

Teaching with Blogs

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What is a blog?

A blog is a kind of social media tool that allows one to share ideas with authentic audiences and to engage those audiences in conversation. Most blogs look something like journals, with a series of “posts” appearing on the blog in reverse chronological order (newest posts at the top, older posts below). Blogs can address any number of topics, from travel to food to parenting to politics, and they can be written by single authors or by groups of writers. Typically, blogging software is very easy to use, but also flexible enough to allow for customization in both style and structure.

Why teach with blogs?

Although people often think of social media as a space for non-academic interactions, blogs can be helpful tools for instructors interested in enhancing their students’ communication skills and increasing their students’ investment in learning.

Blogs can be spaces for informal or formal writing by students, and the capacity of blogs to support multiple forms of media (images, videos, links, and so on) can help students bring creativity to their communication. Most blogs includes tools for commenting and discussion, enabling students to engage their ideas in conversation with others, either within their local learning communities or on the open Web.

Student writing is often seen by just one person on the planet (their instructor), which can make writing assignments feel like “busy work.” The dynamic interaction between writer and audience that blogs facilitate can help students see real value in their academic writing and take that writing more seriously. Moreover, the public, persistent nature of blogs can help students practice more integrative learning, finding connections among their personal, professional, and academic experiences.

When writing for blogs, students can experiment and interact digitally in a relaxed and low-risk environment. Blogs can be an excellent balance between the rigor and structure of a formal written assignment and the freedom to experiment with ideas and arguments.

Examples of course blogs at Vanderbilt

- The Solar System (<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/astro201solarsys/>), Erika Grundstrom (Astronomy)
- The Cinematic Essay (<https://vandycinematicessay.wordpress.com/>), Jonathan Rattner (Cinema & Media Studies)
- Science/Fiction (<https://vusf.wordpress.com/>), Jay Clayton (English) and Robert Scherer (Physics)
- Picture It: Literature, Photography, and Memory (Picture It: Literature, Photography, and Memory), Alison Schachter (English)

- Vandy Performs (<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/vandyperforms/>), Christin Essin (Theatre)
- William Blake and Enlightenment Media (<https://williamblakeandenlightenmentmedia.wordpress.com/>), Humberto Garcia (English)
- Neely's News for Children's Literature Enthusiasts (<https://neelysnews.wordpress.com/>), Ann Neely (Teaching & Learning)
- Cryptography: The History and Mathematics of Codes and Code Breaking (<http://derekbruff.org/blogs/fywscrypto/>), Derek Bruff (Mathematics)

Important decisions for teaching with blogs

Instructors interested in teaching with blogs face a number of decisions for incorporating blogs in their courses. Here are three of the most important decisions for teaching with blogs:

1. What dynamic will there be between blog and classroom?

The online writing environment should act as an extension of the classroom. Make this interaction between the digital learning environment and the classroom clear to your students by expressing how you expect the blog work to contribute to the course's overall learning goals.

2. What blogging platform will you use?

The learning curve with an educational blog use can be steep. From choosing a platform to designing the interaction structure, there are many options that arise from using blogs. Making these decisions can be time consuming.

3. Will your students' blogs be public or private?

Consider if you want outside community members to comment, view, and possibly interact with your course blog. It is also important for you to understand the rules of your institution and determine if photos on blog pages or student writing samples are releasable to the public.

For perspectives on the public/private decision, see the section on privacy (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/digital-timelines/#other>) in the Center for Teaching's guide to digital timelines, as well as the blog posts "Should Class Blogs be Private or Public?" (<https://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2010/12/15/should-class-blogs-be-private-or-public>) by Cathy Davidson and "Why Students Should Blog in Public" (<https://googleguacamole.wordpress.com/2016/03/08/why-students-should-blog-in-public/?platform=hootsuite>) by Laura Gogia.

Other considerations for teaching with blogs

4. Articulate clear rules before you start

It is important to clearly communicate the expectations for the blog before you begin. Most students don't have experience writing for blogs for academic purposes, so students will need to know why and how you want them to blog.

5. Writing, writing, writing

Knowledge of the course content can be developed through writing; however, blog use does require the student to deepen his/her writing skills and communicate ideas effectively. Time should be spent to teach the importance of writing style and grammar. Using the blog as a vehicle for providing students with feedback on their writing so that their skills can improve.

6. More writing... rules about posting and commenting

The comment section allows students to share thoughts and opinions. Students can interact with the published content. When using a blog it is a good idea to teach students how to comment well

(<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/how-to-write-a-great-blog-comment>). This can be done by using examples or creating a set of posting or commenting criteria. This should include a discussion about not posting comments that are put-downs or use inappropriate language and how to make comments that reflect logical, sound arguments. Repercussions for improper blog commenting and posting should be discussed.

7. Discuss plagiarism (<mailto:https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/cheating-plagiarism/>) and use it as a teaching moment

With the digital era making content widely accessible, it is very important to discuss plagiarism. These interactions can be used as a teaching moment to discuss copyright-laws surrounding images and how to find and use copyright-free images (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2013/01/finding-non-copyrighted-images-for-presentations/>).

8. Acknowledge the students' time spent on the blog and the amount of time required to make a blog useful.

Building a blog takes time, and by adding a writing component, the course load for both students and instructor can increase greatly. It doesn't have to, however. Blogging can replace other forms of writing. For instance, instead of having students turn in a reading response paper each week, an instructor could ask students to post their responses to the reading on the blog. This way, blogging doesn't increase time on task, it just changes its nature. Also important: Grading structures for blogs (grading largely on effort vs. more rigorous grading with a rubric) determine how much time the student spends on quality blog posts and can determine the importance that the student places on the blog. Please find a sample rubric here (<http://www.samplereality.com/2009/08/14/pedagogy-and-the-class-blog/>) from Mark Sample of George Mason.

Get started blogging at Vanderbilt

Vanderbilt uses WordPress as a blogging platform. To get started, visit <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/> and click on "Create your site." Vanderbilt's WordPress installation doesn't provide many options, which makes it easy to learn to use but also means it's not as helpful for instructors with more experience blogging. Some Vanderbilt instructors use WordPress.com, which is free and provides more customization options than my.vanderbilt.edu. And a few instructors run WordPress on their own web servers. Check out Reclaim Hosting (<https://reclaimhosting.com/>) for one option for self-hosting.

Vanderbilt Web Communications hosts open office hours for those interested in learning how to use WordPress. Center for Teaching technologists are also available for consultation.

Additional reading

- David I. Hanauer and Erin L. Dolan, *The Project Ownership Survey: Measuring Difference in Scientific Inquiry Experiences*. CBE-Life Sciences Education. 2013.
- Andrew Sullivan, "Why I Blog," *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2008.
- Rebecca Blood, "Chapter Two: Finding Your Voice," *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*, 2002
- Rebecca Blood, "Weblog Ethics", *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2002. 114-121
- Rebecca Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective" September 7, 2000.
- Rebecca Blood, "Rebecca's Pocket: Ten Tips for A Better Weblog"
- Charles Lowe, Purdue University, and Terra Williams, Arizona State University, "Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom" *Into The Blogosphere*
- Rebecca Mead, "You've Got Blog" *The New Yorker*, Vol 76, Issue 34, p 102, November 13, 2000.
- Blogging 101 – An introduction to reading and writing a weblog: Blogs – anatomy, Blogs – why read, why write.
- Gunther Kress, *Gains and losses: New forms of texts, knowledge and learning*, *Computers and Composition* 22 (2005) 5-22
- Meredith Badger, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, *Visual Blogs Into the Blogosphere*
- Christopher Pappas, *How To Use Blogs In the Classroom - eLearning Industry*, Thursday 26 September 2013.