

Blogs in College Teaching

This bulletin continues our Web 2.0 series with one of the easiest tools to integrate into classroom use, the Weblog or “blog”. We will present examples of blog projects that demonstrate their potential to engage students in reflection and discussion, as well as guidelines for their use. Also included will be some basics for getting started with your own class blog project. You can find additional resources on Web 2.0 tools on the CTL website at: www.neiu.edu/~ctl/teaching/web2.html.

What is a blog?

A blog is a personalized web site that allows quick and easy updates by its owner. While blogs originally developed a reputation as diaristic and lacking in substance, “...blogging has evolved to [be] a respected vehicle for editorials on specific topics” (Educause, 2005). According to Will Richardson, “Blogging is a genre that engages students and adults in a process of thinking in words, not simply an accounting of the day’s events or feelings” (2008).

Typically, blog posts are text entries combined with links to related sites as well as image files and, often, video or audio clips. Each post is dated and posts are listed in reverse chronological order, so that the most recent entry is shown first when you go to the site. Many blogs are maintained by one owner/poster, with comments added by others. Some blogs, however, have multiple owners/posters, which allows for greater variety of opinion around the main topic of the blog.

Why use blogs for a higher ed course?

Does your course require students to absorb and discuss information? Do you look for assignments that provide opportunities for reflection and sharing of opinion around course material? Do your students benefit from a bit of debate on the meanings they derive and the perspectives they take? If so, you may want to add blogs to the types of activities you use in your courses. Richardson tells us that “through the unique process of blogging...students are learning to read more critically, think about that reading more analytically, and write more clearly. And they are building relationships with peers, teachers, mentors, and professionals within the Weblog environment” (2008).

Can you provide some examples?

From *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines*:

- “After completing each course assignment, and review[ing] the instructor’s assessment feedback, the students then post responses to the following reflective questions on their weblogs: (a) What did you learn in the process of completing this assignment? (b) How will you apply what you learned from this assignment to the next class assignment, other courses and/or your career?”
- “In terms of peer review, students paste or attach drafts of specific course assignments to their blogs. Other students in the class then review these documents and post responses to the author’s weblog. Guiding

questions for the peer review process can include: (a) What did you learn from reviewing this document? (b) What were the strengths (e.g. content, writing style, format and structure) of the document? (c) What constructive advice and/or recommendations could you provide for improving the quality of this document?" (2008).

From *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*:

- A description of one student's blog tells us, "readers of her site will find reflections on the work she did in class, homework assignments handed in through the Weblog, and links to articles that she has found relevant or interesting to her studies...Readers will also find comments from classmates, teachers, and from Scott Higham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from the Washington Post who mentored her through her article process. Ultimately, [her] Weblog became her online archive of all the work related to our class" (2008).
- Another project was based on a book assigned in the course. "...I thought to use a Weblog to have my students create an online reader's guide to the book. In the process, I contacted the book's publicist to see if the author might want to join us in our study of the book...after a few back and forth e-mails...she agreed. So, while my students read and commented online, [the author] was able to follow along and then respond to a series of questions they had at the end of the book" (2008).

How do I get started?

The following are some points to consider when developing a blogging assignment for your class:

- Seek out a few blogs with topics related to your class, and have your students read and discuss them. Google Blog Search (<http://blogsearch.google.com>) is one service that lists blogs by topic.
- Demonstrate the blogging activity by starting your own class blog first. Allow students to follow and comment on your posts, and talk with them about your experience. Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>) is a popular option for those new to blogging.
- Don't assume all your students are familiar with the use of Web 2.0 tools. Walk them through starting and posting to a blog, or find a web-friendly class member to do so.
- Consider creating an account at a newsreader service such as Google Reader, from which you can link to and keep track of all your students' blogs.
- Introduce outside influences. Invite colleagues or relevant authors to interact with your students through the blogging process.
- Blogs are not packed away in boxes at the end of the term. Think about how the project can be structured so that the blogs have the potential to continue to be of value after the class ends.

What are some guidelines for blog projects?

As with any new activity or resource, you will want to discuss guidelines for blogging with your students at the beginning of the project.

- Remind your students that they are not only representing themselves to the world, they are also representing the class and to some extent the school. Talk with them about what it means to address the audience of the Internet.
- Remember that your class blogs may attract others who are not part of the class. Prepare your students for potential discussions with strangers. Don't let this possibility stop you, however. Richardson tells us that his six year old son is a blogger; prepare your students well and they will be better able to handle public discussion.