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Welcome to the Blogosphere: Using Weblogs to Create Classroom Community

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Abstract: This paper introduces weblogs (“blogs”) and their potential uses in the computer-assisted classroom, especially in composition and literature courses. First, we provide background and terminology on the evolution of blogs and blogging. Then, we consider the characteristics of blogs that appear to be relevant in classroom teaching, including their interactive nature, their multi-author capacities, and their public presence. From these features we suggest numerous ways in which blogs might be used effectively in the CA classroom, as well as some potential problems worth taking into consideration.

In this paper, we investigate the possibilities of using blogs to foster classroom community. The practical portions relate specifically to Movable Type¹ software, but may be adapted to other blog software. The first part of the paper describes blogs in general, while the second half focuses on pedagogy.

¹ <<http://www.movabletype.org>>.

What are Blogs?

Weblogs (aka “blogs”) have exploded in popularity in the last few years. While originally blogs were nothing more than frequently-updated HTML files, now blog software (“blogware”) has made creating, hosting, and updating blogs even easier. As this new web genre emerges, we might begin to form a definition of it. The fact that “blog” is a contraction of “weblog” suggests that a blog (a) must be on the web and (b) must in some sense “log” something. The web publication of blogs is easy enough to understand, but “log” is ambiguous. NCSA Mosaic’s “What’s New” page,² begun in 1993, is often cited as the first weblog, and it simply “logged” new sites

² <<http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/software/mosaic/docs/old-whats-new/whats-new-0693.htm>>.

as they appeared on the nascent World Wide Web. Early bloggers sometimes called themselves “pre-surfers” because they were in effect editors of the web, supplying their readers with links and minimal commentary. But as the medium has grown, the web itself is no longer the message of (most) blogs. Many on-line diaries also call themselves blogs, but these “log” an individual’s daily thoughts and activities, often with few outside links if any.

Blogger.com, the most popular blogware provider, defines this amorphous form as follows: “A blog is a web page made up of usually short, frequently updated posts that are arranged chronologically—like a “what’s new” page or a journal. The content and purposes of blogs varies greatly—from links and commentary about other web sites, to news about a company/person/idea, to diaries, photos, poetry, mini-essays, project updates, even fiction.”³ Some of the characteristics common to blogs are that they stay current, address some web-connected audience, and represent the interests and sensibilities of an author or set of authors. While commentary on links of particular interest is still a staple of blogs, it no longer seems a necessary characteristic.

Blogger.com alone hosts approximately one million blogs. Other publishing options and blog hosts add to that number to constitute the ever-expanding “blogosphere,” a term that describes the huge set of blogs in cyberspace. It’s been said that no one reads blogs except other bloggers, but even if this is so, the sheer number of bloggers ensures that the blogosphere is a site of dynamic rhetorical interchange. Many recent articles have called attention to just how interactive this exchange can be as bloggers have actually influenced the news and politics in some instances. See the recent *Guardian* article “Spread the Gospel” or PBS’s blurb about their original documentary *Welcome to the Blogosphere*, which maintain that blogs are “independent media critics . . . regularly challenging the reporting of some of the country’s leading newspapers, including THE NEW YORK TIMES.”⁴ A generic feature which emphasizes this public aspect of blogs is the blogroll, typically a sidebar listing links to other blogs. The blogroll is a symbol of the vitality of the blogosphere because in effect it represents the blogosphere as a discourse community.

What are Blogs Used/Useful For?

On the web, blogs are used for numerous purposes, including disseminating information, keeping up with friends and family, and revealing the minutiae of one’s personal life for public inspection. Blogger.com suggests that company intranets “allow team members to post related links, files, quotes, or commentary” in developing specific projects and also “keep everyone in the loop, promote cohesiveness and

³ <<http://www.blogger.com/about.pyra>>.

⁴ <<http://guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,989783,00.html>> and <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/mediamatters/303/blogs.html>>.

group culture, and provide an informal ‘voice’ of a project or department to outsiders.” In the second half of this paper, we will consider specific uses of blogs in writing classrooms, especially the possibilities for creating discourse communities. We will invoke specific aspects of blogware, including multiple authorship, commenting on blog posts, and creating blogrolls.

Building Classroom Community

The example of the blogosphere demonstrates the power of blogs to build community. Blogs create community by linking to other blogs to create a mini-web of sorts; by creating communities of common interest; and even by opening up personal lives to a wider community. As teachers, we can draw upon many aspects of blogs to engage our classes in issues of public rhetoric, and model the class as a discourse community. Ways to achieve this goal include using a blog in lieu of a typical homepage, investigating the public dimensions of blogs as a genre, and assigning blogs as individual or collaborative classwork.

Blogs as Main Web Interface

Since its inception, idealistic visionaries and critics of cyberspace have gestured toward the radically democratic implications of the web; however, few web pages (and even fewer class web pages) fully exploit this capacity for democratic participation. But many figures who helped revolutionize the genre claim that blogs can help realize that democratic goal. Law professor and founder of InstaPundit.com Glenn Reynolds claims that blogs enable the First Amendment to “finally live up to its promise on the Internet.” Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School recently hired David Winer to help them fulfill their mission of investigating “the real and possible boundaries in cyberspace between open and closed systems of code, of commerce, of governance, and of education, and the relationship of law to each.”⁵ And Winer himself maintains that blogs are “consistent with the philosophy . . . that the Internet should be open and free, usable by everybody.”⁶

Using a blog as the main web interface for a class is a step toward this possibility by enabling frequent, reflective instructor updates, and greater student interaction even in matters of content and design. Such a class interface is not a mere administrative resource, but an extension of class discourse. Blogs enable frequent updates and arrange them chronologically, so a blog homepage becomes a fluid text, reacting to and recording classroom events. Because a blog is much more interactive than a traditional class website, the class page is transformed from a mere tool to an image of the class as an intel-

⁵ <<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/home/mission>>.

⁶ <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=348552>>.

lectual discourse community. The class web page can be used not only as an administrative aid, but also as a reflective space for instructors and students alike. The class page opens a new rhetorical space. Instructors can elaborate on the material presented, reflect on events in class, and solicit reactions from students (posted as comments). With comments, students can ask questions to which instructors can then either answer or ask other students to respond. New questions or directions for the class can arise from this interchange.

Through this interchange, instructors can “hear” and respond more rapidly (perhaps even immediately) to student concerns, adjusting the next class’s agenda to more appropriately deal with issues or skills with which students are still struggling, even after class has been dismissed. Students can use the commenting features of blogs as discussion forums have been used in the past, as a place to voice thoughts left unarticulated during class time. In this respect, the blog space can become another space for shy students to have a “voice” in the classroom. Of course instructors have always retained the ability to adjust class content and schedules to better meet students’ needs; however, the blog homepage provides a space for students to more explicitly express those needs in writing that is more immediately viewable by their peers and teacher. The blog demonstrates and facilitates real change arising from writing. Moreover, the ease with which students can post comments (they can do it from any place they are connected to the Internet, and they do not need to remember a password) may encourage them to post more frequently and readily. Frequent postings will provide students with more incentive to check the site regularly, and thus become more involved and actively part of the community it provides. The class website thus becomes an analogue to and an expansion of class discourse.

Although this kind of increased interactivity is only furthered by using the blog in lieu of the traditional discussion forum or class email discussion list, the current version of Movable Type commenting may limit the effectiveness of this option. Theoretically, the blog can function as a sort of discussion forum, where an instructor can post a “prompt” as a blog entry, and where the students can respond by posting “comments.” Though the logistics of setting it up and using it this way vary from the steps involved in establishing forums with common formats like PHP, the advantage to using the blog as a discussion forum is that the instructor can maintain more control over the design and the overall “look” of the pages in a way that the PHP discussion forum technology does not allow. More importantly, perhaps, comments embed class discussion in the homepage itself, demonstrating the integral importance of class discussion to class content.

Because responses are not nested or threaded, their appearance

is not as clean nor are conversations as clearly coded as other discussion forum technologies. Though the PHP forums allow you to respond to another response by “quoting” it, so that the original text is embedded in the response, the commenting function in Movable Type does not support this kind of nested response. But the same effect could be achieved by copying the text you are responding to (using the Edit menu or keyboard short-cuts) into your comment before actually commenting. While not hard to do, this process is surely not as easy as using the “quote” capability in PHP forums. For these reasons, it seems that the blog is more useful for activities involving multiple authors and tracking processes over time, rather than as a substitute for discussion forums.

Considerations of Enabling Commenting

Whether or not you use the blog as a discussion forum, the commenting capability can present a challenge to the instructor. Since anyone in cyberspace can comment, there is always the danger that someone, perhaps a student or perhaps someone else, will post something inappropriate. Such a comment can always be deleted by the instructor, and may even prompt a larger conversation about the “public” element of the class webpage and the kind of responses that are appropriate for the site’s intended audience. Commenting might be dispensed with altogether by granting all class members authoring privileges, thus enabling students to contribute to the page in ways once reserved for the instructor. The details of this possibility are discussed below and in the appendix. In theory, blog technology can help realize the vision of a class full of authors functioning as an active discourse community with relative ease.

Using Blogs for Collaboration

While the implications of creating on-line writing communities are far-reaching, maintaining such a community might become an undue burden on the instructor. Not only would instructors be committed to regularly writing posts and reading responses, but they would also have to monitor and reply to student-authored contributions. However, if these implications seem too time-intensive, blogs can still be used in other, less time-demanding ways to help create writing communities. Collaborative writing projects are one such example.

Blogs for small writing groups could be effective tools for coordinating a collaborative writing project. The students would access the instructor’s blog account, but only see the blog(s) to which the instructor assigns them as authors. Since blogs typically consist of brief, frequent posts, they can be especially useful in helping students

work through the writing process. A writing group blog ultimately becomes a space where individual work can be shared and in which revisions can be negotiated. For instance, the blog could host discussions about developing a group voice, a difficulty inherent to collaborative writing.

Writing group blogs can help make the writing process transparent not only to the students, but to instructors as well. Instructors can see what writing projects evolve, and follow along as the group makes collective decisions. An instructor could be a fellow author of the group blog, and intervene or redirect the process with posts or through comments. The latter may be preferable because it is less intrusive, and then the instructor can model effective feedback with comments.

Commenting can be a valuable feature for both instructor and students. The nature of the pop-up comments box requires discursive response, but since comments are recorded and linked to specific posts, they allow immediate conversation on points of contention among the group. Although the same drawbacks in comparison to other discussion forum options apply here as well, the existing commenting capabilities can still be effective and integral to the process.

When the instructor creates the blog for the students, he or she assigns students as authors with various privileges. As authors, students may create posts, edit others' posts, and even alter the content of one another's posts, if the instructor grants these privileges. Editing others' posts might be useful for copy-editing and proofreading and can actually promote "true" group authorship, but it is also a potential source of group discontent. Instructors will have to weigh the pedagogical advantages against the potential headaches such privileges might bring. These pitfalls can be avoided by simply not allowing the "edit all posts" permission when adding authors.

Blogs as Rhetorical Genre

A study of the conventions of blogs as a genre can help students understand larger rhetorical concepts such as genre conventions and public discourse. Depending on the particular skills a course is hoping to emphasize, the blogosphere can become the focus of class conversation. For example, as a sub-set of web publishing the blogosphere forces you to consider web pages as a genre, and blogs as a subgenre. If one is teaching definitional arguments, the concept of "blog" begs a definitional question—"What is one? How do you know? What are the criteria which differentiate them from other web pages?" (This paper gestures toward a definition, above.) These sets of questions could also be pushed or used to teach evaluative arguments as well. Once students articulate criteria for defining blogs,

they can push on them to determine what makes a blog “good.” Additionally, since one of the most popular sub-genres of blogging has become the political pundit blog, instructors could design an activity in which students use blog content as the basis for rhetorical analysis to determine the ways in which bloggers write to a specific audience and employ certain techniques and strategies to build ethos within that community. Andrew Sullivan is one famous example of this type,⁷ but there are plenty of others.

⁷ <<http://www.andrewsullivan.com>>.

Blogs and the Public Sphere

Like other kinds of writing published on the web, blogs are “public” by definition. The extent to which they are truly “public” depends on the extent to which they are open to various people’s participation, and so blogs might stimulate a conversation concerning the nature of public discourse. What if a blog exists on the web, but no one reads it? Although somewhat reminiscent of the clichéd conversation concerning the tree’s sound if it falls in the forest when no one is around to hear it, thinking about blogs in this way can potentially help students understand the degree to which certain discourse communities are or are not readily available to them both as students and as citizens. For example, is a blog “public” if it doesn’t pop up on a Google⁸ search? In reality it is there, but if it cannot be found, how public is it? What if a blog is easily accessible, either through Google or some other set of links, but employs the specialized language of bloggers in general, or a particular community specifically? How does this use of specialized language affect the size of the community a blog imagines as its target audience? These questions are just a few that a consideration of the new genre raises.

⁸ <<http://www.google.com>>.

Conversations about publicness and publics necessarily invite questions of audience, and the blog interface can help students better understand these as well, especially since many blogs create an “insider” audience by their use of meta-terminology and references. In fact the entire “blogglossary” is a reflection of the way that bloggers have crafted their own audience of those already “in the know.” Moreover, since the audiences authors envision for their blogs affect the content they put on them—say a political pundit’s target audience as opposed to a dissertation blogger’s target audience—considering an author’s rhetorical task can help students determine who that target audience is.

⁹ See, for example, <<http://www.samizdata.net/blog/glossary.html>> for a list of terms that we call, only partly facetiously, a blogglossary.

Blogs and Student-Added Links

Another way to help students understand the concept of audi-

ence is to actually enable them to contribute to the class website. We mentioned group authorship above, but more conservative options include allowing students to add their own links to a class resources list or an annotated bibliography. By using a combination of features such as Movable Type's "bookmarklet" function and blogrolling.com's blogroll feature, instructors can enable students to contribute to the class website in two different ways.

One way is to set up an account for the course, using blogroller.com so that students can add links to the front page of the class site at will, from any computer with Internet access (see Blogrolling assignment in the Appendix). While the blogroller function does allow students to include a short description which appears when the mouse rolls-over the link, it does not allow the students to create a new "blog entry" with a full description or comment on the site itself. Employing this feature enables instructors to provide their students with limited authoring privileges but with a low risk in terms of sacrificing control over the course website's content.

A second way in which instructors can enable students to contribute links may be more pedagogically useful, because it allows students to not only create a brand-new blog entry with the link, but also provides them with the requisite space to describe or comment upon the site more thoroughly. By creating a specific blog page in Movable Type and enabling students as "authors" (details on how to do this in the Appendix), instructors can essentially create an "Annotated Bibliography" page that would function similarly to the AddLink tool of the Critical Tools suite.¹⁰ Instructors can create categories on the Bibliography page, and grant students as much or as little editorial control over that page as the instructor feels is appropriate. The additional benefit of setting students up as authors in this fashion is that once they are entered into the system and granted the requisite administrative privileges, they are then able to create their own individual blogs. This option provides students with full authoring privileges for their own individual pages which are housed on and part of the overall course page, while preserving instructor control over the content for the class website as a whole. Moreover, once students establish their own individual blogs, these blogs can then be added to the class blogroll as a separate category of links, thus creating a mini-blogsphere of all class blogs.

¹⁰ <<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/criticaltools>>.

Individual/ Student Blogs

In addition to helping students learn about genre, publics, and the concept of audience, blogs can also be used in a variety of ways on an individual level. By enabling students as authors using Movable Type, instructors can grant students the administrative privileges to

create their own individual blogs. Though housed on the instructor's blog server, these individual blogs would be the students' own to design and control. While such individual blogs might take up to an entire 50-minute class to set up, the time would be well invested if done at the beginning of the semester, so the students can use the blog as their virtual composition books on the web. Additionally, if class time is used only to teach the bare essentials, it could be kept to a minimum of 30 minutes. Theoretically an instructor could require students to keep a class blog over the course of the semester. Unless one is teaching a creative writing class, however, the kind of informal and creative writing that blogs tend to foster may present a challenge in terms of grading. But if rhetoric and literature (or any other) instructors using the blog designed more course-specific guidelines, it seems that the blog could be used as an effective place for students to track their progress and processes for a variety of tasks over time, especially for the duration of the entire semester. These individual blogs could be used to track progress and development of final paper ideas by logging in with posts that included students' thinking toward a thesis, drafts of introductory paragraphs, outlines, idea maps, rough and multiple drafts, etc. Of course, an instructor probably would not want to use the blog to comment on student work, because this compromises the confidentiality of student grades. To date, there is not a way to password-protect the page or the comments so that only the page's author could see them. As discussed earlier in this essay, the blog seems most useful in its capacity to provide a public medium for posting progress toward longer/larger projects, or as a space for group members to work on the same project.

Blogs Inspire Self-Reflection

Individual blogs can provide a self-reflective space similar to the Learning Record Online (LRO).¹¹ Both provide a place for students to post their observations, and thereby provide a body of texts from which students could draw their evidence for self-assessment. Personal or process blogs might not work well with the LRO, however, because the latter already provides an online medium for students to post their observations in a private space. The duplicated work and inherently public nature of blogs might confuse or frustrate students.

Only time will tell if the burgeoning blogosphere builds on its potential and continues to create vital, productive rhetorical spaces. It is our hope that instructors who use blogs in their classrooms both here in the CWRL and the blogosphere beyond will contribute to the growing conversation about blogs and the classroom that we began on *bloggity-blog*.¹²

¹¹ <<http://lro.cwrl.utexas.edu>>.

¹² <<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~tnelson/tnelsonblog/bloggityblog>>.

Appendix

1. Setting Up a Blog

See Ryan Starck, CWRL systems analyst, for instructions.

2. Accessing Your Blog

As Ryan's instructions indicate, the editing interface for your blog will be through a website with a URL like this:

`http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/username/usernameblog/mt.cgi`

You will see a log-in screen:



A login form with the following elements:

- A text input field labeled "Username".
- A text input field labeled "Password".
- A checkbox labeled "Remember me?".
- A button labeled "LOG IN".

See Ryan's instructions for username and temporary password. After logging in, you will see a menu screen like this:

-  [CREATE NEW WEBLOG](#)
-  [ADD/EDIT WEBLOG AUTHORS](#)
Add authors, set permissions
-  [EDIT YOUR PROFILE](#)
Change password, contact info, select language
-  [VIEW ACTIVITY LOG](#)
System activity, logins
-  [SET UP BOOKMARKLETS](#)
Bookmarklets enable one-click publishing

Change your password in the “Edit Your Profile” section in the first screen you see. After you change your password to something you can remember, go back choose “Create New Weblog.”

You will be taken to a screen like this:

Main Menu > Create new weblog

Name your weblog. The weblog name can be changed at any time.

Weblog name:

son of bloggity-blog

Enter the path where your main index file will be located. An absolute path (starting with '/') is preferred, but you can also use a path relative to the Movable Type directory. Example:
/home/melody/public_html/blog

Local Site Path: (?)

/export/home/niff/public_html/niffblog

Enter the URL of your public website. Do not include a filename (i.e. exclude index.html). Example:
http://www.site.com/

Site URL: (?)

http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~niff/niffblog

Enter the path where your archive files will be located (this can be the same as your Local Site Path). Example:
/home/foo/htdocs/blog/archives

Local Archive Path: (?)

rt/home/niff/public_html/niffblog/archives

Enter the URL of the archives section of your website. Example:
http://www.site.com/archives/

Archive URL: (?)

www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~niff/niffblog/archives/

Select your timezone from the pull-down menu.

Timezone: (?)

UTC+0 (Universal Time Coordinated) ▼

SAVE

You will need to change some of the site values. Use “Niff,” above, as a guide.

After entering your new blog, look for this toolbar on the left of the screen:



These buttons will allow you to control the content and appearance of your blog.

3. Posting to Your Weblog

Use “new entry” to make a post, or “edit entry” if you need to make edit an existing entry. “Upload file” will link to existing documents. The posting screen looks like this:

Main Menu > bloggity-blog Editing Menu > Create New Entry

Title Primary Category

Entry Body
Look at how it works

Extended Entry [\(?\)](#)
See?

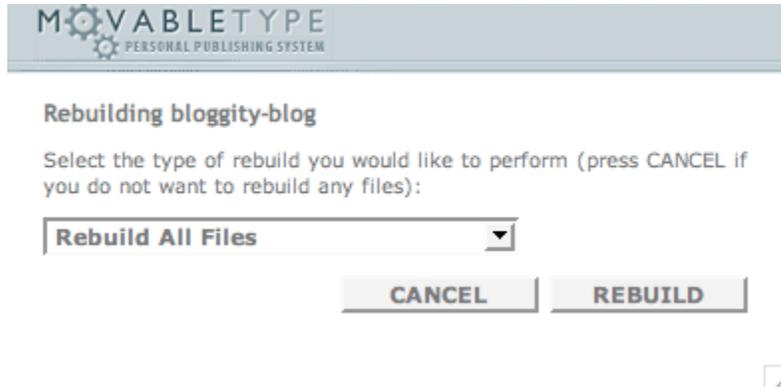
Excerpt [\(?\)](#)
May be configured for use

Post Status [\(?\)](#) Allow Comments: [\(?\)](#)
 Text Formatting: [\(?\)](#) Allow Pings [\(?\)](#)

URLs to Ping [\(?\)](#) [Previous pings sent \(?\)](#)

[Customize the display of this page.](#)

Make sure you save and publish (under Post Status) your entry. To make your entry appear on the web, use the “rebuild” button on the left side toolbar. This pop-up window will appear:



M·VABLETYPE
PERSONAL PUBLISHING SYSTEM

Rebuilding bloggity-blog

Select the type of rebuild you would like to perform (press CANCEL if you do not want to rebuild any files):

Rebuild All Files ▼

CANCEL **REBUILD**

✍

You may choose file types of file to rebuild, or rebuild the entire site. After rebuilding, the sample added above would look something like this:

July 31, 2003

Sample

Look at how it works

[Continue reading "Sample"](#)

Posted by tnelson at 03:07 PM | [Comments \(0\)](#)

4. Managing your weblog:

Weblog Config allows you to change the settings of your weblog.

5. Commenting:

Simply click “comment” below the entry you want to comment on. (Comments must be enabled.) The pop-up screen will look like this:

bloggity-blog: Comment on Sample - Mozilla

Comments: Sample

This is a good sample

Posted by [The Commenter](#) at July 31, 2003 03:10 PM

I think it's a poor sample

Posted by [Comment Boy](#) at July 31, 2003 03:11 PM

Post a comment

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------|--|
| Name: | <input type="text"/> | Remember personal info? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No |
| Email Address: | <input type="text"/> | |
| URL: | <input type="text"/> | |
| Comments: | <input type="text"/> | |

Vertical scrollbar on the right side of the page.