

COMMENTARY

New Solution to the Classroom Blogging Problem

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There has been a push in academia to incorporate digital technology into the classroom to capture students' attention and better achieve learning goals. However, not all educators are sure where to start or which tools are best to use. This article will focus on one particular technological tool that has been around for thirty years and has been incorporated into classroom settings for almost twenty years: blogging. Blogs are web journals that allow users to interact through posts and comments (William and Jacobs 2004). Scholars have noted both benefits and challenges to implementing blogging in the classroom (McKnight et al. 2016). In this piece, I reflect on five years of posting student work on my personal anthropology blog to offer potential solutions to many of the previously identified challenges.

Background

Blogs are web-based publishing tools that are easy to use and customize to each blogger's needs. As readers interact with blogs by commenting on posts, they provide an interactive space that facilitates the sharing of information (Frye, Trathen, and Koppenhaver 2010). Blogs are of particular interest to teachers because of their educational benefits. Blog use enhances student learning through information sharing, critical thinking, and discussions of blog content, and students take greater ownership of their work when writing for the public (Frye, Trathen, and Koppenhaver 2010; Kuo, Belland, and Kuo 2017). The public nature of blogs is the primary motivation for incorporating blogging into teaching; several studies report improvements in critical thinking, learning retention, and writing skills among students when a larger audience is present (Foster 2015; Frye, Trathen, and Koppenhaver 2010).

There are two primary means of applying blogging in the curriculum: 1) students directly publish and comment on either a class or individual blog and 2) teachers use blogs as electronic repositories of student work (Beldarrain 2006; William and Jacobs 2004). Additional uses of blogs include professional networking and supporting collaboration among students over large distances (Divitini, Haugalokken, and Morken 2005). These multiple uses make blogs an attractive option for educators looking to

incorporate technology into their teaching while also supporting students in gaining the digital literacy skills they need for professional development.

Unfortunately, the integration of blogging into teaching has been challenging. Students do not participate in classroom blogging for several reasons: a lack of access to technology; a lack of knowledge about how best to use the technology; a perception that blogging is too much work; and a fear of unintended consequences for expressing opinions because of the lack of privacy when publishing to a mass audience (Andergassen et al. 2009). Several solutions have been put forward to mediate these issues, but, while worthwhile, they do not cover the full scope of the challenges, particularly those related to students' concerns over privacy and their lack of digital information skills. I have been a blogger for several years and have incorporated blogging into my teaching. I want to share my experiences with how I incorporate my students' work into my professional blog to demonstrate an additional way to enhance students' learning while also meeting their educational, professional, and personal needs.

Reflection

I was inspired to create an anthropology blog to supplement my students' course resources and to educate the public (see <http://humerusrevelations.blogspot.com/>). I chose this medium because of its familiarity, and I believed it to be the best tool to reach a mass audience. About two months into the exercise, I was inspired by the quality of work my students produced, and I realized the blog should be used as a publication source for my students' work. I wanted to reward their hard work beyond just ascribing a grade, and I wanted to add additional voices to the blog to help educate its audience. Later, I realized that by publishing my students' work, I was creating a repository of work that future students could use as models.

Over the five years of my blogging activities, I worked at two institutions of higher education: a northern Nevada community college serving a large proportion of minority students, primarily Latinos, as well as a mid-Missouri Historically Black College & University (HBCU), which serves primarily African American students. Both institutions serve a sizeable number of traditional college-aged students (18-24-year-olds) and first-generation college students. My teaching responsibilities included introductory and advanced anthropology courses, although the latter was the result of my changing from a two-year to a four-year institution.

A total of sixty-six student blog posts derived from work completed in my introductory and upper division anthropology courses have been published. Students in my introductory classes complete assignments requiring problem solving and research skills, in which they are given information and expected to answer questions. Students in upper division courses are responsible for creating their own research questions to investigate and answer. Students are required to compose reports that a general audience can read and understand, thereby making them blog-appropriate from the beginning. I have also

featured expository pieces describing students' internship and research experiences. The body of student work includes a variety of pieces from all four subfields of anthropology.

Students' work is selected for publication based on several criteria: overall assignment grade, creativity, maturity in reflection, and clarity. These criteria permit flexibility in choosing student work, thereby allowing work that may not meet all of the assignment requirements to be considered. This allowed me to publish a student's well-researched piece even if it diverged from the assignment requirements. Students whose work is chosen are invited to have it published on the blog after they have completed necessary revisions based on the feedback I provide. This mimics the peer-review process of academic publishing and provides students with an opportunity to improve their writing.

Because of this revision requirement, I will offer the publishing option to no more than five students per assignment. Typically, only one or two agree to feature their work. This revision requirement is the primary reason students elect not to publish, as they overestimate the amount of work necessary for revisions. I have also seen students choose not to publish due to assignment content. This commonly occurs among students who hold strong religious beliefs and write on topics that run counter to their beliefs (e.g., assignments concerning human evolution). Overall, the majority of students invited to publish opt to do so. There have been a couple of semesters when all of the invited students agreed to publish. This led me to either publish each piece as a separate blog post (e.g., individual reflection pieces) or publish similar assignments together in a single blog post (e.g., primate conservation pieces grouped by primate type). Combined blog posts allowed all of the interested students to feature their work without overwhelming readers, who include the general public and my student body.

Students react favorably to the opportunity to have their work published. Reactions range from verbal and written exclamations of excitement to shock and amazement because they did not believe their work would be eligible. After the completion of the class, a number of students have expressed how much the opportunity meant to them and assisted them in building their self-confidence. Students whose work was almost eligible for publication often learn from the feedback I provide to them and produce publishable work for the next assignment, which supports the previous research regarding the utility of blogs in increasing student learning.

It is not just the students whose work gets published who benefit. Students who read these published pieces, which are provided as supplementary course materials, learn the expectations of the assignment or realize where they made mistakes by comparing their work to the previously-published pieces. They also comprehend the class subject matter better through the language and lens of their classmates' posts. It is not just anthropological subject matter that students grasp. A number of students who were enrolled in biology classes have commented that they gained a better understanding of that subject matter by reading students' pieces on Mendelian genetics.

Conclusion

The approach I take in publishing my students' work on the blog is not one that is widely promoted in the literature. Most of the literature provides examples of students publishing their work directly onto a blog prior to peer or instructor review, which has been shown to stifle students' work in both quantity and quality (Foster 2015). My approach, however, provides students with different options for learning through blogging. Students can use the published student work as a model of expectations for their own work, and because they can opt not to publish, they can freely express themselves without worrying about how their work will be received by the general public. This is particularly important for students who are still refining their writing skills but still convey important and valuable information and opinions. Furthermore, this approach removes the pressure that students with restricted access to technology or limited digital literacy skills may feel when direct blogging is required. Students still learn how to navigate the blogs through short tutorials I provide them in class and through the Learning Management System on how to access posts and how to comment on them. It is through interacting with the blog posts that they begin to practice these skills. Therefore, the approach that I take may be an acceptable alternative to solving several of the problems that previous educators experienced with incorporating blogs into the curriculum.

The need for faculty to incorporate technology into the curriculum will increase more than presently felt as more and more technologically savvy students enter into higher education. Faculty will embrace this enthusiastically or with trepidation, but we must acknowledge that tools are only as good as their purposes. Blogging is one such tool available to enhance student learning. Over the past twenty years it has proven to be a useful means of enhancing student learning but not without limitations. This reflection provides an additional means of using blogging as a way to enhance student learning by providing students the opportunity to publish their work online, encouraging self-confidence in their work and providing models to future students. The model provided here may be a viable solution to the previous limitations encountered by others who have used blogging previously. As it has successfully worked for myself over the past five years I encourage interested educators to explore blogging options in their curriculum, not only to benefit students but also the general public at large who may or may not be completely familiar with anthropology.

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