

For Teachers New to Weblogs: An Introduction to Blogging

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What is a blog?

A weblog, or blog, is an online journal, whether individual or collaborative, facilitated by a simple web publishing interface. Unlike a print journal, a weblog is public, with the most recent posts always greeting the reader in the front (the top of the home page). Most blogs have comment boards attached to each post for reader response and discussion.

Many definitions often try to classify blogs into personal/diary-like, filter, or knowledge publishing. While many blogs have characteristics of more than one category, these terms as a group do help to define the genre as a whole. Weblogs are used for a wide range of purposes including, but not limited to,

- Day-to-day reflection on personal experiences (family, friends, special interests).
- Commentary on recent events, politics, and social issues.
- Building professional or academic disciplinary knowledge.
- Sharing of links to and reviews of other Internet websites and postings.
- Podcasting .
- Joining in larger discussions with other bloggers.

Why do teachers ask students to blog?

- **Weblogs are an easy self-publishing tool for creating an Internet website.** Two popular weblog hosting services are Blogger.com (owned by Google) and WordPress.com (a popular open source weblog application). On either site, teachers and/or students can sign up for a free weblog and create a site within minutes. Posting to a weblog is as easy as creating and sending an email message.
- **Bloggng is interactive.** Weblogs are a highly collaborative writing space which invites commentary from fellow classmates and the teacher, the enactment of a collaborative, social constructionist epistemology in which writing is less of a solitary act.
- **Weblogs and writing on the Internet are already a significant part of students' culture.** According to the Pew Internet & American Life project's January 2005 report on "The state of Blogging," "27% of internet users say they read blogs," and 48% of bloggers "are under age 30" (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_bloggng_data.pdf). Some students are already engaged in the literate practices of composing and reading weblogs. Many may have a LiveJournal or Xanga site or keep a blog on MySpace.
- **Bloggng gives students agency.** Weblogs as individual writing spaces are managed and configured by the student, giving them more ownership of

their writing and the work which they do for the class.

- **Blogging helps students learn that their writing has value to other people.** In the social rewards and sense of community (within and beyond the classroom) it offers, and in its ease of use and approachability, blogging offers incentives for students to write regularly, and writing regularly helps them become better writers.
- **Blogging requires writing for real audiences outside the classroom.** The normal classroom environment is a protected space in which students write for either the teacher, student, or simulated audiences. Blogging offers students the opportunity to analyze and write for a real public audience.
- **Blogging can be an important part of developing liberal education skills in civic rhetoric.** Weblogs can be agents for civic action. Students can learn to become active members of our democratic society through reading and joining in various online blogging discussions regarding politics and societal issues.

What should teachers new to blogging know?

- Many teachers who use weblogs in the classroom find that having a blog of their own helps to better understand the rhetorical and technical concerns their students will face.
- Keeping a central course blog is a good way to distribute information.
- It's important, of course, to read what you're asking students to write, and it's often useful to show students that you're reading by commenting (publicly and constructively) on what they write. Teachers can also read their student blogs before class, and then reference individual posts as a means to stimulate class discussion or highlight student participation in their blogs.
- Not all writing need be public writing, and some traditionally personal or private writing topics may not be appropriate for weblog writing.
- Since weblog writing is public writing, it's useful to discuss the implications of writing for a public audience -- including the need for a sense of writerly decorum and the awareness that writing on the Web is public, archived and searchable. Students who may be writing regularly on MySpace and Facebook, but lack understanding of appropriate content for public audiences, can benefit from the experience of weblog writing in the classroom.
- It's essential to set clear evaluation criteria for student blogging, and it's useful to model the sorts of blog posts and comments you're looking for. Do not expect that students will blog regularly without some specified requirements. Word count requirements, mandatory post formats, writing prompts for blog postings, or criteria concerning blogging frequency and depth of posting and commenting are various methods for accomplishing this.
- Blogging works best when it is an integral part of the course. Introduce it at the beginning of the semester and have students blog regularly.
- Rather than having each student keep an individual blog, first time teachers can get their feet wet with blogging by using a single, classroom community

weblog. Make all students authors of the same class weblog. Have two or three students or groups of students responsible for posting each week. Then have the class join in and discuss these posts.

RSS News Aggregators

It can be very time consuming to read and follow individual weblogs for an entire class by visiting each site regularly. The teacher and students can take advantage of RSS news aggregators to subscribe to all course weblogs. The news aggregator will regularly check all blogs to which the user is subscribed and provide a listing of new content in one, easy-to-read interface.

News aggregators can also be useful for having students subscribe to other weblogs (those of non-class members) and various news sites from around the Web. In fact, teachers may find a use for news aggregators in a class for which they do not have students keep weblogs.

Two popular free news aggregators are Google Reader and Bloglines. Both Mozilla Firefox and Mozilla Thunderbird also have news aggregator features.

Activities

Many teachers will find weblogs different from discussion forums because they are organized by user rather than by topic. Each student blog can serve as an individual, interactive learning record of work produced during the course.

When a teacher imagines a weblog as a public, online journal, many uses for the weblog will come to mind:

- **Peer Review.** Blogs provide a good space for peer review of student paper drafts.
- **Reading Responses.** Have students respond to assigned readings in their weblog posts.
- **Research Projects.** Have students document all of their work on a research project in their individual weblog: research proposal, resource annotations, invention for initial drafting, project progress reflections, research paper drafts, and final project reflection.
- **Group Projects.** Have a group keep a team weblog or have students subscribe via RSS to their fellow team member blogs. Students can also keep project logs in their blog documenting the process and work done by the team.

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