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The Disposable Blog: Using the Weblog to Facilitate Classroom Learning and Communications

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Abstract

This article describes two case studies: one is from a graduate course in social work practice evaluation taught by the second author; the other is from an undergraduate political science course in media and politics taught by the first author. These cases describe the way blogs, created by students and the professors, facilitate communications within the class, reduce paperwork for the professors, and let students practice their “public voices.” While the cases are specific to two courses — Masters-level social work and undergraduate political science — the concepts are easily transferred to others. The article begins with a history and literature review of blogs used pedagogically; next, the reader is walked through the creation of a blog using currently popular online tools; the next two sections are devoted to the two cases; and the final section attempts to draw some generalizations about using blogs in the classroom.

Keywords: Blogging, disposable blog, social work, political science, practice evaluation, pedagogy.

History and Literature Review of the Pedagogical Blog

The blog, begun in the first days of the World Wide Web as a tool for elite computer scientists, has become, over the course of fifteen years, a wildly popular medium for personal expression, for sharing all kinds of news, for editorializing and conducting public discourse.

Blog is a “portmanteau” word, the conflation of *web* and *log* (Wikipedia Contributors, 2008). A blog is a frequently-updated website, usually built around a certain theme and expressing the personal opinions of one or several contributors. Each time an entry is posted, the previous entries are automatically archived, so a visitor can browse by date or topic to get an idea of the direction of the discourse, or to look up a past posting. At one extreme, a blog may be nothing more than a list of links to other sites that the author considers of interest to readers (See, for example, “DRUDGE REPORT 2008®”); at the other, it may be a personal diary with few or no links at all (Seth Godin's popular blog is a good example). Some blogs may have multiple authors, and may be open to comments only from certain readers, or from all readers, comments which may create parallel narra-

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tives. “Trolls” are interlopers whose only purpose is to disrupt dialogue and debate with *ad hominem* attacks and “colorful” language (Damoclese, 2004).

The first blog was created in 1992 by mathematician and cybernetic engineer Tim Berners-Lee while working at CERN, the particle physics laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland. It was called “What’s New,” and was intended to share technical information among scientists around the world and keep track of each new website that went online (“Tim Berners-Lee”; Berners-Lee, 2000) This was before the existence of powerful search engines such as Google. The National Center for Supercomputing Applications took over “What’s New” in 1993, then Netscape did so in 1996. Then, according to David Winer (2007), one of the earliest bloggers, “The Web exploded, and the weblog idea grew along with it.”

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 32 percent of American youth between the ages of eight and eighteen already have a blog or a webpage (Rideout, Roberts and Foehr, 2005). These offer information of varying utility, including links to resources; more and more such sites function as small bibliographic archives. While the impact of the political blog may have been over-emphasized in the American popular press, it is difficult to explain the rise of Howard Dean and his ultimate ascension to Chair of the Democratic National Committee, the primary victory of Ned Lamont over third-term incumbent Joseph Lieberman in 2006, the resignation of CBS anchor Dan Rather, the demise of former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, or the more recent fundraising successes of Republican Presidential candidate Ron Paul without reference to online activists and partisan bloggers. (Rainie and Horrigan, 2007; Hindman, 2005; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Rainie, Cornfield and Horrigan, 2005; Welch 2003; Malcolm 2008). This “many-to-many” communication, as Dan Gillmor (2006) calls it, reallocates power, and if it has its limits – Dean was not the Democratic Party’s nominee in 2004 and Paul seems unlikely to win the Republican nomination in 2008 – it nonetheless suggests the possibility of a transformation in communication, the ultimate import of which is difficult to grasp.

The blog also offers opportunities for transformation in the classroom. Previous research suggests that an array of other forms of experiential and blended learning approaches can improve students’ substantive knowledge of policy (Anderson & Harris, 2005), bolster their confidence in their ability to affect change and their willingness to try to do so (Rocha, 2000; Hamilton & Fauri, 2001), and further enrich their commitment to political activism and the pursuit of social justice (Weiss, Gai & Cnaan, 2005). Further, small-group blogging can build community and encourage interaction and engagement that might otherwise not take place; create space for students’ voices to emerge when they otherwise might not; and foster collaboration with their colleagues (Dickey, 2004; Oravec, 2003). Other preliminary research suggests that younger men and women find electronic communications more comfortable, even more “authentic” than other forms (English-Leuck and The Silicon Valley Cultures Project, 2003). The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that 93 percent of youth 12 to 17 use the Internet “and more of them than ever are treating it as a venue for social interaction--a place where they can share creations,

tell stories, and interact with others.” (LenHart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007, p. 2) Fifty-five percent use online social networking sites such as MySpace and FaceBook.

While research about the uses and effectiveness of blogs is limited and, at best, suggestive, there is reason to believe that the blog is a pedagogical tool with significant potential for “deep learning” (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003).

Blogging in the Classroom: Getting Started

At least two websites, Blogger.com (now owned by Google) and Blogstream.com, make blog creation simple enough that students can set up professional-looking blogs in less than ten minutes. Such software, which resides online rather than on the student’s computer, has come to be called “cloudware” (Anderson, 2007, p. 12). There is no charge for its use, and no transmission of credit card numbers or other personal data that sometimes discomfort users. The user creates an account with a password, chooses a template and color scheme to personalize it, and creates content, which can include, in addition to text, pictures, music, and video clips from sites such as YouTube. These are “disposable blogs” because they are easily created and deleted.

Case 1: Using the Blog to Closely Monitor Student’s Understanding of Assignments

The second author frequently teaches a Master’s level course in single-subject research and practice evaluation. The students in the course evaluate their practice by measuring some problematic aspect of their client’s behavior, first a baseline and then the behavior as it responds to a planned intervention. If the student gets off on the wrong foot, and the mistake is not discovered until the midterm paper, the project must be restarted and often completing it in the short time remaining becomes a test of professorial ingenuity. In order to avoid this, each student creates a blog during the first class and records his or her activities there. The professor, who maintains a master-list of the blogs, can dialogue with each student individually, assuring, during the first month of class, that he or she is on track. It is, in effect, a way of peering over the student’s shoulder, and providing a gentle nudge when needed. In this case, the blog facilitates communication, organizes the flow of paperwork, and becomes a virtual filing cabinet, an automatic date stamp, and an auditing device. The second author initially tried to do this with a University-controlled online course content system. Because it was designed to fulfill a number of functions—a repository for reading materials and syllabi, an email client, test-administering software, an online gradebook, and so forth—it performed none of them easily or gracefully. The students felt burdened by it, they reported with frequency. Blogs, on the other hand, were rated more positively because they were designed around one simple function—self-publishing—and also because the student enjoyed a sense of ownership of the blog, having designed and created it.

Because the course is taught in a computer lab, the students were guided through the blog creation process step by step, recognizing that one of the principal stumbling blocks for students using new technology is the lack of such “walk-through” instruction. Of the eleven students in the class, seven set up their blogs successfully during the first class and

left brief posts. The following week, members of the more technically adept group helped the second group get on-line, and clarified some misunderstanding about the operation of the blog. The professor set up a spreadsheet with links to all of the students' blog addresses and once a week clicked through them, leaving feedback in the "comment" section. The student had the opportunity to respond to the comment if it stimulated discourse. At the end of the semester, some students opted to print out their work before deleting their blogs.

Unlike an ordinary blog, where readership is desired, these blogs had to be configured to discourage outside readers, since maintaining client confidentiality was an important concern. Students were encouraged to use meaningless numeric sequences for blog names and passwords, and were regularly reminded to disguise any information about the agency or the client that might result in a reader identifying them.

Most of the students were intrigued by the use of blogs and enjoyed the assignments. Choosing their own templates and color schemes gave them a sense of ownership, and an opportunity to express themselves creatively. The possibility of providing nearly immediate feedback in the form of blog "comments," particularly during the beginning of the semester when they were unsure of how to proceed, was particularly valuable.

The disposable blog is a potential medium for any assignment that requires students to keep a log, diary, or journal. Among its virtues: it will never get lost; if students have laptops and network connections, they can make entries anywhere a connection is available; the instructor can read them online at any time he or she chooses and leave comments at the end of each posting; the instructor will be aware early in the semester if the student is having difficulties with the course and provide a remedy before it is too late; other students can read postings and leave their own comments, if appropriate to the assignment; the instructor doesn't have to remind students to bring assignments to class; and, because students don't know when the instructor will be reviewing their writing, there are incentives to keep their blogs up to date.

In sum, the blog was used as an enticement to the students, as a way of closely monitoring the student's understanding of the coursework, as a means of organizing paperwork and a quick way to provide feedback. Overall, it served as a simple and effective means of managing assignments, and could be used similarly in a broad range of courses and subjects

Case 2: Using Blogs to Encourage Students to Enter into Public Discourse

The first author of this article took a very different approach, using blogs to provide an actual experience of presenting political opinion in a public form. Given the responses by students when told of what they would be doing for the course, this was an exciting, if daunting, experience for them given the growing importance of the political blogger. He sought to encourage students to think about the varied roles of "Mainstream Media" (CNN, *New York Times*), traditional narrow-cast media (*The Nation*, *The Weekly Standard*, talk radio), and "New Media" (web news, political blogs, *YouTube*) in part to un-

pack questions of where political ideas come from, how they become part of a “national conversation,” and how the dissemination or repetition of ideas affects beliefs and opinions. A related goal was to learn something about how online communities form; how they behave; how they develop, share and disseminate ideas; and what impact they have beyond the narrow confines of their participant-community: what we might call a form of social network analysis. How better to understand this ephemeral phenomenon than to encourage the construction of an online community and track its development?

This work took place in a unique institutional setting. Because our University observes Judaic law in the undergraduate colleges, the undergraduate campuses are sex segregated. The first author taught one section of the course at the women’s campus in the morning, and then again for the men in the evening. Thanks to the blog, however, students formed a single, integrated, online community outside of the classroom. It was a way to examine gender diversity and an opportunity to observe whether the dialogue would differ if both men and women participated. (His experience tends to confirm what the academic literature suggests: single-sex education has benefits for women, and few for men) (Mael, Alonso, Gibson, Rogers & Smith, 2005; Umbach, Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Kuh, 2004). This might also serve as a beneficial technique for instructors teaching multiple sections of the same course, granting them similar abilities to create an online community for all students enrolled.

The professor prepared his own blog a few months before the first class meeting. In the beginning his skills were minimal. By the time the semester began, however, he was more than competent to offer students guidance on how to build and customize their own blogs, and later, how to add pictures and graphics, and embed videos, site counters (to track how many people visit the site, and from where), and RSS feeds (an automated means of delivering blog content to a reader’s computer).

The professor had emailed registered students over the summer with a link to his webpage, a copy of the syllabus, and the link to the “master” blog. A week prior to the first class meeting, a handful of students had already completed the first assignment – creating their own blog and posting to it at least once. By the second class, all students save one had built a blog and posted to it. The most difficult and time-consuming aspect of creating the blog, students discovered, was choosing an appropriately clever blog name.

The master blog included supplemental class materials, links to sites for research and for breaking political news, relevant other websites, or personal opinion and analysis pieces. It also contained a master-list of links to each student blog, serving as a kind of main menu for accessing the project. Students could easily navigate back to the master blog and, from there, locate the blogs of any of their classmates to see how others handled the assignment (plagiarism would have been obvious to the instructor, since every post has a time- and date-stamp; see also Oravec 2003), or find their way to the professor’s academic web page in order to find a copy of the course syllabus, syllabi from other courses he teaches, his CV, links to supplemental course readings, or copies of exams.

Since our previous experience with Internet Course Management Systems (we had used both Blackboard and Angel) suggested that getting students to use the technology might be a problem, both carrots and sticks were employed: posting to their own blogs was mandatory, and two specific assignments were due each week, which together accounted for a full fifty percent of students' final grade.

To encourage students to read their colleagues' blogs and to respond to the ideas presented there, he made such activity a required part of some week's assignments; for those who regularly posted on their colleagues' blogs, extra credit was awarded. Even so, the number who did so and the frequency with which they did it were small, until the last few weeks of the semester, when online dialogues and debates began to appear with some frequency. To encourage students to attend to more advanced blogging techniques, such as adding links to other sites, embedding video excerpts, and off-setting extended quotations from cited materials, he informed them on the first day of class that their Final Exam would also be posted online, and that form would count for a substantial portion of their grade. This opened up space to discuss the manners in which different kinds of writing have different rules, not just depending upon the audience, but upon the technology used to disseminate ideas. Since assignments were tied to course readings and topics for class discussion, he would often begin class by visiting a student's blog post on the subject, and letting that serve as a jumping-off point for discussion and debate. Some students, as one would expect, devoted significantly more time and energy to each assignment than others, but those students often uncovered commentary or video that improved the richness and timeliness of materials under discussion, and gave them genuine opportunities to contribute to the shape and direction of the course. As the semester wore on and they grew more accustomed to producing work for public consumption, a number of students encouraged friends and family to read their ongoing work. This too, we think, improved the quality of students' work, since they knew it was not only their professor who would read it. Some eventually opened up to even larger communities. By the middle of the semester, word of what the class was doing had started to spread. Students who were not taking the course began posting their responses, and colleagues were stopping the professor in the hall to say "I read your blog. I liked the article about. . . ."

Student posts tended often to be rather long, and this was the first time the professor found students apologizing with such frequency for writing *so much*, and noticed with many students whom he had taught in previous classes that their writing style seemed more fluid and clearer. Perhaps the medium itself, because it was more familiar and less intimidating, didn't compel students to feel as if they had to adopt an overly-stylized kind of writing (which they often do, emulating the worst of the academic prose they've been exposed to). But because it is less stylized does not, to our minds, make their written work less thoughtful. For the most part, students' writing was clear, concise and often funny. On balance, the medium itself seemed to have facilitated their ability to communicate. That said, many of their initial posts were self-conscious and tentative, and prompted lots of "is this what I'm supposed to be doing" sorts of questions.

The professor posted comments, albeit usually brief ones, on each blog posting by students. This was perhaps the aspect of the course most in need of change. It was impossi-

ble to append grades to each post, since it was a public forum and the goal was not to embarrass students. All this resulted in a heavy workload for the instructor.

Evaluating the Results

Our experience with disposable blogs was positive. The blog was an effective means of managing course materials and for students to manage assignments, a useful tool in any professor's kit. In both the official college student evaluation forms distributed every term and a separate evaluation instrument distributed by the instructor, students frequently described the course with such words as "engaging," "involved," "hands-on," "though-provoking," "stimulating," "interactive," and "participatory," descriptors that had rarely been used in previous evaluations. That engagement carried beyond the classroom, moreover: students in the second case study took it upon themselves to organize a multi-media Media Workshop for other students; one started a "watchdog" website about the student newspaper; another has been urging the university president to launch his own blog; and the majority reported that they intended to maintain their blogs in the future (although the evidence so far suggests that few will).

In both cases students who seemed indifferent or antagonistic to assignments involving internet-based course management systems like Angel or Blackboard seemed to enjoy executing the same kind of assignments on a blog. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it was because they exercised ownership and felt in control of the blog, and because they felt engaged in a cutting edge activity.

As one of the Case 2 students wrote in her course evaluation:

"I liked the fact that instead of hard copy write ups, blogs [presented] endless possibilities. . . . The writing was lighter and more alive with links, pictures, and let us go where we wanted with it. The comments section enables us to share our insights w/ our colleagues. . . . I would like to [continue blogging]. We are at the forefront of a new era in new media and it feels good to be a part of it."

Reported others:

"It was a hands on learning approach that directly related to what we were learning, although I see the value in doing blog work for non-media related classes as well; it is less structured than papers and more creative/personal thought based."

"[I liked the] lack of formality, sense of community. It was different and thus more fun. I was able to illustrate my points by use of video, sounds and pictures that I can't do in a paper."

"It's more relaxing than having to write papers all the time – yes it had to be substantive, but it was a little more relaxed and fun – you can't put videos on paper. . . . I was able to do more and express myself."

“It was a great way to post an opinion if you[‘re] too scared to in class.”

Blogging is a tool that should be more fully and thoughtfully incorporated throughout the curriculum. Students are online with ever greater frequency, and it is through that medium they are accessing information and interacting with each other. As we have noted, preliminary research suggests that students may find electronic communication more “authentic” than other forms (English-Leuck and The Silicon Valley Cultures Project, 2003), and the cases reported in this paper confirm that. We do note, however, that blogging (and other forms of online interaction) are not without risks for students and for the instructor; the first author began the semester with a review of what might constitute “objectionable” material that should not be posted; cautioned them to think carefully before posting personal information; laid out ground rules for civil discourse; and offered students tips on how to effectively manage any Trolls visiting and posting to their sites (see also Romero 2006; University of Illinois 2007).

The value of these kinds of projects, which can admittedly be labor intensive and involve a modest degree of comfort with new technologies, is not only that they encourage formulating and organizing ideas, and dialogue and debate, but that they make students take more responsibility for their own learning. They are putting their own thoughts out into “cyberspace,” where anyone might happen upon them. Some of the fascination with blogs is the possibility that one’s words will be read by world policy makers, artists, practitioners, and pundits. This, in our experience, encourages a healthy competition among students for excellence and originality.

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