

Blog Attack: New Teaching Strategies to Engage Today's College Students

Denise Castro

Abstract

The growing need to match pedagogy with the evolving needs of a new generation of learners has stirred an interest in Web 2.0. Blogging can bring a surprisingly rich experience to class projects by increasing collaboration between students and teacher. As a teaching tool, blogging can bring greater complexity to learning that would have otherwise been one dimensional. This article discusses how the use of a blog in class activities engaged students in academic work and resulted in positive educational outcomes.

Many instructors, including myself, make it a priority to understand and connect with the changing perspective and learning behaviors of college students enrolled in classes today. Students appear to be easily distracted with texting and watching the latest YouTube viral video and less willing to spend quality time reading and writing. Some learners are rushing through projects and not making a strong connection to content or to the learning process. Student submissions at the end of the semester often lack personal ownership and honesty. At times, it is obvious that student work is contrived and fabricated at the last minute with little self-reflection. Faced with these realities, I was looking for a tool that would engage students throughout the course on a level that generates more commitment and accountability.

Generation Y

A search of literature on the generation currently enrolling at our institutions reveals a distinctive change in the approach of young people toward knowledge acquisition. College students today arrive with increasing familiarity of technology and social networking and are now called digital natives, millennials, or the Net Generation (Sandars and Morrison 2007). Students of the generation born roughly between 1980 and 1994 have become so accustomed to using technology that cell phones and the web have become their social lifelines. Accounting for about 90 million people, the Net Generation has been immersed in digital media and carry portable electronic devices at all times (Beyers 2009). Absorbed by a world of video games, digital music players, video cams, and computers, this technologically rich culture has developed a new skill set and, likely, a different affinity to reading and writing in hard copy.

Many of these digital natives have grown up in households in which both parents worked, or in single-parent households or daycare, and often with television and peers as surrogate parents (Holtz 1995). "It comes as no surprise then," Arhin and Johnson-Mallard (2003, 121) observe, "that today's college students are typically very comfortable with technology, have shorter attention spans, a low threshold for boredom,

resist memorization and busy work and prefer action to observation.” Moreover, Beyers (2009, 219) writes, “They are smart but impatient. They expect results immediately.” Learning styles of this generation are more active and visual rather than verbal (Arhin and Johnson-Mallard 2003). Built upon an understanding of the current preferences of many college students today, it makes sense to use Web 2.0 in an academic setting when practical. The ability to create a graphically rich visual environment on a blog site, with media and interactive possibilities at the click of a mouse, would seem to correspond to the style of learning in which the Net Generation are accustomed.

Today’s students use social networking mechanisms on a daily basis. Digital natives are accustomed to making connections and building interpersonal relationships through social networking web sites. Use of blogging, for example, can promote group affiliation in a learning environment beyond text through nonverbal communication, with the opportunity to insert images, objects, and audio-visual material. Providing the opportunity to upload materials beyond text enhances freedom of expression. Enabling students to determine their media choice also builds trust and relationships, which then builds self-efficacy and embraces different learning styles, while potentially captivating the interest of those who might feel uninspired by traditional essay writing.

Reading and writing across the curriculum is a skill that must be encouraged and advanced through strategic implementation (Burgess 2006). Blogs seem to lend themselves to such implementation. Blogs can be formal or informal and be used as a personal diary/journal, travel blog, class notes summary, or demonstration of a problem; or it can be used to solve techniques, upload a resume, create a professional web page, or post class assignments and instructor feedback from class projects. Blogs also are advantageous for archiving information, showing a history or progression of topics and materials, engaging in experiments, or commenting on personal growth. All told, blogs are another avenue to practice thinking, reading, and writing with an audience.

Class assignments created to use the web can be perceived as an invitation to enter into a familiar comfort zone and increase mutual respect for sharing in technology. Accessibility of web pages, specifically blog sites, can be obtained via smart phone, laptop, tablet, or computer. Technology now enables students to use their smartphones to interact with web sites, including blogs. Knowing that students are on-the-go and accustomed to working in a mobile world, it is fitting to provide means to include school activities into the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed (Huang et al. 2010). In education, there is often a disconnect between school activities and technology in which students step out of the classroom and log onto the web via their cell phones, iPads, or laptops. Use of technology within class assignments (such as on a blog) can bridge the gap between class and home, plus harness the skill set within which the Net Generation operates (Sawmiller 2010).

Brief Overview of the Evolution of Blogs

Early blogs were sections of web pages that were updated manually. Only those who were skilled in web design and had the ability to write code possessed the technical

expertise to create blogs. During that time, web sites or web pages had links and comments to other pages and were used as a recording of electronic minutes from meetings with indexes and summary files. Those files were created in HTML and used hyperlinks to sort the different types of information posted (Blogherald.com 2005). In 1992, there were approximately 30 web sites on the World Wide Web. Tim Berners-Lee, father of the World Wide Web, created a web page that posted a listing of new online web sites. From that point in 1993, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) promoted a “What’s New” list of sites. On this list, entries sorted by date provided links to commentaries. Netscape then took over the service and became one of the more popular web sites of the time (Blogherald.com 2005). By 1994, Justin Hall created “Justin’s Home Page”—a personal online journal. Justin’s daily entries were dated and linked through an index page. Evolving further in 1996, Dave Winer posted a weblog that outlined the “24 Hours of Democracy Project.” In 1997, Winer introduced a news page for Frontier Software, and in that same year it became “Scripting News,” a weblog that can still be found on the net today. In 1999, Pyra Labs created a free blogging service, which is now owned by Google. This weblog, called Blogger, was the first to afford an easy-to-use interface to the everyday Internet consumer (Blogherald.com 2005).

Today, the general use of a blog is part personal column, part news service on a particular subject, and part personal diary. The postings occur in reverse chronological order and are updated frequently (Mortenson and Walker 2002). Blogging typically is interactive, enabling visitors to comment and message each other unlike a static web site. Although blogs are mostly text oriented, some blogs are based on photographs, videos, music, or audio content using podcasts. Exactly how widespread are blogs? In June 2011, 164 million public blogs were created, with 54,700 new blogs created during a twenty-four-hour-period on June 29, 2011 (Blogpulse.com 2011).

Wireless Internet and mobile devices gradually have become more stable and mature (Huang et al. 2010). The average Internet consumer today interfaces with online social networking sites such as Facebook, Flickr, Del.icio.us, Wikis, and Twitter. Today, Facebook has more than 500 million active users with an average of 130 friends (Facebook.com 2011). Accessing and participating in all things Internet is far more user-friendly than it was in the early 1990s. Finding information through the Google Search Engine and instructional videos through YouTube is a common practice. Twenty-five million people read blogs (Facebook.com 2011). A study of 4,374 college students across thirteen institutions of higher education found 93.4 percent owned a computer, 82 percent owned a cell phone, and all students had access to the Internet. Of the students surveyed, 99.5 percent use their computers for writing documents and e-mails . . . followed by 97.2 percent for surfing the Internet for pleasure, and 96.4 percent for classroom activities (Kvavik 2005).

Blogging is easy for today’s students. The present ability to develop a personal blog requires a less sophisticated knowledge of computer skills than fifteen years ago. Tools currently available to use in blog sites include the ability to create tags (which increases hits), tweet, interface with social networking sites, create a personal web site

and domain, subscribe to other blogs, and invite multiple authors to contribute. Blogs now have multiple functions and possibilities for interaction on the web. For instance, widgets can be enabled in the sidebar to easily link between web sites, track site stats, utilize RSS Feeds, and sort archived contributions by category or topic for ease of retrieving (Tekinarslan 2010).

Decision to Choose Blogs in Place of a Traditional Course Activity

In an effort to elicit and deepen student interest in health and well-being courses taught at the college level, I have been experimenting with different methods of communication beyond traditional means, such as the lecture, essay, quiz, and open class discussion. “Foundations of Wellness,” a required class for all students at the CSU Monterey Bay, covers areas of health from psychological well-being to disease prevention and focuses on exercise, nutrition, and stress-management. Unlike some health classes, “Foundations of Wellness” is structured for learning about one’s own personal wellness. Because of the nature of teaching personal health, which includes addressing some oftentimes sensitive topics and the depth of reflection on personal choices, it is of utmost importance to encourage student buy-in. Personalization, meaning individual connection with the content, is essential to solicit a higher level of engagement.

Internalization of the course content as a critical component to encourage behavior change is an involved journey for students. Requiring behavior modification leads students through the stages of change, from pre-contemplation and analysis through planning, action, and maintenance, and begs for a mechanism to support the process. This process is not as readily achieved or measured with a quiz, paper, or class discussion. For instance, attempting to have a weekly face-to-face class discussion on each individual’s progress would become a lengthy undertaking.

The impetus to begin incorporating the blog into my class is centered on the assessment of an eight-week Personal Wellness Plan project. Specifically, students are required to document for eight weeks in a journal about how they are implementing their own individually predetermined goals. Entries used to be logged in a private journal, which they submitted at the end of the term. In addition, a progression of trial and error experiences were logged in the journal format. Over several years of teaching and grading this project, multiple issues emerged. Some students did not seem to be fulfilling the assignment’s requirements because they had never before practiced behavior change or logged the results. Some students did not seem to know how to analyze their behavior or didn’t care to, while other students were ready to begin working on improving their lifestyle the minute they enrolled in the class.

At the end of every semester’s eight-week period of the Wellness Plan Project, inspirational student journals were submitted to me containing amazing personal discoveries and realizations. Students had made significant connections between their self-sabotaging habits and how they, through the systematic process of realistic goal-

setting, gained tremendous confidence in their ability to regain control over their health habits. Reading about their proud moments as submitted in their word-processing documents was uplifting and enriching. However, the marvelous sharing and personal stories came to a quick halt with an audience of one—me. Student revelations about the wellness process were buried in the method of submission. Feeling selfish for being the recipient of the diverse perspectives and insightful contributions, it was clear that the development of some type of public forum was needed. Certainly students who were not as practiced at behavior change or the ability to analyze their health habits would benefit from the group of students who did possess motivation and enthusiasm for behavior modification. From this constraint, the rationale for a class blog was devised.

Logistics of a Class Blog

The steps to initiate the blog community begin six weeks into the semester. Each class member is asked to activate an account on Wordpress.com—one of many free blog sites (see also blogspot and blogger). Once that is completed, all are invited individually as authors to a single, predesigned, public web page on Wordpress.com. Specific instructions on how to post are provided in a screen capture video I created, which demonstrates the step-by-step process on how to create an account and how to post and navigate through the web page. Students are able to link from inside the learning management system (i.e., Moodle) to the blog and back again to create a seamless sense of accomplishing their class assignment within class.

On the class blog for the Wellness Plan Project, students must post once a week for eight weeks, and include a catchy title and a picture. Submitting a picture and requiring a catchy title serves several purposes. Knowing that students are in a hurry and unlikely to slow down and read each other's post, placement of a picture with subtitle draws attention and curiosity. In fact, captions are proven to be the third most observed portion of print material after the headline and graphics. Documentation of their activity with a picture also serves to bring accountability to the project and also provides an opportunity for self-expression and creativity of the author (student).

The entry's contents must include details of the week's behavior change experiment in relation to their established mini-goal. Honesty, not perfection, is promoted in the minimum seventy-five-word post. Ideally, the blog should include a realization of the physical, social, and psychological impact of habit change. It is not necessary for them to be identified in the blog so they can remain anonymous if they prefer. Students are informed that the class blog is completely public and potentially could solicit comments from classmates or the public. As the blog's administrator, I also have the ability to approve or delete any incoming comment.

Student Blog Examples from the Eight-Week Wellness Plan Project

Below are several examples of blog posts for weekly entries about reaching or not reaching their behavior change goals during the core of the eight-week Wellness Plan Project. (Each student gave their consent to the anonymous use of their blogs. The pictures accompanying some entries have been removed because of copyright concerns in some cases and low resolution in other cases.)

#1: “Week 8: Exercise”

May 8, 2011

“This was my last week of the plan. For this week I did 5 days of cardio and 4 days of strength workouts. I did great this week and did all my workouts. For my first day this week, I went to the gym and did 30 minutes of cardio on the elliptical and then I did an ab workout for my strength. The second day, I went for a walk and then went back to my room to do the strength workout that I found a couple of weeks ago. For my third day, I visited the gym again and rode the bike for 30 minutes, but I did not do a strength workout this day because I was a little sore. On the fourth and fifth day this week, I went with a friend and we walked along the beach, and then I went back to my room and did the ab workout and the magazine workout. I think this was a great week. I tried to get outside a lot this week because the weather was so beautiful. As a reward for completing my wellness plan I went shopping at the new Forever 21.”

#2: “Dusted, Treadmill’s Ready for You”

July 2, 2011

“So far I’m off to a much better start this week. Yesterday and this morning I spent a few minutes stretching and then walked for 15 minutes on my treadmill; all before work, so I squeezed it in. I also have not eaten junk food and have had fruit and veggies in my diet. I feel better already, mostly mentally. Just knowing I’m doing something positive for myself that is physical feels good. I hope in three or four months to be back the way I was two years ago: stronger, leaner, and just looking and feeling much better. I’m sore today, which really tells me just what kind of poor condition I’m in. Oh well, ‘hurts so good.’”

[Note: Post also included a picture of a dog on a treadmill.]

#3: “Walking my Dog”

July 3, 2011

“A little humor to begin my post. I really don’t walk Max as the image depicts. This last week, I did not exercise as often as I wanted to, and I ate way too much junk food. My future goal is to incorporate healthy items into my diet and eliminate unhealthy items: eat more veggies/fruit, less cookies, cheese, and crackers. I think I have become an emotional or lazy eater, and this must change. I’m really busy, and I don’t make the time to do the things that I should for myself. I stimulate my mind, but I’m neglecting my body. I feel sluggish. This week will be all about change. I look forward to getting back into shape and feeding my body and soul properly.”

#4: “Still Progressing to Reduce Swearing”

May 16, 2011

“I’m changing my ways! I was under my goal of only using any of the before-mentioned words 100 times a day this week on the field only! I feel so much better punching a pillow rather than yelling and making myself look stupid. I also do believe that wanting to keep my girlfriend is helping me reduce these words.”

#5: “The End is Only the Beginning

May 4, 2011

“Sunday marked the last day of my eighth week. I could not believe how fast the weeks went by! The first thing I did for the week was a bike ride around my neighborhood with one of my friends, and we also played basketball. Before we went I was talking to my friend about how stressed I was with homework, and he suggested we go and play with the basketball. I loved how great the weather was because it was really sunny, but it was not too hot. The bike ride to the park is about 15 minutes.

While I rode my bike I noticed there was a slight breeze, which made the weather even better. Just being outside with the awesome weather changed my mood! At the park my friend and I started off with just making shots at the basket and doing layups. We then played a bit of one-on-one ‘til someone got to 20 (it was close, I lost 18–20). We took a little break, and then we played the games HORSE, around the world, and knockout. By the time we were riding back to my house, I was feeling much better, and I felt ready to get back to my homework and get it done. On Friday, I just went straight to the gym. It was really full, but I managed to get on a bike for a half hour. After that I just decided to come back to my house, and I used my x-box to dance some zumba

for about 45 minutes. ☺ Saturday night I was browsing through Yahoo’s little news clips and came across this headline about Beyonce having a new “web hit.” I like Beyoncé’s music so I was curious as to what this was about. The new music video she made was produced in an effort to help Michelle Obama’s campaign (Let’s Move!) to fight childhood obesity. I really liked the video so I figured it would be something really cool to learn so that I could teach it to my nieces. It took me about 30 minutes to get the routine down, but I ended up doing it over and over for about an hour total. I really liked the dance; it very energizing and fun. I’m including the link to the article that I read, which also shows the video she made. I’m also including the instructional portion to the dance routine.

The preceding examples of student blog posts illustrate several valuable and practical outcomes for the Wellness Plan Project. First, students are joined together in a community with a common goal and accountable to the assignment and each other. Previously the assignment was to be documented privately in a personal journal in either hard copy or electronic file and submitted at the end of the eight-week project. Using the old style, the major beneficiary of experiential learning was me, the instructor. Using the new venue to blog their results from week to week, students not only feel important as they express their accomplishments and build self-efficacy, but they also share their challenges to bring transparency and reality to the behavior change experience. Inspiration and ideas are fostered and shared between classmates, which, in turn, builds support and encouragement. For instance, workout details from several of the examples demonstrate different approaches and styles of exercise with various incentives and results, including ambition to include a niece in learning a Beyoncé dance.

Student Blog from Wellness Plan Project Conclusion Assignment

The following are three examples taken from an assignment to blog a conclusion of the eight-week behavior change assignment called the Wellness Plan Project. The blog samples here represent a culmination of the learning experience with personal connections and adaptations.

#1: Wellness Plan Conclusion

May 8, 2011

“I really loved this Wellness Plan Project that we had to do for class! I was really happy that I chose exercise as the area I was going to work on. I did notice that I had some good moments during my eight weeks, but I also had some bad moments. Through the blogging, though, I felt that I was able to reflect on how I was feeling as time passed and that seemed to make a difference for me. I felt that by writing what I felt I was able to get my

thoughts and emotions out, and it helped me to not give up. The whole reflection process also helped me to assess parts of my plan that perhaps were too much/hard or too easy, and it helped me to change some things around and improve overall. I noticed that I really enjoyed exercising in other places besides the gym, and once I incorporated that into my wellness plan, I noticed that I was much happier with what I was doing ☺. The fact that I had someone to help me with my plan was awesome as well! I felt that made a major difference because I felt that I really had a great support system, which also encouraged me to not give up. This project also helped me to tackle one thing at a time instead of seeing the project as a whole, and I think that also helped me get through the eight weeks because it did not seem so overwhelming once it was broken down into weeks. Even though my Wellness Plan Project is done, I feel like this is a new beginning for me. I am still going to keep my main goal of exercising more often, and I also want to try to make other wellness plans for myself, that way I can slowly improve other areas in my life. I look forward to what lies ahead with my future wellness plans.”

#2: Wellness Plan Summary

May 10, 2011

“So over the eight-week period when I was trying to de-stress myself, especially before finals, I found that this plan helped me concentrate on what I needed to do. I learned that I needed to stick to time frames of like “8 hours” of sleep or “no Facebook until one hour of homework is completed.” Having these exact concentrations of what I needed to do helped me figure out what will help me de-stress. Another thing that I found motivating was the rewards I would give myself if I completed what I needed to do for the week. The thing I mainly enjoyed was receiving the strawberry-banana smoothies. They were delicious! I do not have to feel like the comic anymore! :]”

#3: Wellness Summary

May 11, 2011

“Well . . . this wellness plan to me helped a lot more than I had really thought. It taught me that I was making excuses for my habits and accepting them like it was nothing. I had always blamed the fact that I ate late on two reasons: it is something that I have always done (familial behavior), and it’s because I am in college and that is how it is. But I’ve learned over the last past eight weeks that it is because I did not try hard enough. Granted, I had a busy schedule, but if you really put your mind to something, it is possible to go outside the box. My ultimate goal was to not eat after 9 pm, and I slowly but surely made it to that goal. It took some time, and I had minor setbacks. But for the most part, I made progress, and for that I am proud of myself.”

Before using weekly blog entries for the journal assignment, some of the end-of-semester personal journals were written at the last minute, depriving the student of the chance to observe their own transformation. The preceding examples reveal the trial and error approach to behavior change. These examples also confirm the important components of behavior change theory that includes incremental, doable, measurable steps, with support and rewards. Each blog is affirming that they have understood that the process works and alludes to the fact that what they experienced can be applied in future situations. Students also affirmed a realization of self-efficacy through their summary of the Wellness Plan Project.

Benefits of Blogging Increase Student and Instructor Engagement

The wellness plan process of journaling is alive and changes constantly with new posts from different students on different goals when carefully prompted and constructed on a class blog. Students have the opportunity to commiserate and encourage each other, rejoice, and hold each other accountable. There is a chance to comment or just learn from another's setbacks or victory. As students share ideas and insights from the trial and error accounts in their posts, others can expand their efforts and experiment with a fresh approach.

Another surprising benefit of blogging is the opportunity for instructor participation within the blog, which can occur in several modes. Relating with students during the journey adds a dimension of community, which is difficult to establish in a traditional class setting. Unlike the delivery of a final document from students at the term's conclusion, a blog creates transparency between instructor and student, and student and student during the process. Commenting on their weekly posts enables participants to have the needed assurance and guidance to stay focused while also reinforcing their progress. The ability to comment and encourage students during a project can redirect negative energy, guide students about their writing and/or ideas, and jump-start sidelined plans. Comments from instructor and students also validate and motivate learners to focus and persevere.

Instructor participation strengthens affiliation and empathy, while also demonstrating authenticity—an important element needed to achieve wellness. The opportunity to become involved in the student's assignment through blogging cultivates a unique relationship that would not have otherwise been possible. Blogging alongside students as a participant is a unique method of modeling. Modeling is a viable tool for teaching and a chance to provide feedback and support for those students who might not have a vision for the end product. For example, I start off the class blog with my own post demonstrating an exercise routine that has a picture of my feet doing a step routine and include details that I would like to see them include in their post (see Figure 1). Later I post an example of a healthy recipe that displays the challenges of incorporating real food in a diet while working with time constraints, in an effort to build honesty,

transparency, and commonality. Unlike the top-down form of teaching, shared learning builds trust among members for engagement and is purposeful as a technique.

Figure 1: Example of Instructor Blog Post

November 20, 2010

Exercise

Posted by Denise under Exercise (edit this)
Leave a Comment



step aerobics at home

In trying to establish a consist workout routine at home I've made a few discoveries. First of all I am certainly a fair weather exerciser. Definitely more motivated to workout on a sunny day. Second of all I need to keep my mind occupied. So not only do I play music at the right speed, but I started also reading a book while stepping. Seems like it justifies the time I take away from grading and housework to also accomplish something like reading. Unfortunately I was not able to stick to 3 days a week at the box, but ended up with a variation of walking sometimes instead, or going on the treadmill. I had to adjust my mindset of needing the routine to be perfect to allow some flexibility on how to get my workout because I get so easily bored doing the same thing each time. Still a work in progress.

The experience of blogging can enhance the voice of students who otherwise might not feel included in the class. The anonymous feel of a blog can even arouse the desire to be heard (Mortensen and Walker 2002). So often in face-to-face class discussions the same four to five students contribute to the topic. There is often a hesitancy to become vulnerable in front of peers due to fear of criticism from the sensitive nature of public self-disclosure. Techniques to draw greater participation often are met with resistance and anxiety. Essays and class writings demonstrate that students have remarkable insight, but often are too shy to share in a class setting. Blogging can be the venue that liberates inhibited students (Sawmiller 2010).

People don't all read, write, and think at the same pace. Students who blog their assignments do not have to feel pressure from instructors or peers to finish reading in a predetermined time frame. Seat time is not wasted waiting for students to read articles. Not all students process content as quickly. Significant sharing could be generated from those who just needed more time. The added convenience and freedom to post in privacy is a tremendous asset that can create a positive response. The chance to interact with the instructor and classmates in a virtual world makes room for different learning styles. Blogs potentially can capture the lost voices that might have affected meaningful dialog. However, more than any other benefit, when more students contribute, more information is shared, and more information is heard.

By far the most distinguishing facet of blogging is the audience when compared to submission of an essay as a hard copy or electronic word file to one individual—the instructor. Many students will comment that they are writing for themselves when they blog, but it is a sobering awareness to realize that after selecting the button “publish,” the world is now able to observe and respond. Those posts that can contain complex

math calculations, innovative ideas, personal revelations, and travel adventures run the gamut, and their fellow students could read and comment, but so also could the public at large. There is a heightened sense of importance when more than an instructor's eyes are evaluating the written piece. In some sense, bloggers are developing an identity in that they are actually writing for three or more audiences—their peers, the public, the instructor, and possibly their future employers.

The less obvious benefit of giving students a voice beyond information sharing is the sense of empowerment stemming from self-expression, while also unconsciously practicing inclusion. Contributing to class discussion can bring personal validation—a level of consciousness that only a small percentage experience in a typical classroom setting (Miller and Sheperd 2004). Providing a safe avenue for students to anonymously contribute decreases anxiety, while it also increases the status of each individual to share power. With more opportunity for equality among participants, inclusion of multiple perspectives is created to bring a greater collective intelligence. Thus, empathy and tolerance are practiced to enrich the discussion to a more global potential (Irwin and Berge 2006).

Also fascinating is that the community's boundaries are flexible when designing a class blog project. Select groupings can be created by the blog administrator. Groups or subgroups on class topics can be formed by creating categories from the options menu on wordpress.com. Typically, a group for my purposes is the size of a class, but I also have merged two classes into one blog. To pull together an even larger community, I have joined similar classes from two different institutions during a semester. Considering there really are no rules as to how a community comes together, there is no reason to close the blog after the semester's conclusion. Why not continue to make the blog available to users even after the term's conclusion? Archived posts from previous semesters then can serve as a foundation for students in the subsequent semester.

How Blogging Affects Student Learning and Instruction

In the preparation and development of blogging in my courses during the past year, the following discoveries emerged, which proved to be more positive than expected in terms of engagement as well as increased learning opportunities. Investigation of the assumed outcomes requires further investigation, but the main objectives are addressed in the following rubric (see Table 1). On the left are the perceived results of blogging together as a class. The row at the top demonstrates the potential academic outcomes. The "X" represents what I believed to be happening as a result of our class blog. For example, blogging in the class enabled students a *chance to read and write in an informal format*. As a result of writing informally, students gained practice reading and writing, took part in opportunities for creative expression, participated in tasks calling on different learning styles and used technology. I also adjusted my teaching practice.

Table 1: Perceived Blogging Outcomes**Overarching Purpose for Incorporating Blogs into Instructional Design**

Blog goals	Practice reading and writing	Practice critical thinking	Creative expression	Enables different learning styles	Builds community	Changed instructional practices	Uses or teaches technology
Discover commonality through reading each others' posts	X	X		X	X	X	X
Chance to formulate thoughts into concrete expression		X	X	X		X	X
Students who typically do not speak up in class, have a voice	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gives students time to analyze and process material		X		X		X	X
Increases shared learning and peer review	X	X		X	X	X	X
Large audience increases motivation level of students	X				X	X	X
Increases importance of project because of online environment	X					X	X
Virtual environment convenient			X	X		X	X
Opportunity for more interaction outside class time	X			X	X	X	X
Anonymous feel of the blog encourages self-expression or self-disclosure		X	X	X	X	X	X
Interaction of instructor with students to model		X		X	X	X	X

Blog goals	Practice reading and writing	Practice critical thinking	Creative expression	Enables different learning styles	Builds community	Changed instructional practices	Uses or teaches technology
Interaction with students for intervention	X	X		X	X	X	X
Publicly share what students are learning					X	X	X
An archive of all entries	X					X	X
Ability to upload media with text increases expression and inspiration		X	X	X	X	X	X
Increases accountability because of time stamp						X	X
Opportunity to include students from past semesters					X	X	X

The table originated from a brainstorm session I had after beginning the second semester of blogging with my class. After reading through a literature review on the use of blogs in the classroom to see what outcomes should be expected, it became apparent that many more benefits were happening than anticipated, especially in contrast to the submissions of their student journals in a word-processed document. Our institution's vision statement and criteria for our course work is listed across the top to include reading and writing, demonstration of reflection, inclusive environment for learning styles, building relationship with the community, and the use of technology. Creative expression facilitates different learning styles, and then of course, improving and advancing instruction is a core component for our university. The grid then reflects the overlap of all categories and suggests how blogging most of all increases opportunities for instructional growth.

Student Survey Following Blog Activities

In an attempt to understand student behavior and receive feedback from the class blog experience, a survey was conducted near the end of the eight-week blogging exercise. Twenty-one students participated in the survey out of the thirty students who were involved in the blogging project. Following is the set of instructions, questions, and their anonymous responses, which are used by permission.

Instructions to students:

Please watch my video first before answering these questions . . . It's around 5 minutes . . . so in an effort to improve my teaching and my ongoing practice of using various tools in an online environment, I welcome your feedback and permission to demonstrate what happens in our class when we use technology, and in particular, go Web 2.0. So, if you could, please answer the following questions honestly for constructive feedback both for future classes I teach and contribution to research on use of blogs in the class projects. I will provide you an opportunity to accept or decline my use of your feedback for participation in the blog. No matter whether you accept or decline I will give you points for filling out this survey. Thank you for your assistance.

Following is an anonymous class survey about use of wordpress.com with student responses. (Note: Some questions not relevant to my main discussion have not been included.)

1. Does knowing that others can read your blog add interest to the activity compared to just submitting to me?

Response	Average	Total
Yes	 52 percent	11
Somewhat	 33 percent	7
Makes no difference	 14 percent	3

2. Do you worry about spelling and grammar more on the blog than in an assignment only submitted to the instructor?

Response	Average	Total
Yes	 10 percent	2
Somewhat	 29 percent	6
Makes no difference	 62 percent	13

3. Does the environment (colors and background compared to ilearn forums) of the blog bring a different attitude toward your entries?

Response	Average	Total
Not really	 38 percent	8
Maybe a little	 14 percent	3
Prefer this format to the ilearn forums	 48 percent	10

4. Do you like the anonymous nature of the blogs?

Response	Average	Total
Doesn't matter to me one way or another.	14 percent	3
I feel a little more free to express myself.	71 percent	15
I don't like being anonymous. I'd rather see and be seen by my audience.	14 percent	3

6. Are you looking for comments from me—the instructor?

Response	Average	Total
No, I'm doing my own thing no matter what.	14 percent	3
I didn't notice there were comments.	5 percent	1
I just like to know from the instructor if I'm on the right track.	71 percent	15
I wish the instructor would give specific hints or ideas.	10 percent	2

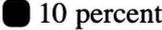
7. Would it be better for you if other students in the blog would make comments on your posts?

Response	Average	Total
I don't want comments on my post.	19 percent	4
Doesn't matter one way or another.	52 percent	11
Would be nice.	19 percent	4
Yes, it would make the blog much better for me.	10 percent	2

8. Are you reading other student posts?

Response	Average	Total
No, I only go in and enter new post without looking at the home page.	10 percent	2
I just read the one post next to mine.	5 percent	1
Depending on if I have time, I might read through a couple.	71 percent	15
I use the topic to search by exercise, stress, or nutrition to see others in my area.	14 percent	3

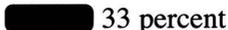
9. If you're reading other student posts, have you found their experiences to be of interest to you?

Response	Average	Total
Again, I don't read other posts.	 10 percent	2
On occasion I've read through another post that was interesting.	 52 percent	11
I find what others write beneficial to me and can learn from them.	 38 percent	8

10. Has using wordpress.com increased your skills with technology?

Response	Average	Total
I have blogged before many times; this is not new to me.	 5 percent	1
I have barely done any blogging before, but this is fairly comfortable to me.	 43 percent	9
I've never participated in something like this and it's a challenge for me.	 5 percent	1
I've not participated in something like this before, but I adapted pretty well.	 48 percent	10

11. Do you believe that what you have to say could be significant to someone who might read it?

Response	Average	Total
I never thought about that before.	 57 percent	12
Yes, everyone has something to offer if they have a voice.	 33 percent	7
I am just writing for myself, so I don't really care if others are reading it.	 10 percent	2

13. Are you more likely to post each week knowing the post is time stamped when you publish?

Response	Average	Total
Yes	 57 percent	12
No	 43 percent	9

14. Is it easier to post in a web site than to open a Word file, write your comments, then upload it into iLearn each week?

Response	Average	Total
Yes	81 percent	17
No	19 percent	4

16. Would you be more honest or self-disclosing if this was a private blog that you only shared with me—the instructor?

Response	Average	Total
Yes	48 percent	10
No	52 percent	11

17. Any other comments or feedback here is appreciated:

#	Response
1	Blogging is a creative and fun way to share your ideas and progress as well as reading everyone else and helping each other out instead of just writing essays and stuff.
1	I like when posts, blogs, and assignments are only submitted to the instructor, so not everyone can see it. I think it allows people to be more open and honest.
1	I really like how I have been learning and participating in the blogging process. It is something new to me, but I have found it interesting to read about other people's activities and achievements.
1	I really like the blog site as a teaching aid. I thought the idea was very creative and it is very easy to keep up with ourselves as well as our other classmates.
1	Overall I feel that this blog is a good way to keep the students in an online class engaged with the material.
1	Thank you for a wonderful year. I really enjoyed this class. I learned a lot about myself.
1	The blog is a great way for us to keep track of our own progress as well as a way for the instructor to see how our plan is working out. I feel that I can reflect on what I've done by being able to read back and it's cool that I can compare what others have done, too, because I see a lot of similarities.

Overall, the student response regarding blog participation is generally positive. Of particular interest to me is that the anonymous results here mostly confirm perceived outcomes from Table 1. For instance, according to survey question #1, students acknowledged that interest in participation increased, knowing that others could read their blog contributions. Skill level of technology, from question #10, which could

have been a big deterrent toward participation, reported the majority in the survey as comfortable with blogging. The questionnaire and the video are, of course, somewhat metacognitive and no doubt influenced some of the responses and might also have changed the remaining blogging exercises for students. That is, students knowing that they were now part of a study and somewhat under a microscope might have created a more positive endorsement of the blogging than if there was no survey.

In general, their comments suggest that the requirement to interact with new technology for the blogging project was not met with too much resistance. As a matter of fact, there is an indication that students preferred the blogging to the electronic class forum and appreciated that there was no uploading of files or attachments needed to participate. I had expected that students might protest to adding a new technological requirement (joining wordpress.com) to a class assignment. However, either the directions for creating their blog account were easy to understand and apply for most students, or students in the class possessed fairly sophisticated web skills.

Curiously, students noted that they enjoyed the blog's anonymous feel and might have been even more willing to self-disclose in a private blog. The question of public or private is a complex determination. Balancing the advantage of creating community and shared knowledge against deeper personal reflection is a difficult choice to make in relation to the context of the wellness plan journal. Students might have been able to implicate more psychological meanings to their behaviors in a private blog. Potential outcomes for a public blog per the grid listed previously, such as support and accountability, outweigh the chance of richer self-disclosure for the wellness journal from my perspective. Results comparing students' desire to see instructor comments versus peer comments definitely confirms that students like to receive instructor feedback at least in terms of knowing they are on the right track. Disappointing in terms of writing practice, students did not feel compelled to adhere to strict grammatical skills, at least not any more than submitting work through normal class assignments. I had thought that community and/or classmate oversight might have added incentive to value grammatical principles. It might be that the nature of the blog appeared informal, and in that sense students believed that language rules were not as important as an honest portrayal of behavior change. Although proper grammar was stressed in all class writings, it appears that the blog was in a domain where students could let their hair down so to speak. It is possible that because students believed they were writing to their classmates as an audience, they chose a style of writing that was not off-putting to their peers.

Conclusion

Blogging changed my pedagogy and added a new dimension of participation within courses for both student and me—the instructor. Use of technology certainly broadens the scope of creative possibilities as a teaching tool for any discipline. Technology plays a role in influencing the actions of users, sometimes in ways the technology's creator did not intend. For instance, as the weeks progressed, I decided it was important to comment occasionally to each student's post in order to give myself a

presence. Inserting my own post also had no prescription for best practices and evolved over time. Unique decisions arise as a participant of the blog as to how often to join in as a peer and how often to remain as an administrator. However, although technology shapes how we act, it is, in turn, shaped by that action (Kjellberg 2009). Communication is somehow both internal and external at the same time.

The ability to be “live” with students on Web 2.0 is a direction that was unexpectedly engaging for me as an instructor. In sharp contrast to waiting a week to meet with students face to face or waiting for students to upload a file, use of Web 2.0 tools adds undefined possibilities for interaction. The community created by bloggers is unified to create a body of knowledge which is shaped by the users and evolves into a collaboration because social relationships have the ability to influence the whole (Yang and Chen 2008). For example, in subsequent semesters I added a new semester of student authors onto a previous semester of blogs and deleted inferior posts to influence students to raise their contribution level. Students don’t have to wait until a class meeting to submit their work as the blog is always open for participation with a wealth of information from which to read and respond. In fact, use of blogging outside the classroom can feel spontaneous and informal during which members share and exchange problem-solving and innovative thinking with little instructor prompting (Huang et al. 2010). In fact, not the least of all these potential benefits is that students become peer teachers who share with each other in the learning process. Not only does their contribution raise their own level of self-efficacy, but exponentially increases the typically one-dimensional learning that is limited by instructor-based pedagogy. Therefore, students are now actively participating as important players in the enrichment of course content.

What is also surprising in retrospect over the past two years is that students were for the most part using technology to accomplish a class project with little knowledge of the implications or scope of the tool. By posting a catchy title and a picture with their paragraphs, students were inadvertently practicing journalism and establishing a public presence. Unbeknownst to them, students also were a blog site owner and could develop and design their own web site or portfolio.

Of significant interest to me as an instructor is the benefit of archiving student contributions from semester to semester for future classes and/or the public. Moreover, several classes (or campuses) can join together to form a larger community in order to cultivate inclusion and diversity while also building commonality or purpose. Therefore, student participation over the semesters leaves a legacy that extends beyond the term. The capacity to further develop blogs within course design is boundless. Exploration of individual and group blogs is certainly worth the endeavor in terms of the numerous advantages discussed here and those yet to be realized. There is no doubt that technology will continue to evolve and generate unforeseen opportunities to communicate through the use of Web 2.0.

References

- Arhin, Afua, and Versie Johnson-Mallard. 2003. "Encouraging Alternative Forms of Self-Expression in the Generation Y Student: Strategy for Effective Learning in the Classroom." *The ABNF Journal* 14 (6): 121–122.
- Beyers, Ronald Noel. 2009. "A Five Dimensional Model for Educating the Net Generation." *Educational Technology and Society* 12 (4): 218–227.
- Blogherald.com. 2005. "A Short History of Blogging." Accessed July 2, 2011. www.blogherald.com/2005/03/06/a-short-history-of-blogging/.
- Blogpulse.com. 2011. Accessed July 2, 2011.
- Burgess Jean. 2006. "Blogging to Learn, Learning to Blog." In *Uses of Blogs*, edited by Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs, 105–114. Peter Lang: New York.
- Facebook.com. 2011. Accessed July 2, 2011.
- Holtz, Geoffrey T. 1995. *Welcome to the Jungle*. New York: St. Martin.
- Huang, Jeff, Stephen Yang, Yueh-Min Huang, and Indy Hsiao. 2010. Social Learning Networks: Build Mobile Learning Networks Based on Collaborative Services." *Educational Technology and Society* 13 (3): 78–92.
- Irwin, Christopher, and Zane Berge. 2006. "Socialization in the Online Classroom." *E-Journal of Instructional Science and Technology* 9. Accessed July 4, 2011. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/e-jist/docs/vol9_no1/papers/full_papers/irwin_berge.htm.
- Kjellberg, Sara. 2009. "Scholarly Blogging Practice as Situated Genre: An Analytical Framework Based on Genre Theory." *Information Research* 14 (3). <http://informationr.net/ir/14-3/paper410.html>.
- Kvavik, Robert, and Judith B. Caruso. 2006. "Students and Information Technology, 2005: Convenience, Connection, Control, and Learning." *Educause*.
- Miller, Carolyn R., and Dawn Shepard. 2004. "Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog." In "Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs," edited by L. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman. Accessed July 4, 2011. http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging_as_social_action_a_genre_analysis_of_the_Weblog.html. Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.Webcitation.org/5j9YtAGiO>.

Mortensen, Torill, and Jill Walker. 2002. "Blogging Thoughts: Personal Publication as an Online Research Tool." In *Researching ICTs in Context*, edited by A. Morrison, Oslo, Norway: InterMedia. Accessed July 4, 2011.
<http://www.fdcw.org/logosite/Mortensen-Walkerpercent20percent20Researching ICTs in context-Ch11-.pdf>. Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.Webcitation.org/5j9Zhnhmq>.

Sandars, John, and Catriona Morrison. 2007. "What Is the Net Generation? The Challenge for Future Medical Education." *University of Leeds, UK Medical Teacher* 29: 85–88.

Sawmiller, Alison. 2010. "Classroom Blogging: What Is the Role in Science Learning?" *The Clearing House* 83: 44–48.

Tekinarslan, Erkan. 2010. "Reflections of Effects of Blogging on Students' Achievement and Knowledge Acquisition in Issues of Instructional Technology." *International Journal of Technology and Distance Learning* (7) 11.

Yang, Stephen, and Irene Chen. 2008. "A Social Network-based System for Supporting Interactive Collaboration in Knowledge Sharing over Peer-to Peer Network." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 66 (1): 36–50.

Author Information

With an MHE and MA in art and in physical education, Denise Castro is a lecturer in the kinesiology department at California State University, Monterey Bay, where her teaching and interests revolve around use of the cloud and Web 2.0 to capture student interest with an engaging and practical pedagogical approach. Believing wellness to be a multi-dimensional process, Denise is a consultant with the Monterey County Department of Health and also uses Web 2.0 extensively in her staff position as a compliance officer for the university athletic department.

Denise Castro
100 Campus Center, 84F
Seaside, CA 93955
E-mail: dcastro@csumb.edu
Telephone: 831-582-5216
Fax: 831-582-4023