



## Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom

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The web teaches us that we can be part of the largest public ever assembled and still maintain our individual faces. But this requires living more of our life in public. On the Web, the notion of a diary has been turned inside out: weblogs are public diaries. It is likely that the neat line we draw between our public and private selves in the real world will continue to erode, grain by grain. (Weinberger, 2002, p. 177)

Given that students have access to the Internet, weblogs can easily replace traditional classroom uses of the private print journal. While weblogs are normally public, free tools such as Blogger can be used for private, expressive writing. Students need only choose “no” when Blogger asks if they want a public blog site, keep their site’s location on the web secret, and exchange the URL only with the teacher, resulting in a private electronic writing space where they can be free to express the personal. 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.

Consider Sebastian Paquet’s personal knowledge publishing, “an activity where a knowledge worker or researcher makes his observations, ideas, insights, interrogations, and reactions to others’ writing publicly in the form of a weblog” (2002). For instance, academics bloggers Jill Walker, John Lovas, and Dennis Jerz use their weblogs to share ideas about their specific fields of interest, as well as the personal:

- On *Literacy Weblog*, possibly the longest running weblog in the field of English, Jerz discusses his research on memes and text games, provides links to resources for his students, and regularly critiques items from around the web on a host of cyberspace cultural issues.
- At *Jocalo’s Blog*, Lovas gives daily descriptions of his teaching and service work with De Anza College, often with introspective looks at professional issues for community college faculty.
- At her popular *jill/txt* site, Walker blogs about weblogs, hypertext, and narrative theory, while also sharing thoughts about relationships, family, and friends. Recently, she solicited feedback from the weblog community as she drafted her definition of “weblog” for the upcoming *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.

Each of the examples above can serve as good models for student blogging. Weblogs as personal knowledge publishing parallels Susan McLeod’s description of journals as a way to

help students explore and assimilate new ideas, create links between the familiar and the unfamiliar, mull over possibilities, [and] explain things to the self before explaining them to others. The analog for this kind of student writing is the expert’s notebook—the scientist’s lab book, the engineer’s notebook, the artist’s and architect’s sketchbook (the journals of Thomas Edison and Leonardo da Vinci are prototypical examples). (2001, p. 152)

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.

McLeod’s definition, though, along with other discourse on journals in composition, restricts journal writing to the completely private or the immediacy of the classroom. Weblogging, as a publishing phenomenon which allows anyone—even those with little technical expertise—to maintain a website and regularly write online, promises to complicate journaling with the introduction of the public. As two teachers who have used weblogs in our classrooms for the past two years, we have found that by extending the discourse to a large community outside of the classroom, our student bloggers regularly confront “real” rhetorical situations in a very social, supportive setting.

## Using Weblogs to Connect to the Valuable Public

Sharing journals within the writing classroom is not a new concept. Well before weblogs became popular, Chris Anson and Richard Beach (1995) encouraged teachers to extend the principles behind the dialogue journal to peer dialogue journals, where, working in pairs or groups of three, students share journals entries. Like weblogs can, peer dialogue journals provide students “with the social interaction and motivation to extend their writing” not available through private journal writing (p. 65). However, as Anson and Beach caution, the logistics of sharing print texts could make it difficult to coordinate and exchange dialogue journals in the classroom. As an alternative, they suggest emailed peer dialogue journals, “interactive environments” that can create “a strong sense of community in which students can assume an active role as a participant” (p. 76). Though they make sharing more logistically sound, emailed peer dialogue journals still keep sharing within the walls of the classroom.

Because of the benefits of social interaction, most writing teachers would agree that students sharing their writing—making their writing public—is important. For example, in their introduction to *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text*, Emily Isaacs and Phoebe Jackson note Kenneth Bruffee’s contribution to our understanding of the importance of public writing: Bruffee

emphasizes the value of the social nature of public writing, a condition he identifies as common in nonacademic settings. In his work, Bruffee argues strenuously for students to go public with their writing to receive feedback, on the grounds that public writing in classrooms deemphasizes teacher authority and promotes student-writers’ abilities to see themselves as responsible writers and to view writing as a social activity. (2001, p. xii)

Such principles inform our understanding of peer response and are now integrated into process theory. Writing teachers commonly use small group or full class workshops as the means for students to share their writing. By making their writing public in class, students begin to take

responsibility for/ownership of what they have to say rather than handing it directly over to a teacher-reader-grader. Writing teachers have also extended this notion to electronic discourse. Many use email as a way for students to share drafts or configure electronic writing spaces in course management systems. Teachers even create journal spaces in Blackboard or WebCT discussion boards.

These electronic spaces are not quite private; however, they are not quite public, either. For instance, Blackboard and WebCT, with their emphasis on content delivery and teacher administration functions, are classroom-only gated communities. Institution-maintained course management sites may have WWW addresses and contain links to other Internet sites, but as they move through the password-protected virtual hallways, students easily realize such online class spaces are not the information superhighway. Instead, they are only one way streets that pull content without contributing to the larger discourse which is the web. Within password-protected classroom spaces, these student writers are safely sequestered from the discourse community of the Internet.

Many common writing class practices, like the use of Blackboard and WebCT, reflect a restricted definition of public, a rhetorical situation with which students are all too familiar after years of writing for English classes: that of the classroom, a place in which the grade and the teacher are largely what matter. Recognizing this, teachers often try to expand the audience that students write for by asking them to articulate imagined or simulated rhetorical situations for writing projects, such as "write in the manner of the 'Talk of the Town' essays found at the beginning of each week's New Yorker magazine" (Bishop, 2004, p. 183). Or, teachers may ask students to choose a publication and write an article in which the subject matter, voice, and style are congruent with what might be found in that publication. The problem with such artificial rhetorical situations is that ultimately, the real audience is still the teacher—and students know this. As a consequence, some teachers have students work with real audiences outside of the class. Students write for class newspapers or zines and do service learning activities where the final product is shared with an organization or community

We believe, as Catherine Smith does, that students "take real-world writing more seriously when it is done on the web, where it might actually be seen and used" (2000, p. 241). Many students today regularly email friends and family, converse via instant message daily, participate in multiplayer online games with people from around the web, and surf Internet sites much as earlier generations read magazines and newspapers. Students see the web as a public, playful place different from the writing spaces they typically work in within the classroom. Recognizing this, some composition teachers now assign individual hypertexts or group hypertext projects such as webzines, hoping to tap into the students' sense of play and familiarity with online environments in order to stimulate investment in and engagement with their writing.

Student hypertext projects expand the concept of the public audience to include the entire web. Yet, weblogs as a social, public genre can have equal if not more appeal to a generation who enjoys seeing the private made public on *Survivor* and *MTV's Real World*, while also fulfilling the pedagogical goal of expanding audience outside of the classroom. When students hesitate to share their texts publicly—given the association of the word "journal" with the word "private"—an exploration of weblogging will clarify for them that a weblog is a public way of sharing ideas. Each semester, we introduce our students to weblogs by asking them to visit [weblogs.com](http://weblogs.com) and by engaging them in discussion of articles such as Rebecca Mead's "You've Got Blog: How to put your business, your boyfriend, and your life on-line" (2000). Through these activities and after a little time gaining experience as bloggers, students come to see weblogs as a fun communication medium in which they can and want to participate as writers and readers.

Weblogs, as an electronic publishing tool, also offer significant practical and pedagogical differences and advantages over student hypertext assignments for both writing teachers and students alike. In light of the following comparisons, writing teachers may appreciate Pat

Delaney's (2002) "analogy of the Dreamweaver and ftp-ed webpage as 'paper making' and blogging as 'writing on pre-made digital paper'":

- Webpage projects generally require specialized software, such as Netscape Composer or Dreamweaver, and a file transfer method, applications which may only be available in classrooms or school computer labs or need to be purchased or downloaded onto students' personal computers. Since weblogs are a browser-based application, students can work from almost any computer that has Internet access.
- Students then have to learn to use the specialized applications for creating webpages, understand server file management, and learn some HTML basics, requiring the teacher to act as a web design tools educator and technical support. Teaching students to use weblogs is very simple: most weblog programs use web-based forms where students can enter plain text, much as they would when creating an email or using an online discussion board.
- Teachers not only have to serve as technical support for using specialized applications, but also serve as techno-rhetoricians. Jonathan Benda (2001) points out that students "lack background in the principles behind designing a Web site that really communicates something to an audience" (63). With the emphasis on creating text and not graphical layouts when using weblogs, teachers can focus on writing for the web without getting into graphical design and visual rhetoric.
- Web pages that students create are usually static HTML—to be read, but without any opportunity for reader feedback on the site. Blog software is much more interactive; most include comment boards, allowing readers to easily attach feedback to any post.

Using Delaney's "digital paper," we've found that blogging and reading blogs prepares students to write online. Weblogs can serve as an alternative to hypertext assignments, or even make hypertext assignments more effective. In our experience, students sometimes get carried away with the eye-candy of website design—images, fancy layouts, Marcomedia Flash—at the expense of working on the alphanumeric part of their texts. Working with weblogs privileges writing: students are more invested in the writing that goes into end-of-the-semester hypertext projects when they've been writing for the web all semester. They learn rhetorical strategies for writing online before moving on to work with graphics. They also learn about how to make effective hyperlinks—a crucial part of website design *and* blogging. Thus, students spend more time developing their texts, rather than working mostly on graphics and choosing the "perfect" background. These texts likely end up being more rhetorically sensitive than without the intervention of the blog.

## **Weblogs as Social, Public Writing Spaces**

As writing teachers, we typically feel it our duty to protect our students, to create safe writing spaces where students can enjoy greater risk-taking. Traditional print journal writing, used as a private writing space, typically embodies this notion. It is no wonder that teachers fear having students post personal reflections, drafts, reading responses, and other writing assignments and exercises to the public Internet, preferring instead the locked doors of a Blackboard or WebCT site. For example, Charles Moran's

experience with Web publishing has made [him] consider a rather frightening possibility: that computer technologies, as we are presently using them, move all of us in our first-year writing courses toward the production and publication of 'documents' that will live in the public sphere, and away from more or less private writing that will help us compose our lives. (Moran, 2001, p. 40)

Moving journal writing to the web using weblogs where Internet surfers can read and link to student writing potentially opens our students' texts to the unknown outside of the classroom, but our experience with student blogging has shown that "less private writing" may equally help writers to compose their lives, albeit in a social, more public way. And even though this speculation about the positive aspects of public writing may disrupt established thoughts on what should be public and private, it is not out of line with collaborative process views. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1990) note that the solitary writer image permeates "the theory and practice of teaching writing" (6). Composition has traditionally privileged dialectic and Platonic perspectives on invention in writing (LeFevre, 1987, pp. 49-50). The scholarship often depicts the writer, working alone, drawing on deeply divined personal truths or engaging in inner dialogue as the means of creating knowledge. While composition theory and practice now recognizes the importance of collaboration and social interaction more than it did twenty or even ten years ago, we still suspect that our field's expressivist heritage may lead many writing teachers to put the private unnecessarily in front of the public, partially because writing teachers are themselves more comfortable with the private. As a consequence, many writing assignments include opportunities for deep, personal reflective writing that is not possible within the public eye. But what is the tradeoff for that kind of writing opportunity for students? Isn't it possible that the paradoxical situation of creating a risk-free space in which to enable risk-taking has led compositionists to forget a primary purpose of privacy, which is to provide a comfortable writing space, comfort which can also come from community?

Regardless, despite the fact that publicly posting to the web may limit some instances of deeply personal expression, we want to encourage writing teachers to be aware of their possible biases for private writing spaces when thinking about weblogs. In her 1987 report on a computer-mediated graduate course, Linda Harasim highlights some of the new options in education that computers have opened, suggesting that computers can, in some cases, be more effective than the traditional classroom (1997, p. 118). Below, we show that using weblogs in our classrooms has been more effective for at least some of our students because it has increased participation: our quieter students who typically don't participate in face-to-face discussions are participating in weblog discussions. Making a similar claim, S.R. Hiltz's early research in online learning concludes, "[W]e believe that one important requirement for realizing the promise of new educational technologies is to use them to create new learning and teaching environments that are more effective and exciting for at least some kinds of materials rather than merely trying to replicate the traditional classroom electronically" (1986, 104).

Differing in important ways from other genres traditionally used in the writing classroom and on the Internet, weblogs are, as Mark Federman explains,

an instance of "publicity" - the McLuhan reversal of "privacy" - that occurs under the intense acceleration of instantaneous communications. Our notion of privacy was created as an artifact of literacy - silent reading lead to private interpretation of ideas that lead to private thoughts that lead to privacy. Blogging is an "outering" of the private mind in a public way (that in turn leads to the multi-way participation that is again characteristic of multi-way instantaneous communications). Unlike normal conversation that is essentially private but interactive, and unlike broadcast that is inherently not interactive but public, blogging is interactive, public and, of course, networked - that is to say, interconnected. (2004)

Compare this to Jill Walker's observation on *jill/txt*, that "the traditional solitude of writers is so different from the companionship of blogs." Or pioneer edublogger Will Richardson's conclusions about his K-12 literature class where blogging "stimulate[d] debate and motivate[d] students to do close reading of the text" (2003, p. 40). Each of these is an instance of "publicity" that fits very nicely with Bruffee's social constructionist views of writing. For instance, Bruffee (1984) explains that "if thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is

internalized conversation re-externalized" (1984, p. 641). Blogging, then, with its networked, informal conversational style, is less thought, and more *externalized* public and social talk.

From a Bruffean perspective, then, weblogs can facilitate a collaborative, social process of meaning making, leading us to believe that weblogs as an instance of "publicity" enable a comfort zone, a social environment where anxiety about the teacher and of school writing is reduced, while also drawing on other benefits of writing publicly.

- When our students write about a bad day or a difficult personal experience of some kind, quite often someone else in the community will post a comment of consolation. One of Terra's students from the fall of 2003 posted a message about how having strep throat forced him to quit smoking—cold turkey. Several students posted encouraging words, including one who wrote, "I have only had ONE cigarette in the past 2 days, so I guess you can say that you are kind of an inspiration. Once reading your blog, I realized that I would never want to feel the way you did, and I am now going to try and quit." Another student in Charlie's class injured her ankle and was somewhat immobilized for a few weeks, unable to attend class and largely confined to her room. When students in the class saw her declarations of loneliness in her blogs, they more frequently responded to her posts, making a special effort to continue to include her in the blogging community that existed outside of face-to-face class meetings.
- In reference to peer dialogue journals, Anson and Beach explain through the sharing of their journal writing, that students "create their own social support network" (1995, p. 66). Comfort, then, as with the examples above, may be said to come from what Karen LeFevre has defined as resonance where "an individual act—a 'vibration'—is intensified by sympathetic vibrations" (1987, p. 65). One student noted in a mid-term evaluation, "I like the way that we have our own little corner of the world that we can do what ever (PG-13 guys) we want in it. If something were bothering us we could state it and then have our fellow classmates comment with solutions, help, or maybe just a kind word that will cheer us up." Blogging thus creates a sympathetic space through social interaction, friendliness, and positive, useful feedback—a place where writers don't have to become comfortable with their writing before sharing.
- Frequent blogging reduces anxiety about publishing to the web, about writing publicly. We've found that students' apprehension about blogging usually disappears within a few weeks as they become "comfortable"; for example, students often expressed views such as: "I think that as I got more comfortable with [the course weblog] my participation has increased."
- In our classes, blogging is a constant from the beginning of class to the end. There should be some long-term effects of public writing even after the first few weeks that aren't seen in classes where public writing is a once-a-semester or occasional project. For example, students have told us at the mid-term that they were very skeptical of blogging in the beginning of the class, but the initial discomfort they felt about sharing their work disappeared once they discovered it was actually fun to read everyone else's writing and be able to post comments when they were compelled to do so. Three weeks into the fall 2003 semester, when asked to evaluate their experiences with blogging, a student wrote, "I like blogging because I believe it to be a positive experience for shy people. At times I don't speak up in class because I get frightened. It's much easier for me to express my opinion on paper and it's easier for me to take criticism on paper. I think blogging will bring up new ideas that might not have been spoken in an in class environment. Many people aren't as intimidated to speak their mind online."
- Some students said they would read through what others had written in order to get ideas about what was acceptable and what had already been covered so that they wouldn't repeat the same ideas in their writing. Here we see that the writing students are doing has a direct impact on what others write: "I [read the messages already posted on a given topic or assignment] so I can get a feel on how others interpreted the assignment."

- Blogging represents the interaction of a community in the sense that all posts are subject to concerns about audience. In a classroom that uses weblogs extensively for posting content, as well as discussion and feedback from peers, the ongoing conversation becomes the voice of that community, which can make itself heard over the voice of any one, including the teacher. With the teacher no longer the overly predominant active reader and responder of student texts, students, as a community, take more ownership of their writing. Writing teachers should remember that much of the purpose of private writing is to create a teacherless writing space where students take ownership. Peter Elbow (1998), himself, arrived at freewriting as a means of escape from the anxieties created by a history of writing instruction. Private writing created a comfortable place where he could find himself as a writer; public writing through weblogging can do the same. One student writes:

When I first looked over the syllabus for the class before the first day of school and I saw the word 'blog' all over the place, I was like what??? I had never ever heard of the word blog... So I got a little nervous, but I realized that I probably wasn't the only one who didn't know what a blog was, so I decided not to freak out and keep a positive outlook on the class. Now, 3 weeks into the class, I love blogging! It's really cool! I really like how you can read what other people wrote, and other people can comment on what you wrote so you get some feedback from your class mates. It's also a really good way of communication and you get to know people in a sort of different way, other than meeting them face to face.

Another student wrote:

What I have enjoyed most about blogging is that even though we have certain topics to expand upon, I can post my own thoughts and feelings in a relaxed environment. As I have already stated in a previous blog, being in relaxed environment when you write is probably one of the best things for your writing. You can always write how you feel about the desired topic that you have to blog about.

- Like print journals, blogging encourages the sort of informal writing where students can share invention work, drafts, half-formed ideas—always with sharing as the common focus. But because sharing is the common focus, students still have a rhetorical situation to consider since they are writing for a real audience; as a consequence, they seem to take more pride in all of their work, even exploratory writing. One student notes, "Blogging is a interesting thing that has been really fun for me to learn how to do and I know that with each new blog I will get better and better at expressing my message in a neat, clear and concise way so that all who read it will get a feel of me and my ideas." And as Theodore Humphrey (1999) suggests about online writing in general, students may also work harder: "Their work is constantly being shared with and receiving responses from their peers as well as their professor. The rhetorical concept of audience emerges almost without awareness into the consciousness and practice of the students." On working harder, one student confessed, "I could show improvement in the 'insightful' department. I've noticed that my blogs aren't as insightful and original as the other blogs."
- Some would point to other student web texts—zines and student websites—and suggest that they, too, can accomplish the same goals without the need to share drafts and other exploratory writing, that students can wait until a finished product is ready to share publicly. Yet, we feel that such texts diminish the process of drafting and do not create discourse about the drafting process in the same way that making the entire process public does. In only publishing the final draft—such as in the case of many zine projects

and student websites that we have seen—isn't this practice overly valuing the final product and, in doing so, also undercutting writing process pedagogy?

## Writing for the Future

In "Digital spins: The pedagogy and politics of student-centered e-zines," Jason Alexander's (2002) introduction talks about how "staged" audience is in first year composition. Alexander points out that even just sharing papers among students on the Internet is not enough, and goes on to problematize posting to the web, suggesting that students realize that their only *real* audience is fellow students and the teacher. However, we would say that by using weblogs in our classrooms, we've turned ownership over to students and given them a real audience. In life outside of the classroom, much like on the Internet, writers will not always know who their audiences are when they write. A report, memo, letter, or fax might cross the desks of numerous people that the writer has never met during the course of a workday. Risk is part of writing, and our students experience that risk within a very supportive community of writers. When we first began teaching with blogs, Charlie recalls being apprehensive himself about putting course syllabi, feedback on drafts, and other teacherly responses up on the web for everyone to see, even though he had been posting to an academic blog for almost six months. But we both feel now, that the shared meaning we and our students have gained from blogging our courses makes it all worthwhile. Imagine. Classes within and among institutions could interact through the use of weblogs as more institutions integrate student blogging into the curriculum (see, for example, the University of South Florida's First-Year-Writing Program's *Writing Blogs* site).

We hope that researchers and practitioners will take our exploratory, experienced-based musings and extend the dialogue on weblogs in the classroom, opening themselves to the many possibilities of publishing to the web now that blogging makes practically anyone a web author. Maybe others will come to feel, as we do, that there is something exciting about the way that weblogs facilitate sharing and build community by putting more of our lives online.

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