

Chapter 6

Fresh and Forward-thinking: Using Blogs for Educational Purposes

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We are intrigued with blogs – online, Web-based journals in the form of frequent, chronological publications of thoughts and ideas, typically within a specific theme or area of interest. We have been exploring the educational potential of blogs and blogging for some time now. We started blogging for several reasons:

- To be heard, to have a voice on issues of personal interest (e.g., Joni blogs about her thoughts on teaching at <http://thoughtsonteaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/>), and to disseminate ideas to our professional community.
- To engage with our domain and professional community as lifelong learners.
- To connect with others who have similar interests, and to build a network of colleagues and collaborators.
- To formatively share and test ideas and perspectives that might otherwise not see the light of day (via a formal presentation or journal article).
- To collect and organize ideas to support our teaching and scholarship (for example, Joni has gone on to publish articles based on posts in her blog).
- To engage with Web 2.0 technologies in a relevant and meaningful way that supports our practice.
- To establish a reputation as a source of ideas for postsecondary online teaching practices, online education, and eLearning design.

Educational Uses of Blogging

But using blogs for educational purposes is a bit different. In terms of using blogs with our students, we have frequently had students use blogs for reflective journaling – summarizing class discussions, reflecting on what they learned during a class activity or project, sharing ideas for applying what they have learned to their own practice, and so on. We have also used blogs with students to accomplish a number of other objectives that we will quickly elaborate on in the following paragraphs.

Articulate Ideas and Make Thinking Visible

We have used blogs to encourage students to articulate their ideas and perspectives, make their thinking visible, and be brave and bold about their contributions to the greater discourse. At the same time, we have used blogs to make our own thinking visible about a course. For instance, Joni has created a course-specific blog where she shares her thoughts about the course in progress; see her IT 5130 Ideation Journal – <http://it5130journal.blogspot.com/> – for a current example. This allows students to see how she is thinking about what works and does not work, what she wants to do next time, ideas that occur to her because of the in-class discussions, and so on. She used to do this privately, in a course notebook that was for her eyes only. Now, with a course

ideation blog, students get to see her thinking, and she models reflective practice in the process.

Promote Reflection and Analysis

We also use blogs to engage students in reflection on the domain, requiring them to critically analyze ideas, perspectives, theories, research, and designs. Because student blogs are linked together in our course communities, there is a social context that supports a unique caliber of thoughtfulness, very different from the private reflective journals we have used in the past.

Connect Students to a Professional Community of Practice

We also use blogs educationally to encourage students to see themselves as participating and contributing members of a professional community of practice. That is, we have students use their blogs as (a) avenues for garnering feedback on ideas from course and community colleagues and (b) opportunities for collaboration with colleagues.

Promote a Habit of Writing

We use blogging in our classrooms also as a way to promote writing. We have found that blogging helps students express themselves and share their ideas and perspectives in an articulate way; that is, it helps them to write, organize their writing, and develop a habit of writing. We have included a rubric (see Table 1) as an example of how we assess students' blog activity.

Introduce Web 2.0 Tools

Finally, we use blogging to introduce students to Web 2.0 tools. Web 2.0 tools can be used as vehicles for self-expression, inquiry, construction, and collaboration as well as to support lifelong learning endeavors. Further, using blogging for educational purposes enables us an opportunity to take advantage of the Web 2.0 tools students are using in their personal – and often professional – lives.

Another benefit of introducing blogging and other Web 2.0 tools for our students—who are in the field of education—is it gives them an opportunity to learn to use Web 2.0 tools as aids to instruction with their own students. For example, Ellen has integrated blogging and Web 2.0 tools like delicious into her EPSY: 6600 Human Motivation class (see <http://delicious.com/motivation09>)

Drawbacks of Using Blogs for Educational Purposes

While we have been very satisfied with using blogging for education purposes—for many of the reasons addressed in the preceding section—we recognize that there are some drawbacks to using blogs for educational purposes that faculty should consider before integrating them into their teaching. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly address a few common pitfalls to consider.

Time-Consuming

Maintaining a blog is a time-consuming proposition. For it to be valuable, you need to be active – reading others' blogs to continue to learn about the domain and connect with others, and contributing new posts to your own blog. Therefore, you should keep this in mind when and if you consider using blogging for educational purposes.

Very Public

Blogs can be setup as public or private. Unless your blog is set up to be private (so that only those invited have access), a blog is very public. While this is one of the strengths of blogging, it can also be seen as a drawback for many. When having students set up blogs, it is important to help them understand this, and act accordingly.

Informal Writing

Blogging tends to reinforce a more casual, informal writing style. We actually like this because a more informal writing style can be more inviting to the community, allowing community members to feel more comfortable participating in the conversation. However, that sort of writing style is not appropriate for all activities or projects, so it is helpful to keep this in mind when involving students with blogging.

Tips for Using Blogging for Educational Purposes

We have been using blogging for educational purposes for a few semesters now. Throughout this process, we have learned a few things about what works and doesn't work (at least in our courses). In terms of blogging tips, we have a few to share:

- Select a very specific, unique focus for the blog.
- Do not ask students to share anything publicly that may do their reputation or credibility harm.
- Establish a blogging schedule. For example, Stephen Downes has a great blog called Half an Hour (see: <http://halfanhour.blogspot.com/>). The title refers to the amount of time he spends each day (or, at least tries to) sharing with the community via his blog.
- Pursue opportunities to connect and collaborate with colleagues. When people connect with you via your blog, respond. When you go out searching others' blogs, make a connection to your own.

Concluding Thoughts

Recently, we saw a photo of a gentleman wearing a t-shirt he received as a gift from his wife. Stenciled on the shirt was, "My blog has an audience of 2." It is certainly desirable to have more than an audience of two for your blog. To achieve this, you have to strive for a balance between the intrapersonal (personal reflective journal) and interpersonal (connecting with others in discussion) aspects of blogging. This means that it is not enough just to post in your blog – you have to read and connect with other blogs, linking your posts to others, and so on. This requires time and energy, but it helps keep you up-to-date on what others in the community of practice are thinking and keeps your own work fresh. Therefore, involving students in blogging can help them develop the needed disposition to participate in and with the professional community of practice, be active contributors to the community's knowledge base, and engage in lifelong learning so their practice is always fresh and forward-thinking.

Table 1. Blog Reflection Rubric

Developing (0 points)	Proficient (20 points)	Strong (30 points)
Overall Use of Blogs		
Some required blog entries and comments have been completed. (0 points)	Five blog entries are submitted, though not all of them may give evidence of a substantial contribution. (7.5 points)	Five blog entries are submitted, all of which are substantial. Beyond the required five, your blog includes many more reflections. (12 points)
Intellectual Engagement with Key Concepts		
Blog entries make some reference to issues raised through readings and/or class activities. (0 points)	Blog entries demonstrate awareness of most of the key issues raised through readings and/or class activities. (5 points)	Blog entries demonstrate engagement with the important issues raised through readings and/or class activities. (7.5 points)
Personal Response to Key Concepts		
Blog entries convey little evidence of a personal response to the issues/concepts raised in the readings/activities. (0 points)	Blog entries convey evidence of a personal response to the issues raised in the readings/ activities, and demonstrate that the author is capable of reflecting on learning, technology, and society. (5 points)	Blog entries convey extensive evidence of a personal response to the issues raised in the readings/ activities, and demonstrate the author's growth through reflection on learning, technology and society. (7.5 points)
Engaged Writing		
Blog entries demonstrate some evidence of correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. Audience will have little trouble reading your blog. (0 points)	Blog entries show a good command of Standard English. No problems for your audience. Most blog entries include links. (2 points)	Blog entries show a very good command of Standard English and have some flair and originality. Blog entries may contain multiple links. (3 points)

Modified from a rubric found at http://www.catholicforum.com/churches/cathteach/outcomes_rubric_reflection_journal.html

Bios

Dr. Joanna Dunlap is an associate professor of instructional design and technology at the University of Colorado Denver. An award-winning educator, her teaching and research interest's focus on the use of sociocultural approaches to enhance adult learners' development and experience in postsecondary settings. For over 13 years, she has directed, designed, delivered and facilitated distance and eLearning educational opportunities for a variety of audiences. She also works in the Center for Faculty Development as the Faculty Fellow for Teaching, sharing ideas about teaching with online and on-campus faculty across the university.

Ellen Stevens is the Founding Director of the UC Denver, Center for Faculty Development and an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology in the School of Education & Human Development. She holds a B.A. in Experimental Psychology from California State University, San Bernardino and a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Stanford University. She was the Assistant Director for the Center for Teaching Enhancement at the University of South Florida, and has offered numerous workshops about issues in college teaching in a variety of settings. The focus of her scholarship is university faculty and college teaching.