

7 things you should know about...

Blogs

Scenario

Professor Thomas has been looking for new ways for students in her International Politics course to connect—with her, with one another, and with the material. Knowing from experience that reflecting on concepts and writing about them helps crystallize her thoughts, she decides to experiment with blogs. Blogs are personal online journals that serve to capture thoughts and comments and post them to a public Web site for others to read and respond. Blog entries can be informal and are posted without the approval of a moderator or editor.

She gives a brief demonstration of the blogging application, showing the students that it's quick and simple to create an entry. Going to her blogging application, she types in her comments, includes a link to the related article online, and adds minor formatting. With a single click, the entry is posted to her blog online.

Each student creates his or her own blog. Dr. Thomas instructs the students to set aside regular time for blogging, encouraging the students to write about topics discussed in class and how events in the news inform their understanding of global politics. She tells the class to read each other's blogs, as well as her own, and to comment on the postings. In her own blog, Dr. Thomas models the kinds of blog entries she hopes students will write, and many of her entries are her responses to student blog posts.

As the course proceeds, she finds that most students take to blogging. When she uses a student blog entry to seed a posting on her own blog, she generates much more interest among students than had been possible in previous years. The trackback feature allows Dr. Thomas and the students to reference individual blog posts, similar to an informal literature citation. She also enjoys the community dialogue that results from others' commenting on her postings—or challenging them.

By the end of the course, Dr. Thomas sees that introducing her students to blogging is a straightforward and interesting way for them to generate, share, and keep up with timely and topical class information. They form rich connections with one another and the content and—because of the reflection and sharing—find great relevance in the material. Several students continue to blog after the course is over. Dr. Thomas plans to include richer media, such as photographs and short audio segments, in the blogs in her next class.

What is it?

A blog—a shorthand term that means “Web log”—is an online, chronological collection of personal commentary and links. Easy to create and use from anywhere with an Internet connection, blogs are a form of Internet publishing that has become an established communications tool. Blogging has evolved from its origins as a medium for the online publication of personal diaries to a respected vehicle for editorials on specific topics. In their latest incarnation, blogs represent an alternative to mainstream media publications. The personal perspectives presented on blogs often lead to discourse between bloggers, and many blog circles generate a strong sense of community.

Who's doing it?

Although online journals have been around longer than the term “blog,” they gained momentum with the introduction of services that allow users to publish blogs easily, without needing to code HTML. Today, thousands of people use services including Blogger and Moveable Type to simplify, automate, and accelerate the online publishing process.

Blogs are showing up in venues ranging from entertainment and commerce to news and politics. Many blogs are the musings of a single author; others focus on a particular topic and feature the voices of several authors. There are group blogs, family blogs, community blogs, and corporate blogs. WarBlogs (a product of the Iraq war), LibLogs (library blogs), and EduBlogs (targeting education) are just some of the emerging types of blogs. In educational settings, faculty are using blogs to express their opinions, to promote dialogue in the discipline, and as an instructional tool, and students are increasingly using blogs both as personal commentaries and as a required part of certain courses.

How does it work?

A blog can be thought of as an online journal, and maintaining a blog is as simple as using an online e-mail program. Bloggers enter posts into a blogging application, add formatting or hyperlinks, and save the post. The application adds the entry to the blog, making the content available online and alerting users who have subscribed to that blog's content. Entries can include text, hyperlinks, images, or multimedia. Visitors can read postings, submit com-

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ments, find blog entries by date, and search the site by keyword. Most blogs allow visitors to subscribe using an RSS feed or another service. Effective blogs tend to be updated on a regular basis.

Most bloggers solicit feedback, fostering two-way communication between readers and authors. Readers can provide feedback by leaving comments on the blog page itself or by posting a response on their own blogs and linking back to the original post—a feature called trackback. Trackback notifies bloggers when one of their posts is referenced by another blog, making it possible to determine the popularity of a post based on the number and diversity of incoming links to a post. Through linking, commenting, and feedback, good (or at least popular) ideas spread quickly through the informal network of blogs (the “blogosphere”), while unpopular ideas are simply ignored. Being referenced by a popular blogger brings instant attention and often credibility, and repeated linking enhances the reputation and authority of a blogger. Through this system of recommendations and referrals, a collaborative filtering capacity has emerged in the blogosphere.

Why is it significant?

Because blogs engage people in knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate, they often attract a large and dedicated readership. Blogs are becoming an important component of the Internet landscape, providing authors and readers with an avenue for unedited expression, reaction, and connection, without the censorship of mediated chat rooms or formal media outlets.

The simplicity of creating and maintaining blogs means that open discussions can be established almost immediately, making blogs an ideal venue for far-reaching discussions among the Internet community on new or timely topics. Blogs foster the growth of communities, and the dynamics of collaborative filtering and recommending/referring may provide new ways to evaluate, vet, and critique student-created knowledge.

What are the downsides?

Because blogs are often produced and maintained by individuals, they can include biased or inaccurate information. Users visiting a blog might see it as factual or authoritative when, in fact, it is the online equivalent of a soap box: a place to speak and to be heard. Unlike chat rooms, blogs are unmediated and therefore offer a different type of venue for individuals to express themselves and air their opinions, ideas, and attitudes. While this may be acceptable for a personal blog, it might be inappropriate for a blog hosted on an institutional server. Intellectual property is another area of concern for higher education, given the implications of hosting blogs that might include content that has been used without proper attribution.

Blogs are also highly volatile. Bloggers can edit or delete posts, and this transient nature can make blogs difficult to archive or index. In addition, the time-limited relationship of students to

institutions influences the length of time a student blog should be hosted, yet removing posts from the blogosphere once a student has graduated could confound those who linked to the post.

Where is it going?

Blogs are proliferating at an exponential rate. Estimates suggest as many as 50 million people are now blogging. Because blogs are easy to create and modify, they occupy a unique niche in cyberspace—that of highly personalized discussion forums that foster communities of interest. Blogs are public and long-lived, and they weave themselves into close relationships with other blogs. As such, they may serve as an educational tool for reflection, knowledge building, and sharing.

Blogs continue to benefit from several years of experimentation and evolution, both within and outside of education. By carefully evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, educators are learning to set guidelines and expectations to maximize the benefits of blogs. Structured exercises and clear goals are further enhancing the value of blogs in education.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Put into practice with an understanding of their benefits and limitations, blogs are an increasingly accepted instructional technology tool. Blogs can be used for reflection about classes, careers, or current events; they can also capture and disseminate student- and faculty-generated content. RSS feeds make blog content accessible through newsreaders, allowing bloggers to increase the sharing of this information among interested individuals.

Blogs offer students, faculty, staff, and others a high level of autonomy while creating a new opportunity for interaction with peers. Blogs provide a forum for discussion that goes beyond coursework to include culture, politics, and other areas of personal exploration. Students often learn as much from each other as from instructors or textbooks, and blogs offer another mechanism for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and acquisition.