

Blogging as a Tool for Reflection and Learning

Associate Professor Jill Walker Rettberg, University of Bergen (UiB).

This short talk is about how blogs are being used for learning. I'm going to start by talking about blogging as a way of using writing to learn. I'll continue by giving you some examples of how blogs can be used with students, and talk about how blogging teaches network literacy, that is how to be an active participant on the web. And I'll finish up by telling you about how you can get started yourself.

1. Let's start by talking about what sort of writing blogging is.

You may be familiar with the Norwegian researcher Olga Dysthe's work on how to use writing in learning. She writes about the difference between "thinking-writing" and "presentation writing". Thinking writing is the kind of writing we do when we're thinking through problems or topics, when we're writing for ourselves and not for an audience. Thinking-writing is often called process writing, but I really like Dysthe's term: it emphasises how writing can actually help us think. Presentation writing is the kind of writing you do in order to communicate a message. When you use presentation writing you always have a reader in mind (Dysthe et. al. 2000: 45).

Blogging combines aspects of thinking-writing with aspects of presentation writing – and it adds in the conversation as well.

In a personal blog, each post is usually written quite quickly, and you publish each post immediately. Rather than drafting and revising until each piece of writing is perfect, bloggers tend to publish more frequently and with less perfectionism. You blog your immediate impressions and your first responses to ideas you have read about, or you blog about your experiences or about discussions that are going on in other blogs. Blogging as an immediate response to another text or to an experience or an idea is close to Olga Dysthe's idea of thinking-writing.

But at the same time: when you blog, you're always aware that you have an audience. And so you write out your thoughts just a little more clearly than you might have in a journal nobody but yourself was going to see. Most blogs are not read by many people – maybe you have a dozen readers, maybe you have two dozen, maybe a hundred or so. A very few blogs are read by hundreds of thousands of people. Andy Warhol said that everyone has 15 minutes of fame. That's changed today: on the internet, everyone is famous to 15 people.

VIRTUAL BOOK E-PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2009 © Anne Karin Larsen and Grete Oline Hole (edrs.), Bergen University College, Bergen, Norway

Production: Media Centre, Bergen University College



And you know, 15 people can be just about the perfect size for a group of learners and thinkers. Blogging isn't about being read by as many people as possible: it's about being part of a conversation. Writing a blog without reading other blogs is like clapping with one hand: it makes no sense.

2. How blogging helps learning

I started blogging in the early phases of working on my PhD, and it helped me immensely. I rapidly found that the daily writing was helping me become more confident about my research, and that I was developing a clearer voice of my own – and that that increased confidence carried through into my dissertation writing. In addition, I developed a research network with colleagues blogging around the world. We read each others blogs, shared ideas and research findings and gave each other fast and frequent feedback simply by commenting on each other's blog posts. Many of my fellow bloggers were also PhD students and we found a lot of support in each other during the difficult process of working on and completing a PhD. This blog network was at least as important to me in my everyday research as my local colleagues were.

Many webloggers have had similar experiences. Rebecca Blood was one of the first and most prolific bloggers – her blog is called *Rebecca's Pocket*. In her oft-cited essay "Weblogs: a history and perspective", she writes about how blogging not only helped her gain knowledge about herself and her own interests, blogging actually led her to value more highly her own opinion and her own point of view. Partly, this was because she carefully considered her ideas as she wrote.

In my own blogging it became clear to me at an early point that writing for readers, however few, meant that I took far greater care in my writing than I did when scribbling notes in a notebook for my own eyes only. When you blog, you know that others will read what you have written. That means that you write with an awareness of the possibility that others may disagree with what you have written. Steven Johnson is an author who's found he became twice as productive as a professional writer after he started blogging as well. Blogging, Johnson wrote in his blog, is "an intellectual version of going to the gym".

3. OK, so blogs are great ways of gaining confidence, practicing writing, and participating in networks of other learners. How can you help students to use blogs so that they also learn these things?

I've used blogs in my teaching for several years. I've mostly used blogs with undergraduate university students studying digital culture.

When I first started using blogs in the classroom, I had this idea that students would take to blogging as happily as I had done myself. That didn't happen. Certainly, some students get it instantly. Just as many hate blogging at first, and a large group of students tend to be indifferent to it.

The key thing in guiding students to become bloggers is giving them opportunities to blog. It isn't at all obvious to most students how to blog, or *why* you'd want to blog. Many students don't really like writing. Many students are shy of putting their words onto the internet. Even when they *do* blog, many students don't think to engage in the larger world of blogging. They don't really read other blogs and they don't really expect anyone other than the teacher to read their blog.

Partly this is due to the way we've brought them up in our educational systems. We've taught students to expect to write essays that won't be read by anyone other than the teacher and maybe an external grader. Sometimes, the realization that their writing *matters* outside of the classroom can be a strong learning experience for students.

When I started using blogs with students I assumed that the writing would happen outside of the classroom. That turned out to work well with a few students, the students who took easily to blogging, but most students didn't write enough on their own to learn how to use weblogs.

Finding that most students were not writing at home, I began to give them very explicit exercises in class. It was really helpful having computers in the classroom – and I've found it harder to use blogging successfully when I have to rely on all the blogging happening outside of class.

So here are some of the things I did that really worked. I'd give students the last ten minutes of class to write a blog post about the points in today's discussion that interested them most. And then of course I'd have to make a point of read their posts and maybe writing a post myself linking to some of their points. I'd also give students a few minutes to google a term we were discussing, and to post a link in their blog to the best site about the topic that they could find.

But I also really wanted them to interact with each others writing, so a few times I asked them, in class, to read another student's most recent posts and leave at least

one comment. On other occasions I asked them to write a post in their own blog that continued a discussion started by another student. Often I would ask them to discuss questions or assignments in groups and then write brief posts about their thoughts in their weblogs, as a step towards writing more carefully edited responses, which might become part of their portfolio at the end of the semester. So my in-class assignments aimed to foster strong individual writing as well as a solid networked discussion between students.

I tried to model the kind of weblogging I wanted to encourage in the blog I wrote for the class. I drew connections between posts students had written, helping them to see how discussions were growing forth between them. I linked to particularly well-written or unusual posts, and I also showed the class interesting posts when we met.

I think having students write public blogs is immensely valuable, because it allows them to experience writing in the real world. If students link to other blogs, the other bloggers will be able to see the link either through the logs of visitors to the website or through trackbacks, a feature in many blogging systems that shows links to a post. So if a student links to another blog, she's likely to receive a comment from that blogger – or to find that the blogger has a new post linking to the student. Experiencing that what you write actually matters outside of the classroom is an immensely potent learning moment. Students are used to a learning environment where nobody will see their work apart from the examiners. As my blogging students realised that their writing was actually being read by other students and even by people outside the university, their writing changed. I was most impressed by the way in which they began teaching each other.

For instance, in a class on web design, a colour blind student wrote a post carefully explaining other students and readers how to design sites that can be read by colour blind people – an important point when designing websites, since you'll have more colour blind readers than readers using Opera or Netscape or needing websafe colours or any of those other elements of web design that we fret about. Other students explained technical skills they themselves had just mastered: how to make skins for your blog, how to use php to join up separate html files.

These posts turned out to be very popular among the other students. Students linked to each other's how-to posts, and leave comments asking for more assistance, or suggesting alternative ways of doing things. A certain pride was evident as students mastered a topic and shared it with their friends, and a pleasure in sharing that was contagious and seemed to encourage the others to write more as well. This

is a kind of writing that is experienced as valuable, and not simply because the teacher requires it. As Charles Lowe and Terra Williams note in their article on educational uses of weblogging, “With the teacher no longer the overly predominant active reader and responder of student texts, students, as a community, take more ownership of their writing.” (Lowe and Williams, 2004).

4. OK, that’s some examples of how you can use blogs in your teaching. But how do you actually DO it?

The only way to learn how to blog is to do it. Luckily, it’s pretty easy to get started. My favourite blogging system is Blogger.com. Go there, and they’ll lead you through the process. Once you have your blog, start writing! Use sites like technorati.com to find other blogs about topics you’re interested in and start leaving comments on those blogs. When you comment, make sure you type in the URL for your blog so readers can find you. Write blog posts about the other blog posts you read, and make sure to include lots of links. Read blogs written by other teachers – and find blogs written by experts. Probably some of the authors of books you’ve enjoyed have blogs: read them! As you’re doing research for a paper you’re going to write, take notes in your blog. Ask questions. And then once you feel that you understand blogging – at least to some extent – have a go at blogging with students, and fostering a learning network beyond your own.

References

Blood, R. 2000. “Weblogs: a history and perspective”, in Rebecca's Pocket. 7/9/2000 (online, cited 9 February 2002)

<http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>

Dysthe, Olga, Frøydis Hertzberg and Torlaug Løkensgard Hoel. *Skrive for å lære: skrijving in høyere utdanning*. Oslo: Abstrakt forlag. 2000.

Johnson, Steven. 2002. “A Word From Our Sponsor”, in Stevenberlinjohnson.com. December 26, 2002. (Accessed December 22, 2004)

<<http://www.stevenberlinjohnson.com/movabletype/archives/000028.html>>

Krause, Steven D. “When Blogging Goes Bad: A Cautionary Tale About Blogs, Emailing Lists, Discussion, and Interaction” *Kairos* 9.1 (Fall 2004)

<<http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/>>

Lowe, Charles, and Terra Williams, 2004. "Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom", in Gurak, Laura et. al. (eds) Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs. (Accessed December 16, 2004)<<http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>>

Links:

Jill Walker Rettberg's blog is called [jill/txt](#).

[Blogger.com](#) is a good place to start your own blog. [Wordpress.com](#) is another option.

[Technorati.com](#) is a search engine for blogs. Try searching for a topic or a name there and see which blogs write about the topic or person. Use filters – search only for posts on blogs with “a lot of authority” if you only want to see popular blogs. You can also search for blogs on ordinary search engines like Google. Try searching for edublogging – or add “blog” to whatever topic you're interested in.

Every two weeks there's a “teaching carnival” where a blogger who's interested in teaching compiles a list of interesting blog posts about teaching from the last fortnight. There's a list of teaching carnivals at the [Teaching Carnival blog](#).

Rebecca Blood's blog is [Rebecca's Pocket](#).