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Blogs as a Tool for Teaching

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Blogs have become commonplace on the Internet, but in higher education -- where methods of publishing scholarship and teaching students typically change at a glacial pace they are still considered experimental. Even though academic blogs exist, most scholars who do not have their own blogs doubt the value of this newfangled computer tool, or wonder what point it serves.

To a certain extent, I understand those doubts. Blogs have a lot of potential in scholarship as a space for discussion of print journals or books, as a means of helping support academic conferences, and even as an alternative to more-traditional venues for publishing. But in teaching, most of my experiments with them have been problematic, if not outright failures. Mind you, I think even the failures were interesting. Using blogs with students over the last few years has taught me three basic lessons.

First, just because you give students the opportunity to use a new and exciting technology doesn't mean they will want to use it. I first used blogs in a graduate course I taught in 2003 called "Cyberspace Rhetoric and Culture," which explored the Internet and other contemporary technologies that have had a significant impact on writing, communication, and teaching. I asked students to divide into three groups and created a collaborative blog for each group, organized loosely around topics we would be discussing during the semester. I purposefully made the assignment to write in the blogs open-ended: There were no specific requirements about the posts, not even how many each student should write. I didn't want to be more prescriptive because I felt that blogs were an evolving technology, and I didn't want to restrict their use; because I wanted my students to feel free to experiment with their writing; and because they were graduate students who I didn't think needed too much guidance.

But the dynamic exchange of writing that I was hoping for didn't happen. Some students posted repeatedly to the blogs, while others posted rarely; some posted long, rambling reflections, and others posted little more than links to other Web sites.

When I discussed the results with my students, who were otherwise quite capable writers and readers, they said that while I might have thought of this as a relatively unrestricted opportunity to write, they thought the assignment was just too vague.

In retrospect, that should have been obvious. Perhaps the main power of blogs is that nearly anyone with a desire to publish her thoughts for the world to see can do so; but to write in a blog takes a desire to reach an audience in the first place. After all, I keep my own blogs -- an "official" one about my teaching and scholarship, and an "unofficial" one about my family and friends, my politics, and what I do for fun -- because I want to, not because I have to (both are at <http://www.stevendkrause.com>).

The second lesson I learned is that blogs do not do a very good job of helping writers interact. E-mail lists do better, with each reply going automatically to all the other participants. Discussions on online bulletin boards also make interaction easier than on a blog. The sort of bulletin boards that are included with course-management systems like WebCT and Blackboard usually require the extra step of logging in to a Web-based site. However, that is not a serious obstacle because students have to perform other class functions on the site anyway. And because the bulletin-board

discussions are "threaded" in a format that allows for responses to individual posts, once a student is on the site, interaction is not difficult.

In contrast, blogs don't do a very good job of supporting interactive discussion. In the "Cyberspace Rhetoric and Culture" course where I first experimented with blogs, students working in supposedly collaborative groups barely acknowledged each other in their posts. In a different course I finished teaching in April, I experimented with a collaborative blog discussion instead of a class e-mail list, which I had used in the past. Although the students interacted more with each other than those in the earlier course, that is probably because all the students participated in the same blog, and because I required them to post each week. Still, the level of interaction was not nearly as high as it is in classes where I require students to regularly post to an e-mail list. With e-mail lists, students are more likely to post more often than they have to, compared with students using blogs.

The lack of interaction in my course's so-called collaborative blog wasn't significantly different from what I see in most other blogs, including academic ones. Although academic blogs are interactive and dynamic in the sense that there is metaphoric discussion and dialogue between bloggers and their texts, it isn't the same as the literal interaction that takes place via e-mail or in bulletin-board discussions. There are exceptions, of course, but comment spaces on most blogs are blank, and generally, the comments that appear are reactions to the writer's original post rather than efforts to engage in the sort of conversation that characterizes most e-mail and bulletin-board discussions. Even collaborative academic blogs -- like the excellent sites Crooked Timber (<http://www.crookedtimber.org>), an eclectic mix of writers about academe, politics, science, technology, and more; and Grand Text Auto (<http://www.grandtextauto.gatech.edu>), which describes itself as being about computer-mediated and computer-generated works of many forms -- are interactive only in the sense that they are run by groups of writers who have similar interests and goals. The posts on those blogs are more akin to individual articles in a single issue of a journal than to truly collaborative writings.

That leads to the third lesson I have learned: Blogs work best for publishing individual texts that are more or less finished, at least in the sense that blog writers generally don't ask their readers to suggest revisions. Blog writing is most commonly compared to journalism and to writing in a diary or journal, and although those comparisons are not perfect, they are fairly accurate.

Having students keep a journal is a common pedagogical technique in writing courses, and to date that has probably been my most effective use of blogs with students. In an upper-level writing course that I routinely teach, I have students create their own blogs and use them to post responses to specific questions I ask about assigned readings and class activities.

That assignment could easily be accomplished on paper, but there are several advantages to using blogs. First, I don't have to haul around a bunch of student notebooks. Second, students can include direct links to materials they find relevant to their entries; on paper a mere citation is the best a student can do. Third, because the blogs exist in a public space, students can read and comment on each others' entries. In fact, I have students write about their classmates' blogs, a task that would be difficult to manage with paper notebooks.

Of course, those three lessons are based on my limited experiments, and blogging is a moving target. A couple of years ago, Blogger, a Web site for creating blogs, did not support comments, a feature that obviously increases dialogue between blog readers and writers. Now it does. New features -- like audioblogs, photoblogs, and subscription technologies like RSS, which feeds new posts to subscribers -- are emerging all the time, altering the very definition of "blog."

Beyond the technical advances, blogging is becoming more useful as a teaching tool thanks to the efforts of teachers who are experimenting with it. In my field -- English -- most of those innovators are graduate students and junior faculty members, intent on making blogs a more inviting and interactive space for our students to write in. Besides using blogs as a student publishing space and as an alternative to e-mail discussions, many academic bloggers are experimenting with more complicated and feature-rich open-source software, like WordPress, Drupal, and Plone. And I am certain that many of my colleagues have had more success than I with using blogs as a collaborative and interactive writing and teaching tool.

In other words, it is not just changes in the tool that alter the possibilities of blogs; it is new teachers with fresh perspectives as well.

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