thoughts. . . . I think that the blog/journal has contributed to my learning in a huge way and I would almost go so far as to recommend it as a compulsory for all courses.

"Being able to access the amazing resource that is my fellow classmates has allowed a depth of understanding that I don't think I have gained in other classes," wrote one enthusiastic student. "I think having marks attached to this is important," wrote another, "as I don't think I would have used it as much if it were [not] mandatory." One student noted another benefit: "The class blog also means that things can be discussed that would otherwise waste precious class time."

To these comments I would add only one observation: the structure of our class contact typically means that we had one two-hour session in which the class normally participated in a practical exercise, followed by a one-hour session that we used for debriefing and discussion. That one-hour class had previously been a vital follow-up to the practical session, but with the introduction of the blog I found that almost all the issues that would normally be addressed in the review session had been canvassed already, immediately following the simulation (including my comments and responses). This therefore allowed me to introduce additional material. The students ended up working harder, covering more ground, but enjoying it more than they anticipated — and, it might be said, the same goes for me.

Broader Implications

I place the wider conclusions to be drawn from this into two categories. The first, more specifically pedagogical, is that engagement in learning is critical and use of the diverse tools of the Internet (the world our students inhabit as "digital natives") enhances that engagement.

The second observation is political and civic: these tools of online life have potential to create a "digital commons" — a digital counterpart to the physical commons, which historically (and possibly nostalgically) were physical spaces that people shared. Use of these "digital commons" can correct or supplement distorted perceptions, provide credible alternative narratives, and foster engagement in peace building. Some scholars have suggested that communities formed on the Internet can be an antidote to the civic disengagement that Robert Putnam (1995) chronicled in his essay about "bowling alone," that the potential exists through the Internet to foster "bowling together" (Coleman and Gøtze 2001; Putnam 2007).

According to these theories, Internet communications can foster civic literacy and promote deliberative democracy. While students in a negotiation class are not specifically or overtly engaged in deliberative democratic processes, a more optimistic view of the experiment suggests that the experience may, in other settings, contribute to the promotion of constructive civic discourse.

In addition, techniques and technologies that have been seen as essentially private — mediation, negotiation, and the Internet — can be seen equally in terms of their civic and public contributions. Mediation in the West, for example, has been fostered for its values of public cost saving, private settlement, autonomy, confidentiality, and choice, but in other places, mediation has served more of a public, normative, and socially integrative function. The parallel with information communication technology (ICT) is that, while ICT does foster a consumerist technoculture, with a focus on choice and autonomy, that same technology can be seen and used in terms of its capacity to foster engagement, citizenship, and civic dialogues. As David Bohm and his colleagues have written, dialogue is "a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization" (Bohm, Factor, and Garrett 1991: 1).

At the very least, then, this technology provides educators with a new and engaging way of achieving learning goals. More than that, blogs offer students the prospect of learning that goes beyond the substance of the course and encourages civic engagement — a surprisingly conventional and even old-fashioned educational goal.

NOTES

This article is based on the author's experience teaching a course in negotiation and mediation in the Law School at Victoria University of Wellington. The author is now at the School of Law, Singapore Management University. I wish to express my appreciation for the brief and helpful comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

1. "Blog" is short for "web log" and is a term used to describe journals posted on the Internet. Most are primarily textual, although bloggers are increasingly including photos and video and audio segments on their blogs, as well. Blogs may be universally available (e.g., anyone with Internet access may read one's blog entries) or access may be more limited, restricted, for example, to a preselected audience or made available only to those who have been given a password. A blog is considered "active" when new entries are posted on a fairly regular basis. Most feature some kind of commenting function that readers can use to respond to the blogger's entries.

2. Of course, the open texture and relative anonymity of the Internet still create challenges for the management of communication, all the more so in the regulation of pornographic material and the protection of minors from potential predators on the Internet.

3. For example, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers and the World Intellectual Property Organization have established relatively formal procedures for the resolution of conflicts relating to domain names. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2003) and American Bar Association (ABA 2002) have each developed protocols relating to the protection of consumers in online, cross-border transactions.

4. See Katsh and Gaitenby (2003) and Katsh (2002). While the use of the term "party" may be confusing, the point is that, while the role of the "third party" — the mediator — is a familiar one in terms of facilitation and communication, the passive presence of technology, as another kind of intermediary or resource, might serve as a fourth party in that same facilitative and neutral sense. Note that there are four principal forms of online dispute resolution: expert systems for the automated resolution or settlement of disputes (e.g., http://www.cybersettle.com; http://www.clicknsettle.com), arbitration, consumer complaint handling processes (using, e.g., e-mail), and online mediation.

5. The development of the world of "v-business," in which participants in jointly created online societies spend real money on virtual items (houses, artifacts, etc.) is going to present yet another variant on this challenge. V-business is also an emerging issue of web management and web-based management of accounts, client information, etc.

6. As Sunstein (2007) has noted, "enclave" deliberation is important in order to elicit the perspectives of members of those enclaves but is only truly valuable if it is also connected to and engaged with civic deliberation.

7. An upgraded version of a classroom software application known as Blackboard offered a blogging option, which prompted the change from hard copy to the online version.

8. While students did not use these features extensively, some did point each other in the direction of good resources. For example, one student was a court administrative official and was able to give immediate and practical advice to a classmate planning to write on restorative justice.

9. All student comments are quoted with permission and with some editing of spelling and punctuation eccentricities.

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