

Blog, Blog, Blog: Experiences with web logs in journalism classes

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty three students pecked diligently at computer keyboards, seemingly oblivious to the student at the front of the classroom. She was discussing Internet advertising and was projecting examples of banner and pop-up ads on a large screen. I watched her classmates occasionally raise their eyes and watch the screen, then return to their computer monitors.

Their behavior was not rude, but part of an online journalism class project on writing web logs or blogs.

Like most students in the class, James was writing a brief summary of the presentation: "Surprisingly, banner ads actually get used a lot. MSN offers a lot of information about advertising on websites, people who follow advertisements, and what types of advertisements work the best."

Some students were simply complimentary. Etta wrote, "Her web site was very well organized and it explained very well her topic on Banner Ads."

Others took a more critical view toward the presentation's content. "How effective are banner ads if people just ignore them?" wrote Melvin. "I don't think that they are effective because they unlike tv commercials are poorly created and don't catch the viewers interest. More time goes into the process and idea of a commercial on tv than on a banner ad."

A few students were experimenting with the new form of writing. As Kennedy (2003) noted, bloggers are active writers who establish their own identities, personalities and points of view. For instance, Darryl Ng was writing, "Wow! It sounds like she's giving some love to those damn pop-up ads! Ca-razy! She's got some pretty good web design. Lots and lots of links. Dang! She actually did some research on this, it looks like. I just relied on my beautiful web design to save my grade from my juicy lack of good information."

Although web logs are arguably the most controversial form of new journalism today, many newspapers have integrated blogs into their online editions. The challenge for journalism

educators is to find effective ways for students to learn how to create content for this new medium.

College-level instruction in blogs is important to bring journalistic standards to this growing medium. Blog writers make mistakes, partly because their writings are unedited and lack quality control (Seipp, 2002). Despite their flaws, blogs are being adopted by many media organizations for some reporting, mainly opinion writing, news digests and short articles. However, some investigative reporters are publishing the results of their inquiries only on their blogs, and a few freelance journalists even have made thousands of dollars publishing their stories on blogs (Cox, 2003). Some observers predict that blogs could soon overtake online newspapers in readership (Palser, 2002).

Blogs come in several forms. The microjournal blog, basically a diary, is the form most used by non-journalists. Notebook blogs are like journals with longer entries, such as essays. Filter blogs are the most common type created by journalists. They include hyperlinks to other Web sites, and the blog writer posts opinions and observations about material on the other sites. A filter blog points "to sites, concepts, ideas, and products that its author thinks you should know about" (Ernst, 2003). Seipp (2002) refers to a similar form of blog labeled the Web journal, which has links that support the blog writer's comments on current news events.

My study will investigate the use of notebook and filter blogs in undergraduate journalism courses.

The study will examine the following research questions:

1. How do journalism students learn to create blogs?
2. How can blogs help students learn about such journalism topics as online newspaper design and current events reporting?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although they existed before Sept. 11, 2001, web logs surged as a new communication medium after the attack on the World Trade Center. While most blog writers are ordinary people,

traditional journalists also have entered the blogosphere. Ernst (2003) noted that the technology to set up a blog is easy, but that time management, relevant content, and finding an audience and a writing voice are the main challenges for bloggers.

Ernst defines a web log as “an interactive database hosted on a Web server and manipulated by the scripts in the blogging package” (p. 61). Blogs can be established on free or paid blog service sites, such as blogger.com, or software can be installed on a server if the blogger wants to run his/her own site. The mechanics of blog sites are similar: a blogger logs on to the site through a Web browser, writes in a form, and then posts and publishes the writing. Blogs can be set up for a restricted, invited audience or can be open to the general public.

Although the interface differs among blog services, blogs generally follow a familiar format. The most recent entry appears at the top of the blog page and is marked with the time and date it was posted. Older entries are moved lower on the page and the oldest entries may be archived. Hyperlinks to related Web sites or blogs may be within the entry or listed on the side of the page.

Since web logs are relatively easy to establish, a rivalry of sorts has sprung up between bloggers and the traditional media. Many bloggers seem to have a mission of challenging the establishment press (Seipp, 2002). However, the establishment media also take pleasure in criticizing bloggers, and Seipp noted a condescending tone by the old media toward bloggers. “Just as many bloggers view the mainstream media as elitists, mainstreamers generally look upon bloggers as a bunch of mutts crashing the dog show” (p. 44). However, she noted that many popular blogs are written by former reporters and editors. Mainstream journalists can find valuable news items and story ideas from cutting-edge blogs, as well.

Free-lance writers are finding ways to make money from their blogs (Cox, 2003), coining the term *blograising*. Blog readers are asked to voluntarily contribute to fund a writer’s story project, such as a reporting trip to Iraq. Other *blograising* takes the form of a public-radio fund-

raising drive, in which the blogger asks the audience for donations, which can be paid on line through secure payment systems.

While blog writers enjoy freedom from editors and deadlines, they do not write in a void. Blog readers perform the editor's function, pointing out factual errors to the blogger, who generally corrects them promptly and prominently (Seipp, 2003).

Newspapers that allow staff members to blog have set guidelines that follow traditional journalistic practices. For instance, the Cleveland Plain Dealer requires that staff-written blogs for the online edition be edited, be an extension of the reporter or editor's work, and cannot detract from their work on the print edition (Weaver, 2004).

The challenge for journalism educators is to integrate blogs into the curriculum, both as a learning tool and a new form of media that students may encounter in the job place during internships and employment. Blogs' emphasis on publication and audience make them useful for journalism educators, who may find students writing for the instructor instead of a general readership. Kennedy (2003) noted, "Web logs started out primarily as a self-publishing movement for both professional and armchair journalists making their voices heard in an open online press (p. 11)." Blogs provide students with the opportunity to publish their work immediately and to interact with their audience.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design known as ethnographic educational evaluation. The investigation for this pilot project began in October 2003 and continued until April 2004. Participants were undergraduate students in two online journalism classes at a 13,000-student university in the Rocky Mountain region. The investigation consisted of interviews, observations and documents.

There were 24 students enrolled in each class, and 48 students voluntarily participated in the project. A class about producing content for online media, named Online Publishing,

participated during fall 2003 and spring 2004 semesters. There were 27 journalism majors, 12 communication majors, and nine students in other majors.

Both classes were held in a computer laboratory with 24 computer stations organized in five rows. The computers run on a Windows operating system and have software ranging from Microsoft Word to specialized programs for Web design, such as Macromedia Fireworks.

I kept field notes as a written record based upon observations of the fall 2003 Online Publishing class. Interviews were conducted by e-mail using a combination of semi-structured and informal techniques.

Other data sources consisted of the web logs themselves from both classes. Students produced notebook and filter blogs. In addition, course evaluations by students at the end of the fall 2003 semester were also used as data sources. Besides the standard evaluation form used by the university, I prepared an additional evaluation focused on the learning objectives of the course. In particular, I asked students about the filter blog project.

I also kept a reflexive journal that recorded my reactions to the pilot study, mistakes that were made, and how to avoid mistakes the next semester.

In deciding the kinds of data to gather, I also had to consider conflicting recommendations in the literature regarding ethnographic educational evaluation. For my purposes, Fetterman's (1987) advice seemed more pragmatic. A questionnaire, in the form of the final course evaluation, would be useful to gauge reaction from the entire class toward blogs, rather than just the 10 students who were interviewed. However, to stay in a qualitative methodology, questions were based on my analysis of data collected from interviews, observations and documents, not on preconceived ideas I had about what I might find out about students and blogs (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). The questionnaire was one of the final steps I took in the initial study, rather than one of the first, as might be done in a quantitative inquiry.

To help me achieve trustworthiness and credibility, two students agreed to perform a member check of my interviews with them and my interpretations of what they said.

Triangulation was used to seek convergence across the various data sources.

FINDINGS

The results support social-cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1986). Bandura considered human behavior to be largely a result of the interaction of three types of motivation: incentive, vicarious, and self-produced. Incentive motivators are external incentives, which could include grades or praise for student writing. Vicarious motivators allow people to observe how others act, and what benefits and penalties others receive as a consequence of their actions. Seeing others get rewards for their acts increases the likelihood that the observer will act in the same manner. In journalism classes, modeling could include the instructor providing examples of correct sentence structure in written comments on student papers. Bandura contended that modeling behaviors that receive rewards is more effective than only modeling with no consequences. For journalism teachers, that indicates the importance of including a grade with comments on student writing. But external incentive and vicarious motivators do not control people's behavior, Bandura argued. Self-produced motivators, such as self-evaluation and internal standards of behavior, give people some control over their thoughts, emotions and actions. He used the act of writing as an example of behavior that is self-regulated through self-evaluation. Writers, he observed, continually revise their work during the writing process until their work meets the writers' self-set standards. In light of this study, although students receive instructor feedback and modeling of good writing, ultimately the students' own standards of what constitutes good writing and their ability to self-evaluate their writing will regulate those external motivators. Bandura (1986) stated that people could learn socially by observing other people who had adopted new ways after seeing them modeled. For instance, instructors can model desired writing behavior by providing examples of good writing in their feedback.

Students learned how to create blogs by modeling. There are two types of modeling that would enhance student learning. The instructor could model by demonstrating how to set up a blog, either on a web page for a notebook blog or on a blog hosting site for a filter blog. Another form of modeling would be for the instructor to provide detailed instructions on how to set up blogs. Both model types would help students avoid some of the technical difficulties some experience.

In the absence of instructor-provide models, students also learned to blog by modeling other students. I noticed several students who successfully created blogs on hosting sites assisting students sitting next to them.

Regarding the second research question, students learned about web design and current events by modeling and social interaction. In the web critique filter blog project, students commented that they would avoid some of the flaws in poorly designed web sites, and would try to emulate design principles found in well designed sites. Social-cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of group projects to enhance learning, and using teams in the filter blog project seemed beneficial. A dialogue among team members took place in their blogs that resulted in students learning from each other, then adding new knowledge as the conversation expanded.

In the current events blog project, students were not assigned to teams, but interaction took place as other students in class commented on the issues. Again, dialogues ensued that could lead to some critical thinking about current events as new and perhaps opposing viewpoints are heard.

Data analysis revealed three major themes that will be explored in this section. One concerned the technical aspects of creating a blog, including time management problems encountered by many students. The second dealt with communication, including interpersonal communication with the instructor and with other students. The third involved students finding their voice in writing blogs.

Because one research question in this pilot project was to evaluate how blogs help students learn about journalism topics, I will conclude the findings with recommendations for future use of blogs in similar classes and will take an advocacy position based on my findings.

Notebook blog

None of the students in the Online Publishing class had ever participated in a blog, and few had even heard of blogs before the class. Their first blogging project was fairly simple. About a month after each class had begun, they were required to keep a journal of the daily student presentations on a topic dealing with online mass media, including journalism, public relations, advertising, photojournalism, etc. The journal entries were supposed to include a summary of the topic and the student's reaction to it, such as whether they learned something new or surprising. I did not tell them how long the entries needed to be, only that they were free to express themselves openly and that blog writing tended to be more informal than journalistic and other types of academic writing. One of the first student presentations of the fall 2003 semester was on blogs, so the class was familiar with the format. The notebook blog was not posted on a blog site, however. Rather, students created web pages for their blogs, with dated entries and new entries at the top of the page. Many students created links to each presentation, which were on the class web server.

The notebook blogs were interactive in that all student web sites were posted on the class home page, so anybody in class could look at other students' pages and comment on them by e-mail. However, I did not see that interaction take place. Most student notebook blogs were complimentary or neutral commentaries on the presentations, probably because students were aware that their classmates could read their comments. A typical blog entry would be similar to Richard's: "Very useful content within a visually appealing and well functioning presentation. This information (is) key to beginning newspaper web design and much of the information is relevant when applied to traditional newspaper design."

Only a few students openly criticized the presentations. Laurie commented, "Some of the information toward the end of the presentation did not really seem relevant, so it would have been

great if these things were explained better..." Even Richard, who usually was complimentary, wrote, "This guy doesn't know what the heck he's talking about. He clearly just threw this presentation together."

Some students did find their blog voices after a few entries. Their writing became more casual and conversational, and some students' blog entries focused more on their reactions to the presentations than on the content. For instance, Ng wrote, "This sucks. I can't find her presentation online. I think these should all be linked to on the class website *before* the presentation so you can just hyperlink to it rather than screwing around trying to type in the address and miss half of the person's presentation. Or maybe we could all just get an email from the person with the link. That would be efficient. This current way is not -- trying to read their URLs from the back of the room and type it in while they keep clicking around."

Students did not experience technical problems creating their notebook blogs. They set up a new web page and added entries for each class presentation. Some students created hyperlinks to each presentation, as well. However, several students did not follow blog chronology and wrote the most recent entry at the bottom of the page, rather than correctly placing new entries at the top.

One objective of mine in assigning the notebook blog project was that students would pay attention to the presentations rather than working on their daily lab projects or reading e-mail. I also wanted to see if the blogs would help them study for quizzes, which included questions based upon the presentations. In interviews, students generally said the blogs did help in both regards. I asked three questions about the notebook blogs:

1. Do you think keeping a web log of the presentations helped you pay attention to them?
2. Do you think the web log helped you study for the quizzes?
3. How did keeping the web log compare to any journaling you may have done for other classes? For instance, was it easier? More useful? More interesting? Or not?

Katharine reported mixed results. The blog helped her focus on the presentations. "Because i'm one of those people that can zone people out VERY VERY well, and if not for the web log, i'm sure i wouldn't have been able to pay attention." She agreed with several other students that the blog did not help her to study for the quizzes. She said this was her first experience with journaling in a class. "But it was really easy, and proved to be something that i caught on to quickly. Too bad i couldn't take notes like that for every class... then i wouldn't need to get a notebook, just post my own notes to the web, and look them over at home from my computer. how convenient."

Most students responded that the notebook blogs helped them in the course. "I think it did help us to pay attention to each of the presentations to write blogs during/after the presentations," said Sandra. "I think writing the blogs helped me study for the quizzes because I could quickly review what I thought were the most important parts of the presentations." Carrie added that keeping the notebook blog made her "listen and also form opinions and really think about the issues people were presenting."

One student commented that he liked being able to read classmates' blogs. Another said that she has received instructor feedback on journals for other classes, and would have liked me to provide more feedback on her blog. Several mentioned that the blogs were easier to create and change and more useful than journals they had written. One student said she found that having students writing in their blogs was distracting while she was giving her presentation.

Filter blog (Fall 2003)

The filter blog project was due at the end of the semester. Students were given a month to work on their blogs. The assignment involved six teams of four students each creating a blog on a blogger service. The blog was to include links to four different types of web sites: informative (such as an online newspaper), self-expressive (such as a personal site), persuasive (such as a political site), and entertainment (such as a humor site). Then each student in the team was to comment and evaluate the four types of sites, resulting in a conversation among them.

The first day was spent setting up accounts on the blogger services. Students were given choices of four services. Three were free blog hosting sites, while one was a pay site. Most teams chose blogger.com, a free site. One person said his team chose blogger.com because it was the first site on the list that I provided. One team chose zlogger.com, another free site, while one team downloaded free blogger software on to a server managed by one of the team members. No teams used the pay site.

To set up accounts, students had to register and provide a user name and password. Then they had to follow each blogger service's procedures to create a blog. "The instructions aren't very detailed," complained one student about blogger.com. He would have liked more examples of how to set up blogs. However, a student on a different team said that setting up a blogger.com site "was not really that hard." A third team tried to set up a ftp site by downloading blogger.com's software on to the university's server, but was unable to. So they settled for using blogger.com to host their blog.

Then the teams discussed which web sites to link to their blogs, and how to organize their team. Richard suggested linking to the Ku Klux Klan site as an example of a persuasive site, but the rest of his team shot down that idea. One team discussed whether the whole team should critique one web site each week, or whether each person should critique all four sites as they found time. Another team debated whether to set up their blog as public, meaning anyone could read the entries, or private, in which only the team members and I would be invited to read the blog. They decided to go public. "Let's hear everyone's opinion," one member said.

Problems soon arose. One team was not sure how to access their blog and post individual messages. Richard spent the class trying to set up a ftp site. "I think it would be easier plus I want to figure it out," he said, before finding out later that the university would not allow students to download blogger software on to school servers. The team using zlogger.com set up an account in which all four team members would use the same user name and password. They encountered

problems when two people posted messages at the same time and lost both posts, probably because they were using the same user names and passwords.

The teams displayed different group dynamics. Most sat together and worked as teams, setting up the accounts and discussing which sites to critique. But one team that experienced more problems setting up a blog splintered, with the only male on the team walking to the back row to work on his own computer. Rather than talking with each other, another team seemed locked into their computer monitors, searching for sites.

Once the filter blogs were created and the web sites to be critiqued chosen, conversations took place. Students generally agreed with each others' opinions, but often would raise new areas of analysis of the web sites. Responding to two other students' comments on the CNN web site, Amelia said, "I agree with Aaron's and Emily's opinions that the CNN website is cluttered. It does contain a lot of news; however, it can seem overwhelming. I also agree with Kendell that the picture clips are eye-catching, but I still think the site needs more in order to grab people's attention."

At the end of the semester, I set up a blog to gather student reaction to the filter blog project. I wanted to know about their general reaction to blogging, whether the project helped them learn about web design, and, if so, what they learned by doing the filter blog. The class' reaction was generally positive, although it was the first attempt at blogging for everyone in the class. Several students said they enjoyed the interaction with other people that is possible on blogs. James commented, "The blog project is interesting. It is really neat to interact with other people in the class and to analyze websites--it has given me ideas on what to do and what not to do." Melvin added, "It is a very new and creative way to communicate with others and to read other group member's comments on the blogs." Other students noted that, even though they had never blogged before, they enjoyed the project. For instance, Arnold said, "This is my first Blog, and I have to say its pretty fun. I don't know much about them, but they appear to be easy enough to use."

However, two students said they did not like the project. They criticized a member of their team, who they said did not participate in the group project. They said they would have preferred to create individual blogs rather than group blogs.

Every student reported that they learned something about web design from critiquing the four kinds of sites. Among the things they learned:

-- "Two of the web sites my group used for our blog were horrible. I learned how important it is to keep your site updated. I also saw how lack of thoughtful layout design can tear your site - and it's credibility - apart."

-- "The Importance of the broad shallow type site, and the simplicity of design that is required for a really good site became aparent to me."

-- "I did find some horrible things on the websites that I will avoid like the plague when designing pages for my site."

-- "It actually gave me ideas for how to improve a website because all of the websites our group critiqued were very good. For the most part, I liked how organized and easy to navigate the sites were. The more organized a site is, the more likely I am to spend more time on it."

Students also took advantage of the blog to criticize the project and offer suggestions to improve it. The most frequent complaints were that I didn't give them enough time and my instructions were too vague. "My biggest suggestion is to get the team blog project going sooner. It feels frenzied and crammed in these last few weeks," said Melvin. "If the parameters were a bit narrower it would be less confusing in what is wanted of us."

Some students wanted more information about blogs before creating their own. Alan said, "I would recommend you use this project again, however I would give more background on blogs much earlier in the semester and how blogs are directly related to what we are doing."

Filter blog (Spring 2003)

Based upon student criticisms from the previous semester, I changed some aspects of the next filter blog assignment. We began the assignment in the middle of the semester rather than at

the end. Two days were set aside in the class schedule for students to create and start writing their blogs. After the second blog session, only three students hadn't yet started blogs. In the requirements, I provided links to numerous blogs and a link to a student presentation on news blogs from the previous semester. Half of the class was assigned to create blogs on blogger.com, while the other half was assigned to zlogger.com.

I also gave students two choices of content for their filter blogs: Either a web critique, as in fall semester, or a current events blog. The current events blog had to be on a topic at the university, in the state, or in the Rocky Mountain region. I explained that the provincial nature of their blogs might make them unique and attract audience interest. Here is the assignment that was posted on the class home page: "The blog should begin with a link to a news site on the topic. Then the blog writer will post an opinion on the topic and provide links to online sources to support his or her opinion. By the end of the blog project, there should be a minimum of three links to sites that either support your opinion or disagree with it. The blogger can argue with sites that disagree with his/her opinion."

I also tried to make the instructions for the web critique more specific. Here are the new requirements: "The critiques should incorporate the theory, ideas and concepts covered in this class: i.e. 'This bites' or 'This is good' won't do. The critique should discuss why the site is good or bad and what could be done to improve or change it. The critiques should include references to at least two Web design sources other than the textbook."

Because the class is required for journalism majors, I was particularly interested in seeing how many students would choose to create current events blogs, and what topics they would select. Twelve decided on current events blogs. Most chose university topics, ranging from repairs to the football stadium to a plan to cut down old trees in the center of campus. Two students decided to blog about a city plan to improve traffic flow on a busy street. One chose the wolf recovery effort in the northern Rockies. Another blogged about the governor's plan to keep young people from leaving the state. Only one topic was questionable: the rising price of gasoline

seemed more national than regional. But since the student's first entries were focusing on gas prices in the state, I decided to let her continue with that topic, but advised her to try to keep it regional.

Students experienced some technical problems creating blogs, but not as many as they did the previous semester. One problem immediately surfaced. Much to my surprise, zblogger.com's free blog hosting site had shut down since the previous semester. I scrambled to assign a new service to those students, who ended up creating their blogs on blurty.com. There was one major difference between the two blog services. Blurty.com included a comment function, on which visitors could quickly post their reactions or add information to blog entries. To comment on blogger.com, students had to set up a members list and invite people to join their blog. I provided the e-mail addresses of the 12 blogger.com students so they could invite each other to join their blogs. A comment function can be added to blogger.com through other sites that provide the html and javascript codes. One student decided to go that route, while the 11 others all added member lists.

Discussion on the current events blogs dealing with campus issues was lively. Many students used the blogs as a forum to criticize university administration. A blog on a city ordinance to make bars smoke-free generated a lively debate with students on both sides of the issue. The blogs are available at www.uwyo.edu/cmjr/wiltse/3530/blogproject.htm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the technical problems some students encountered could have been avoided had I provided detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to set up their blogs on the various services. I did not experience any serious problems creating my own blogs on any of the services I tried. They seemed user-friendly and took me through the process without many complications. Although each of the three services I tried had slightly different procedures, they were basically similar: create an account using a password, begin a blog, post entries and publish. Still, some students could have benefited from better instructions at the beginning of the filter blog project.

Also, problems caused by the disappearance of zlogger.com could have been avoided had I tested the sites. Since they are free services, blog hosting sites can go out of business without warning.

My larger concern was with the quality of writing. Many students wrote in an informal style as they would for e-mail to friends. They did not spell, punctuate or capitalize correctly. They also used frequent abbreviations. While this casual writing style may be appropriate for some blogging, journalists who blog should uphold journalistic writing standards to be taken as credible reporters. That means students writing blogs probably should follow Associated Press style, as they have since their first news writing class.

At the same time, I don't think journalism instructors should clamp down completely on creative writing in blogs, since some students actually thrived in the type of freedom that blog writing can provide. Although he admitted he could have used a spell checker, which was not available in blogger.com, Ng explored the medium and produced some entertaining notebook blog entries. In an e-mail interview, Ng told me, "At first, I thought the whole blog thing was stupid... And I still think that--with an assigned topic. But when I 'freed my mind' just like the Matrix, I realized that dumping my day's thoughts out in a generic webpage was a good thing; maybe a catharsis or some self therapy."

One reason his writing may have differed from that of most other students was his discovery of an audience. "When I found out that my quirky website was providing hours of entertainment for my friends, I began using the blog as a forum for my current thoughts and anecdotes," Ng said. "I did have fun venting my thoughts and knowing that my crazy friends would actually be reading that crap!"

As a compromise between journalistic standards and creative freedom, instructors should provide models of different types of good blogging, ranging from traditional journalists' blogs to fiction writers' blogs. Instructors should emphasize that the common element in good blogs is good writing, and that audiences expect high-quality writing from professionals. For modeling

purposes, British journalist Andrew Sullivan's blog (andrewsullivan.com) and American journalist Virginia Postrel's blog (www.dynamist.com/weblog) are both well written.

To make students aware they are writing for a potential audience, instructors should make sure that the blogs are set up as public, not private, sites. That way, anyone can read the blog entries, and, if there is a comment function, anyone can participate in the blogs. While the primary audience for the filter blog projects were fellow students, instructors also should participate in the blogs and perhaps invite members of the professional community, such as local newspaper reporters, to join in. In addition, working journalists could serve as editors of student blog writing to encourage students to follow journalistic standards.

To improve the quality of writing, students with weak skills should write their blog entries in a word-processing program, run spell and grammar checks on the entries, and then copy and paste their entries into the blog. Collaborative blog sessions might also improve writing quality by having classmates edit each others' blogs.

Assessing and grading student blogs is another issue. Since the first year of blogging for my classes was largely experimental, I was not very critical of either the content or the writing. My *laissez faire* attitude may have led to the informal writing in many blogs. However, several students mentioned that they would have liked more instructor feedback on their notebook blogs since it was a new writing medium for them. Kennedy (2003) suggests that instructors evaluate student blog writing several times during the semester, rather than just once at the end. Students also should be allowed to self-assess the weaknesses and strengths of their blog writing, and to set goals to improve their blogs during the rest of the semester. Instructors could assign a grade for grammar and another grade for style to encourage students to develop their blog voices. A grading rubric could be created to evaluate the quality of the content in students' blogs, including the use of evidence through hyperlinks to relevant web sites, and the thoughtfulness of their comments.

The results from the first blog experiments are encouraging. Students generally seemed excited about the new medium and were motivated to create them. My course evaluation blog to gather feedback on the project provided useful ideas to improve the class in the future. Students seemed to provide more constructive criticism in the feedback blog than they do in the traditional teaching evaluations at the end of the semester. The candidness may have to do with my hands-off approach to evaluating their blogs, which gave them a lot of creative freedom. I plan to continue using blog projects in the online journalism class and also will use blogs for other courses, such as opinion writing and perhaps even graphic design.

I will do several things differently. Blogs could be effective teaching media for any class dealing with current events. However, instruction should be provided in how to evaluate the credibility of Web sites so students think critically before linking to related news articles in their blogs. In opinion writing classes, students could write background reports on issues of public concern. Then they could create blogs in which they editorialize on the same issues, using links to articles that both support and rebut their opinions, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of those sites. The blogs would be graded on the quality of their writing and on the strength of their arguments.

For graphic design classes, a filter blog project could be designed similar to the Web site critique project in my online journalism courses. Students could link to online newsletters in portable document format (.pdf), advertisements and even logos they find on the web. Then they could critique the strengths and weaknesses of those designs.

I also would become a more active evaluator of student blogs, perhaps even participating in the blogs as a commentator on both writing and content. Since the blog medium is new to most students, they might welcome instructor feedback to help them know whether they're on the right track with their blogs. Positive comments from the instructor could also boost their motivation and sense of self-efficacy in blogging.

I think blog assignments could be adopted for any class that involves a writing component. The immediacy of publishing one's writing and the possibility of a reader anywhere in the world commenting on that writing make blogs powerful learning tools.

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