



Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom

Comments

On this:

However, to use blogs merely as a tool for private journaling is to privilege our understanding of journals as private writing spaces without considering the benefits of weblogs as public writing. Whether as researchers investigating a topic, pundits championing a cause, or expressivist writers exploring their feelings about themselves and others, students can also easily share a journal, not just with a teacher, another class member, or the entire class, but potentially with any interested reader on the Internet.

Whether this is done needs to be a student's choice. I don't think a writing class should require students to journal write publically. I think a writing class can easily and wonderfully use blogs, yes, but always it must be the writer's choice on what is public outside of class.

The only exception would be a course description that clearly stated up front that the course was one in public writing, and ultimately I believe that course must be an elective.

Also, if students do choose to make their blogs public, I think some reading and discussion of the possible implications of that would be in order.

Posted by: Nick Carbone at June 21, 2004 08:53 AM

Charlie and Terra write:

"In our classes, students use their blogs for a wide range of writing, much like a combination of a commonplace book and a diary put together. Blog entries include:

- * Reading responses;

Articles and items of interest that they find on the web that are related to class--texts about writing, for example;

- * Research responses (akin to the double-entry journal as defined by Bruce Ballenger in *The Curious Researcher*);

- * Personal explorations on topics ranging from "Ten Things I Really Like About Myself" to favorite family traditions and pet peeves; and

- * Off-topic blogs/journals. Our students, of course, have an open invitation to submit off-topic blogs/journals. Off-topic posts have included a lament about a flea-infested apartment, a link to an

article about the Sims Online, a link to downloadable Esheep--and "They're so cute!" comments--

and various day-in-the-life-of-a-college-freshman blogs.

Here's what I wonder. All of these are good ideas, and blogs make it easy enough to post stuff to the WWW. But these aren't particularly new ideas -- public writing. We've been using that argument about the Internet in general for as long as it's been around. We used that in talking about file sharing, about using email discussion lists (Mike Day's "Tapping the Living Database" leaps to mind.), in our earlier writing about the benefits of online discussions and bulletin boards. The Isaacs/Jackson text on the benefits of public writing was put together well before blogs burst onto the scene.

So I guess the question is, what's the advantage of blogs in all this? Do they make it public writing easier or better or different than having students use email list, newsgroups, public bbs's, WWW pages, and so on?

Posted by: Nick Carbone at June 21, 2004 09:09 AM

An off-the-cuff response... few people write "college essays" when they leave college. But many people blog outside of academia.

Thomas Jefferson's view of higher education as a tool for creating the next generation of leaders prepared those future leaders for membership in an educated elite. Education is more democratized now, and more people who don't have classical training in rhetoric (and so forth) are in positions of power, and are using different forms of discourse. I wouldn't advocate ditching all the traditional forms and using, say, text messaging or computer games as texts in the composition classroom. Still, students in college who turn first to the Internet as a source of information probably benefit from being taught to write for the Internet, if only so they can see how easy it is to post a mistake or a half-understood truth.

I used to teach my freshmen how to make a web page, but we got caught up in the design stage. Blogs permit us to get right into authoring hypertext, bypassing concepts such as how to FTP files, or how to lay out a page. (They can get to that later, in more advanced classes.) And blogs are different from email lists, newsgroups, and bbs's because those aren't as public. (Okay, Google does search newsgroup archives, but remember what happened when DejaNews suddenly stopped making its archives available... Google might possibly do that again tomorrow.)

Blogs are just the latest development, and of course they aren't the be-all and end-all of the evolution of rhetoric, so you're right to ask a tough question, Nick.

I'm very conscious of what happens when one forces a student to blog publicly... I feel students should have a wide choice of topics -- in part, because nobody wants to read "forced blogging" ("The answers to the questions in chapter 9 are...").

Posted by: Dennis G. Jerz at July 3, 2004 01:10 PM

Nick,

I'm curious about your reasons for thinking that required public writing should be an elective only? Is it an ethical issue? After all, there are other course tracks in many universities where students are required as part of their degree work to do things outside of the safety of the classroom. K-12 student teaching and engineering internships are two that come to mind.

Posted by: charlie at July 3, 2004 11:22 PM

I can't speak for Nick, but the cases that come to my mind revolve around the confessional, personal stories that one often finds in a freshman comp course. I can also imagine problems from some students who have restraining orders against individuals to whom they'd rather not publicize their whereabouts.

I personally try to address this by showing students multiple examples of times somebody blogged (or uploaded e-mailed or IMed) something they later regretted.

Posted by: Dennis G. Jerz at July 4, 2004 04:45 PM

Dennis,

Right. Terra and I acknowledged above that "many writing assignments include opportunities for deep, personal reflective writing that is not possible within the public eye." For those that feel this is a must, then public blogging is not the right venue. Of course, one would hope that writing teachers are rhetorically savvy enough to recognize when their assignments are not "public" friendly :)

As for the restraining order idea, well, I'm not really in favor of students using anything more than their first names--even better, a screen name--on their blogs. Anonymity provides a degree of privacy while the words are still public.

Posted by: charlie at July 4, 2004 11:06 PM

Charlie, I guess I'm leary of required public writing, public beyond the classroom, because it reminds me of that thing you sometimes hear parents say to their kids on a forced trip: "You're gonna go and you're gonna like it. Now shut up and get in the car."

That's not to say you or anyone else conducts their class that way, with that tone. But I do think one of the important things in teaching writing is for students to come to see themselves as the author(itie)s of their own work. I need to assign writing for the class to have something to do -- even if it's simply to say write some pages by next week. But if I insist students share their writing beyond the class, even if it's not confessional writing or especially personal, then I've taken that decision out of their hands.

So I don't do that. So were I teach again and use blogs, I'd want a private blog default, with students having the option to make their blogs public.

I think it's especially useful too in an age of Alexa and Google and Technorati and other archiving tools. I want students to be free to be, well, stupid for lack of a better word. Free to say dumb and embarrassing things. But I don't want to force those things, along with the good stuff, to be public. Students can choose to go public with any of their writing, but I can't bring myself to require it.

Unless the course description makes clear that its purpose is to do public writing and students then opt in. That's it, I believe in opt in.

Posted by: Nick at July 15, 2004 04:16 PM

Sorry I'm joining this late -- hectic workload this summer and limited internet connections :)

It wasn't our intention to suggest that blogs are better than other available technologies, but maybe our piece came across that way.

My students post everything to the class weblog in one form or another -- blogging or commenting to someone else's blog. And with the comments and blogs links along the right side of the main page of the class weblog, we can see who's blogged recently all the time and we can see comments all the time. I have access to this stuff from anywhere -- all the time. I like having all of my students' writing, questions, comments, responses, etc. housed in one spot where everyone can find them. I have never had a student who doesn't appreciate this very same feature.

With the amount of writing and communicating my students do, a listserv is just too clunky-- multiple assignments and threads with multiple posts by each participant at all times of the day, seven days a week for an entire semester. I'd have a hard time keeping up with all that email, and I know my students would, too. Ick. Now I'm imagining trying to keep up with the amount of email traffic I'd have if I converted everything my students do on the blog to a listserv.

Another consideration for me is spam -- I run anti-spam software and so do my students and that stuff isn't always reliable. A bad subject line gets labelled as spam and no one reads it or it gets lost. And my students get so much email as it is -- they're away from home for the first time, trying to keep up with their families and pals at other schools -- it seems like a good idea to get them out of their email for a while and out into other parts of the cyberworld.

I can't speak for anyone else's students, but mine have a hard time getting their email accounts set up the way they want them sometimes. Lots of them have their email set to automatically download to their home computers. And if they're doing that, then they only have access to the class listserv material on their home computers. What happens if they go home for the weekend? All that class listserv stuff isn't at their fingertips. I know that's kind of a minor issue, but I've run into "I'm at home and my work is on my computer at school" problems. Having everything on the course weblog tends to eliminate this.

How is using weblogs different than something like a website? I'm thinking of websites as static, rather than interactive the way my course weblog is. I like webpage projects... but I'm using the course weblog as an interactive community space. I think individual webpages are limiting in terms of community interaction.

I'm also thinking of how easy it is to teach my students to navigate the course weblog and post to it. Teaching students to create their own webpages takes time that I'd rather spend writing and discussing writing. I think teaching students to use and navigate our class weblog is just as easy (and less clunky) as teaching them to use Blackboard. I know my students have continuously appreciated not having to wait on blackboard to get to their class stuff. The class website is just so much more user-friendly than Blackboard.

I don't really want to echo Charlie and my article too much, but I also like that the course weblog is public. That space is different than a gated blackboard space. My students know that their writing is On The Web. They know it from the first day of class. They also know, by looking at the course website and the syllabus and by my introductory remarks about the class that

1. I don't require personal writing, typically. Any personal writing on the course weblog is welcomed, but they always need to keep in mind that anyone stumbling onto the course weblog could potentially read it.
2. They're publishing their work to the Web under whatever username they choose, so there is a failsafe anonymous feature to blogs. In f2f classes, this makes life very interesting because they know each other by name in class, but sometimes have no idea which name/face goes with

which username. So sometimes, their writing to the course weblog is anonymous even to each other.

3. Posting to the course weblog is a requirement, just like posting to a blackboard or listserv would be in another class. Perhaps this is a "shut up and get in the car" type situation. But how is this different than requiring students to write/keep personal-writing-type journals in their composition classes? As a composition student, I'd have dropped a class like that in about ten seconds. The fact of the matter is that a student who doesn't like the idea of posting work to the WWW can drop the class and get into another one easily enough. Each course has its own requirements, which appeal to some students and not to others. I'm pretty sure that designing a course that appeals to every potential composition student is impossible. Finally, I'm very approachable and easy-going and you'd have to be a blockhead not to see that from the very first day of class. I'm willing to work around public writing issues that students have on an individual basis--my students know this. I've really never had a problem with a student not wanting to post work to the course weblog.

I like that my students can give our class URL to Mom and Dad whenever they want, if they want. They can share it with their friends, and they can see when someone discovers our class website. This public-ness has its own set of problems, but I think you can find problems just about anywhere. I don't think classroom blogging and the public-ness of it is for everyone. Me -- I'm willing to deal with the potential problems because I really like the results I'm getting from my students and I like their enthusiasm about the way the course is set up on the web.

Also -- I like being able to share what my students are doing with my colleagues. If I were using blogs through blackboard (if you really get creative, it is possible to do something like a community weblog on blackboard), ya'll would have a harder time accessing what we were up to.

This is sort of a drop in the bucket. There are lots of technology tools a person could use for teaching and I'm not familiar with all of them. I'm not convinced that I have to create an argument for why blogging is better than each and every one of them any more than I'd want to argue about why one peer response workshop format is better or worse than any other one, especially if I haven't experimented with all of them.

Posted by: terra at July 18, 2004 04:38 PM

The debate has centered on requiring vs. "not" public blogging as part of course assignments. I have a very practical question; one which I'll probably be asked by my colleagues as I introduce this phenom. How is blogging factored into course grades, if posts are under an assumed name? -- Cheryl

Posted by: Cheryl at August 3, 2004 09:10 AM

Hi, Cheryl, here's the way I do it in my classes: I encourage my students to blog under a pseudonym if they don't want their real names on their posts (which would eventually be cached by Google and would show up if someone searched for their names), **but** the student must share the pseudonym with the other members of the class. This way, the other students know that "PinkSnowboardStar" is really Lucy Blackburn, but no one else does.

Posted by: Clancy at August 3, 2004 10:27 AM

A nuts-and-bolts question for those of you who use "course blogs": Do you establish a blog through one of the free blogging sites and then have students post comments? Do you use the

blog sites to create "group" blogs that allow multiple users to write entries? Do you have individual students establish their own blogs and then link them to a central course site?

Posted by: Belphoebe at September 4, 2004 05:12 PM

Still having trouble with trackbacks: here's an entry on this essay from my personal blog:

<http://chutry.wordherders.net/archives/002625.html>

Posted by: chuck at September 25, 2004 04:23 PM

i didn't really have time to read the article or even skim over it. However, it seems that the article talks about how public blogging can be good in the classroom for academic use and for personal use just to socialize and receive feedback from others. I think blogging could be useful in the classroom and is good for expressive writing.

Posted by: Mizell at October 18, 2004 01:50 PM

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