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Instructional Blogging: Promoting Interactivity, Student-Centered Learning, and Peer Input

by *Stuart Glogoff*

As the Web has afforded new ways to network people dispersed across a broad, invisible system of bytes and nodes, educators have learned a great deal about the ability of the Web to nurture, foster, and enable community. Indeed, the ubiquity of the Web is matched by the reassuring anonymity that it affords. In an online environment, people share personal and family experiences, ask for advice regarding intimate matters, and initiate dialogues with total strangers (Glogoff [2001](#)). Such activities encourage closeness and immediacy in online relationships (Powazek 2002). In this kind of environment, appropriate tools empower participants to say what they think and to receive feedback quickly from others.

In an instructional environment, online communication tools such as e-mail, listservs, chat rooms, and instant messaging cultivate personal bonds with and among students and promote extended dialogue about important topics. In comparison to these communication tools, however, instructional blogging offers additional opportunities to engage students and extend the virtual classroom. Blogging can complement community building in hybrid and distance courses and can frame personal places in virtual spaces. As an adjunct professor teaching hybrid and online courses on information technology at the University of Arizona ([UA](#)), I have made extensive use of online technologies and have come to regard blogging as an exceptional learning tool that has enormous potential in the virtual classroom. In what follows I provide an overview of my instructional use of blogging technology, linking specific practices with key concepts in pedagogical theory and noting the adjustments I made in response to student feedback. By illustrating the value of blogging in a specific educational setting, this article provides worthwhile suggestions for instructors who are considering such technology for their own courses.

Bloggging as an E-learning Tool

Instructional blogging operates as a knowledge-centered instructional tool. In this model the instructor involves students in research activities, engages them in discussions with practitioners, and leads them through developmental concepts of the discipline's knowledge domain.

I found that instructional blogging related well to knowledge-centered instruction in Decision Making for Information Professionals ([IRLS613](#)), a course that I taught in 2003 and 2004 for the UA's [School of Information Resources and Library Science](#). The course content included modules such as technological evolution, information architecture, strategic planning, learning objects, content management, and usability. In both years I maintained a primary course weblog, but in 2004 I also provided each student with a predesigned, individual weblog at the beginning of the course. Prior technical experience with blogging was not a course requirement, and students were given instructions on how to maintain their weblogs. For course assignments I directed students to content-specific Web sites on which they researched a topic. After integrating this research with their own ideas and solutions, students published their work on their blogs. In some content modules, such as strategic planning and request for proposals, students and guest practitioners interacted by exchanging ideas and asking questions of each other. The guest practitioners also commented on student blog entries. By the end of the course, students had analyzed the deeper structures necessary to make sound decisions when evaluating information systems for use or purchase.

Learner-centered blogging acknowledges the important attributes of learners as individuals and as a group. As an instructor, I have used blogging as a learner-centered instructional tool by giving positive feedback to students on their comments in blog entries and by adding comments to discussion threads involving two or

more students ([Exhibit 1](#)). Given that many online students miss the face-to-face contact realized in a traditional classroom, blogging offers particularly useful opportunities for learner-centered feedback and dialogue.

Such opportunities also support community-centered instruction by utilizing the critical social component of learning central to Vygotsky's (1978) notions of social cognition; Lipman's (1991) concept of a community of inquiry; and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) ideas of community practice. Blogging expresses the importance of social and peer interaction as foci of the learning community. Instructors of courses rooted in a knowledge discipline can use blogs to lead students through the foundations of that discipline in order to contextualize real-world experiences. Because they are able to advance their own perspectives and experiences, students make an investment in what they post to their blogs ([Exhibit 2](#)). Class members further discussion by reading and appraising other students' blogs, commenting on the value or relevance of blog entries to their own experiences, and suggesting additional resources. Since blogs are presented on Web pages, embedded links are appropriate and convenient, and they make it easy for other students to access new resources quickly. Although instructors should be cognizant of the delicate balance between the synchronicity of time and place on the one hand, and the need to keep discussions focused on the topic on the other hand, blogging provides opportunities for students to interact in meaningful ways that extend instruction in the virtual classroom.

Receptive Learning, Directive Learning, and Guided Discovery

Instructional blogging also utilizes the three instructional techniques described by Clark and Mayer (2003). These authors advocate supporting student knowledge acquisition through: (a) receptive techniques, which involve building instructional modules that open avenues to a great deal of information while limiting application and experimentation; (b) directive techniques, which emphasize frequent responses from learners with immediate feedback from the instructor; and (c) guided discovery techniques, which place the instructor in the role of the expert leading students toward identifying appropriate conceptual processes and solving real-life challenges.

As a receptive learning tool, blogging can be used to frame assignments within a theoretical context that encourages students to acquire information and report what they have learned. During the 2003 fall semester, for example, J. David Betts, a colleague in the UA [College of Education](#), integrated blogging technology into a graduate-level course that studied the role of language in reading and writing processes. Betts utilized blogs for class assignments, reflections, and journal entries as a way to extend discussion and foster collaboration in the days between weekly meetings ([Exhibit 3](#)). Similarly, I have used blogging as a receptive learning tool through assignments that require students to acquire, report, and evaluate additional information within a given theoretical context ([Exhibit 4](#)).

Because of their public nature, blogs can be used as a directive learning tool to provide students with equal access to important information, to expand students' understanding of specific issues, and to direct students to explore additional material. While teaching freshman composition at the UA during the 2003 fall semester and the 2005 spring semester, for example, William Endres supplemented the blogs he created for each student with a separate blog in which he posted summaries of important classroom discussions, reinforced the week's key learnings, and clarified points that students had struggled to understand fully ([Exhibit 5](#)).

Blogs also lend themselves extremely well to the response strengthening inherent in directive learning because the comments form attached to each entry allows instructors to add content and additional prompts. For example, I posted the following comment to one student's blog entry on disruptive technology: "I agree with the idea that file sharing can be seen as a disruptive technology. At the heart of the disruption you are writing about, IMO [in my opinion], is P2P. Are you familiar with it?" After reviewing my comments, the student revisited the topic, found additional information, and posted an insightful entry regarding peer-to-peer file sharing and university policy changes. Indeed, most of my assignments lend themselves to response strengthening because I use the comments form to give direct, positive feedback. Because blog pages are

public, I use e-mail and face-to-face exchanges to discuss critical comments with students.

Blogs can also be used to encourage guided discovery and knowledge construction. In a module on information architecture, for example, students in my course read from the professional literature and visited Web sites that provided tutorials and other content. After this exploration, students completed an assignment that asked them to synthesize what they had learned and to describe those concepts in a real-world situation ([Exhibit 6](#)). This use of the guided discovery technique also encourages collaboration because students work together to build knowledge. Using cognitive scaffolding, a basic tenet of constructivism, students revisit the learning space, build upon prior knowledge, think about what they have learned, and drill deeper for more information (Richards 2001). Finally, the opportunities for each student to post substantive comments to other students' blog entries add an additional tier of interactivity and social interaction. In online courses where communication remains largely text-based, such opportunities to enhance community can make significant contributions to student learning.

Student Responses to Blogging

Although Brookfield and Preskill (1999) have advocated useful iterative techniques that promote more meaningful classroom discussions, successfully promoting discussion in virtual courses can be challenging because virtual students have a tendency to lurk rather than participate. Moreover, Anderson (2004) argues that it is easier for instructors of online courses to be exclusive and allow nonparticipants to lurk without active community involvement.

My own experience teaching hybrid courses between 1994 and 2000 and teaching IRLS613 as a fully online course in 2003 and 2004 confirms this problem. During the hybrid years, I was pleased to note that all but the most introverted students fully participated in online forum discussions. In fact, one of the most impressive aspects of the 2000 hybrid class was that students regularly took their assignments beyond the basic requirements. Typically, they shared additional resources with classmates, and some even challenged others to build upon what they reported. When the class became fully online in 2003, I added a blog to provide a common space for students to explore individual findings related to one of the course's main themes: recognizing and explaining real-world uses for new technologies. I asked students to share new insights with each other, read each other's entries, and use the comments feature to add new content. Those students who found the course's subject matter engaging posted entries regularly, whereas others refused to do so, even though posting was a course requirement. No matter what incentives I tried, I could not lure the lurkers into participating in meaningful ways in the discussion forums or the blogs. The primary difference between the hybrid and fully online courses was the absence of face-to-face discussions in the latter. Without such discussions, I could not call on students and lead them through a knowledge construction process that would result in their ownership of an idea.

On an anonymous assessment survey at the end of the 2003 class, one student commented that he/she enjoyed reading about new subjects and doing research for postings to the topical blog. The student lamented, however, that in general "the posts were few and far between. None of my posts were ever commented on, which was a little disappointing." With this reaction in mind, at the beginning of my 2004 class I surveyed students informally about their previous experiences with blogging. Several people had similar stories of disappointment. They reported that, in a different course taken the previous semester, the professor had asked them to blog but did not require them to post entries. Nor did he comment on student entries. Because of this lack of attention, the students abandoned their blogs after the first week.

In order to increase the effectiveness of blogging in my 2004 course, I created a blog for each student and developed assignments that required students to post entries. I also required students to read each other's entries and make three substantive comments per week. These policies ensured participation, but they also were crucial to validating students' contributions. In this course, I observed more participation than in the previous year's class, and students reported that blogging promoted a greater sense of community ([Exhibit 7](#)). Overall, student satisfaction with blogging in the 2004 course was high ([Exhibit 8](#)), and students reported

that the peer-review capabilities of blogging contributed to better understandings of course content ([Exhibit 9](#)).

Conclusion

As a valuable e-learning tool, blogging can be used in a number of ways to engage students in discussion, exploration, and discovery. It is appropriate for both hybrid and fully online courses. As my institution's primary support person for instructional blogging, as well as an instructor who has integrated blogging into his teaching, I can attest that it works best when integrated into a coherent pedagogical approach, vested in an appropriate educational theory, and updated regularly by participants. As more instructors use blogging, we will have the opportunity to assess new applications for this emerging instructional technology. It will be interesting, for example, to learn whether blogs promote virtual communities after a course has ended and grades have been assigned. More importantly, extending contact between instructors and enthusiastic students through a topical blog could provide a practical way to mentor and encourage exceptional students to continue their studies in relevant fields.

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