

Blogging in the Classroom: The State of the Field

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Blogging is a cutting edge technology that empowers the individual to become their own publisher. Blogging is a useful tool has the potential of linking instructors to their increasingly internet-connected students. One of the challenges of this rapidly developing technology is that there is not a well-defined literature that has developed as of yet. As such, much of what is available on blogging in education is from on-line sources, briefings, and a limited number of books and journal articles.

In order to understand the importance of blogging in the classroom, we need to understand the impact the internet on the modern student. Jessica Pater, from the Georgia tech Research Institute, gave a presentation on August 25, 2007 (www.f3program.org) about how student's interactive connection with the internet has changed between 2002 and 2007. In a poll done by the Georgia Tech Research Institute in 2002 and 2007, only 12% of teens had social networking profiles or websites. By 2007, 96% of students in the U.S. that have access to the internet use social networking sites weekly, with 12% of those students updating daily and 25% updating weekly. Social networking sites now comprise 40% of the top ten websites, 35% of the top twenty sites, and 22% of the top fifty websites. The penetration of the internet into the student's lives is amazing.

Given the importance of the internet in the modern era, blogging has taken on increasing importance. So what is a blog? According to Teachersfirst, a “blog” is short for a web log. What is unique about the blog format is that is the author can write and publish without an intermediary, readers can post comments on what as said, and both authors and commenters can place links to other websites and other forms of information. All of these capabilities enable people to write, react, and share information – a powerful potential place for both instructors and students to interact. A developing norm in blogging is assertions of fact now demand hyperlinks to the referenced materials to prove the veracity of their assertion. As an aside note, this is one of the reasons that newspapers are going under across the country is because stories that are published in most papers do not link to the primary documents. Blogging, obviously, appeals to individuals that seek individual expression. Blogs are focused on whatever the individual decides to write upon. The can be personally focused, or focused on a specific topic. Lastly, blogs can be blended with RSS feeds to aggregate information from additional sources of information to keep the blog populated with new information.

Pater defines the uses of educational blogs as “replacing standard class web pages, integrating the internet into courses, organization of class discussions, provide summaries of lessons, and the ability to integrate student work into more accessible forums.” Most blogs tend to be written informally, but it greatly depends on the topic. The key with all writing (or publishing) is knowing the audience. If an instructor is going to use blogging as a way to communicate with the students, then they have to tailor their writing style to the audience. An excellent example of a widely-read economics blog is Dr. Mark J. Perry’s Carpe Diem (<http://mjperry.blogspot.com/>), which blends the professor’s individual comments as well as daily links and graphics that are of interest to his students.

The best book on blogging today was written by Glenn Reynolds, *An Army Of Davids: How Markets and Technology Empower Ordinary People to Beat Big Media, Big Government, and Other Goliaths* (Nelson Current, 2006). Reynold's thesis is that the rise of personal technology and the free market are pushing power down from larger entities to individuals. This technological revolution is empowering individuals to be able to publish at unprecedented levels vice large organizations such as universities, media, and government. One does not need to wait for a publishing house or a review by peers in order to publish.

What does this mean for the instructor? The implications of this revolution in publishing are only now being begun to be understood by the teaching profession. Blogging empowers the individual instructor to a level heretofore unknown. Reynolds asserts, with reasonable support from the evidence provided, that both the "the existence of this empowerment is undeniable and irreversible. Love it or hate it, it's worth close consideration" (Reynolds, 2006, 10). Blogging enables information to increasingly move horizontally, between groups of loosely-coordinated people, rather than vertically as in the past. This is a radical change from how information has been handled in the past. That horizontal knowledge, peer to peer and distributed network knowledge, is quickly burying bureaucratic "top down" or vertical knowledge – the exact type of knowledge that tends to be distributed in the classroom. Reynolds calls these new empowered writers "The Army of Davids" because now the individual can with their own writing directly to their audience, no matter how large they are. The Goliaths are the large organizations, such as government or the media, who heretofore have had control over the information that is out there. Reynolds argues that "we are in a transition period and need to reach a place where all historical information, all current scholarship, and all future online publications, both formal and informal, can be leveraged through semantic web and synthetic information architectures." He makes the point that "As the big guys

get better at being big, it's actually easier for the little guys to stay small" (Reynolds, 2006, 27). The proliferation of blogging is enabling the individual instructor to be able to their own use his own personal and professional expertise to bear is what enables Reynolds to say "The Army of Davids is coming. Let the Goliaths beware" (Reynolds, 2006, 268).

As the Army of Davids has begun to find its voice and find ways to utilize this new technology, educational groups have begun to put out ideas about how to use this technology. TeachersFirst (<http://www.teachersfirst.com/content/blog/blogideas1.cfm>) has a series of ideas for how instructors can utilize blogs in the classroom. They recommend using blogs as a place to prompt students for content, or to designate students to put together a "week in review" of the materials covered. Additional ways that blogs can be incorporated into the classroom are having students respond to readings, asking students to find facts that support or refute statements that the instructor posts on the blog, or to have the students critique a website.

Julie Sturgeon writes in the "Five Don'ts of Classroom Blogging" (http://www.thejournal.com/articles/22014_1) that there are issues with using blogs, especially with the inexperienced instructor. Sturgeon writes that one should definitely not just dive in with blogging. She counsels that unless guidelines and objectives are made clear from the beginning of the course, blogging will be a problematic tool. Second, don't confuse blogging with social networking. Sturgeon counsels that social networking applications such as MySpace and Facebook are not designed for educational applications. Sturgeon recommends not using free sites like Blogspot.com and TypePad.com, but this is the least persuasive of all arguments made. Fourthly, she recommends not forcing a sequential style, and lastly not to leave blogging to the students.

David Parry, University of Albany, in “The Technology of Reading and Writing in the Digital Space: Why RSS is crucial for a Blogging Classroom” (<http://blogsforlearning.msu.edu/articles/view.php?id=6>) writes about the application of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) publishing in blogs. RSS is a format for delivering regularly changing web content, one that does not require constant maintenance. This has the practical effect of enabling an instructor to keep their website up to date without continuous maintenance.

Wesley Fryer, in “Safe Classroom Blogging to Improve Student Writing” at (<http://teachdigital.pbwiki.com/bloggng>) writes that one of the key points about the development of blogs is the general ease of publication and associated web feeds that permit subscription, which allows people to pull information rather than having it pushed to them.

John McLaughlin, in “Blogging in the Government Classroom”, linked to (<http://cnx.org/content/m18051/latest/>), writes that blogs can help students put their thoughts into words and allow them to express their ideas publicly. Blogs also allow the student to interact with others ideas with comments. The key point is that blogs enable digital communication that is easily available, flexible, and of low cost.

Alysha Dominico, The “Know How” Guide to Classroom Blogging: (<http://leadingout.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/classroom-blogging-handbookcopyright.pdf>) describes a number of positive reasons to have a blog for educational purposes. Dominico discusses that blogs enable instructors to utilize multiple mediums and sources of information to help accommodate multiple learning styles of their students. Blogs enable course directors to organize the on-line material and make the course material available to the students from anywhere. This continuous access allows peer-to-peer assessment learning to occur at any point of time. Most importantly, this medium appeals to the “mosaic mind” of Generation Y’s thinking. The

downsides of classroom blogging include the need to teach the students how to use the blog, that they will need guidance as to how to make the experience a good one, that web copyright is traceable and also needs to be taught, that students may feel overly exposed by publishing their work too early, and their concerns about having the work “right” will interfere with their willingness to post.

Jonathan Furness, in “Reflective blogs in the primary classroom”, at (http://www.jonathansblog.net/reflective_learning_blog_classroom_primary_home_school_engagement_link) writes that blogging can be most effective when the students are practicing safe blogging and commenting. Students need to know how to communicate well and effectively in the written word. Students will be exposed to having their work routinely critiqued in ways that they normally would not have the opportunity to do so if using other dead-tree methods. Blogs take advantage of the widely held belief that students are actually reading more, and having the students being able to focus their reading on the blog is a darn handy thing to have. Blogging also enables students to write collaboratively. Students can use the blog-postings to share experiences with others. Blog-postings have the additional benefit of potentially bringing in other conversations through horizontal postings. Lastly, it is asserted that students get more excited about these activities when they have an opportunity to see their words put into action. It also creates in the students the need to think carefully about what they write since it will be shared with their peers at the minimum, and a much larger population as a whole.

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