



Extending Instructional Uses of Blogs To The Campus: A Case Study

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Introduction

During the academic year 2004-2005, the University of Arizona's (UA) Learning Technologies Center (LTC) provided centralized support for instructional blogging to UA faculty and hosted blogs for administrative units exploring new ways to provide information to students. This presentation highlights marketing instructional blogging to the campus and describes how faculty members are incorporating blogging in courses. A more detailed review is offered by a professor who uses blogs in a number of interesting ways. In addition, the presentation reports on how administrative units are exploring using blogs to recruit students, provide program information, and build community.

To promote instructional blogging, the LTC created a flyer <<http://www.elearn.arizona.edu/blogs/flyer.pdf>> and website <<http://elearn.arizona.edu/blogs/>> to share with prospective faculty bloggers. During the early summer 2005, interviews are identifying how faculty and instructors use blogs and the instructional benefits that they are deriving. From their observations, a "best practices" document will be developed that LTC staff will share with faculty considering blogging.

Instructional Blogging at the UA

UA faculty and instructors find many ways to incorporate blogging in instruction.

Peer Review

An instructor for in the English Composition program uses blogs to develop peer review skills among his students. Students in this instructor's classes write their assignments on individual blogs and classmates then add comments. By teaching students appropriate ways to critique writing he finds that his students develop a sense of empowerment and assume more ownership of their learning experience.

Fostering Interaction

Because students write in a public place, blogging affords students more opportunities to interact with each other. A professor teaching a Ph.D. seminar remarks that because of the blog, he sees more “cross-fertilization” among his students as they learn from each other.

Discussing Course Readings and Course Projects

Blogs are well-suited for discussing course readings. For example, a senior professor who describes himself as a “low-tech academic” introduced a blog to discuss readings in his graduate seminar. He found that he prefers how, compared to using email, the blog enables everyone to respond in the same place.

A blog to discuss course readings in a Spanish conversation course provided a platform to further the Spanish instructor’s learning targets: developing the students’ skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The classroom develops the first two skills and the blog provides the place for reading and writing skills. This instructor gives her students three or four questions to respond to and notes that students take more ownership of what they write because their names (or usernames) appear with their entries and comments.

The UA’s graduate program in nursing is replacing classroom meetings with fully online classes. As a result, instructors are exploring ways to promote discussions and public comment. The blog replaces classroom presentations and becomes the central place where students write up their first experiences as nurse practitioners. This professor invites students to make their blog entries more “speech-like” and to incorporate images of the sites at which they are training. Community is very important to the nursing program and this instructor felt that by using the blog in this fashion, it facilitated building community among students who only meet online.

Additional Applications

Other faculty and instructors share experiences in which they find that instructional blogging *extends learning outside of the classroom* by addressing student needs on the blog before class meetings. Blogging functions as a “just-in-time” instructional model. A “professor’s blog” can be used to *address class issues*. Faculty and instructors find it advantageous to keep a blog to share additional thoughts that relate to class material, delve more deeply into a particular topic, discuss recent experiences and professional readings, and model the types of entries that they want students to write in their blogs.

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NES696Y Islam, Ethnicity and Nationalism

Graduate students in an advanced methods seminar received individual blogs in which they could respond to theoretical articles and read each other's comments prior to class. The goal was to use the blogs: in lieu of weekly response papers to address more points of discussion than was possible in the weekly session; to encourage students to raise points of particular interest to them; and to have students write their insights in a public yet low-risk environment. This group of older, more traditional students was the most vocal in expressing reservations, least comfortable with technology, most committed to traditional forms of writing and discussion, and the most skeptical group of bloggers.

However, use of the blogs for teasing out finer points of theoretical discussion that interested a subset of students was noticeable. The blogs were excellent for isolating and exploring student interests. The writing was sometimes lively, sometimes introspective, generally productive, and far easier to read – full of humor and style. Blogging provided a durable, legible, potentially public forum for these comments.

The blogs were less successful at producing interaction between students. Fewer than 25% of the blog entries were commented upon by students in the class, and most of those that received comments had only one commenter. Student evaluations revealed that they each wanted more feedback on their blogs from their fellow students, felt that other students were not serious enough, and wanted more coherent discussion. Students commented that the “blogs were good, but with more focus could be really, really good.” Others suggested that half the students should blog in a particular week and half comment, or that there should be a “blogger of the week” to whom all would respond in order to increase interactivity and follow through.

Indv103H Islamic Civilization: Modern and Classical Middle East - Honors Blog

This is a large, general education lecture class with an honors section. The traditional difficulty with this large, two session a week class is that it has no time scheduled for small discussion sections, and its honors students are required to complete an additional project for honors credit. To meet these two needs, the 20 honors students were provided with blogs, and the rest of the class was given participation credit for commenting on any or all of the blogs twice a week. This structure allowed distribution of proprietorship and maintenance to a small percentage of the class as had been suggested by the graduate student bloggers and a number of ongoing discussion forums for the other students to visit and participate in. With these younger and less sophisticated students the blogs served to elicit wide ranging discussion, emergence of interesting voices, personas, and opinions.

Seventy one percent of the class had a positive or very positive response to the blogs, while 29 percent were indifferent or negative. Most who had a positive response appreciated being able to “express opinions” and exchange views with others who had different perspectives. At least one person who disliked speaking in a large class felt it was the perfect vehicle for shy people. Also cited were “openness” and “accepting of opinions that are not the most popular.” Several cited the importance of relating class material to current events and learning about their fellow students’ religious and political beliefs.

Those who disliked blogging cited fragmented and directionless discussion, lack of response to their posts, technical difficulties, and, surprisingly, feeling intellectually inferior to other students. Still, more than half of those who were unenthusiastic toward blogging or posting comments said that they enjoyed or learned from reading what other students wrote. Most who disliked it stated a preference for face to face discussion, more traditional structured assignments and a view that blogging alone did not foster a sense of community in a large lecture class. Suggestions included having fewer blogs, having prompts from the professor on what to blog on, and having a specific deadline or appointment to use. At least one non-honors student objected to the assumption that honors students had anything more valuable to contribute than non-honors students.

NES/HIST277B - Media Simulation Blog

The third instructional use of blogging was in the context of a month long role playing game. Sixty five students were assigned roles of contemporary actors in the Middle East and placed in a simulation scenario communicating with one another through email and chat rooms. Three of the students were assigned to be media outlets based on the real al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyya and al-Manar Arabic language regional satellite television channels and used blogs to report “news” within the simulation. Each media blog was to report on-going developments in the simulation with the appropriate political spin – nationalist, pro-western, or Islamist. In this case there was a very small number of blogs, the blogs were role-plays, and they had a very specific function within the simulation – to update all players with “news.” The blogs were not perceived as competing with real class discussion time but complementing it in a parallel environment.

The bloggers updated their sites at least twice a week, feeling a responsibility to report on the politics of the simulation. Most class members/players visited each blog between once a week and daily. Because there was no incentive to post comments this was not an important part of the exercise. Instead, strategy and interaction focused on getting publicity on the blogs, pushing propaganda and using the media outlets as instruments of policy and politicking. Different characters sent news items, held press conferences and issued statements in hopes of capturing the attention of the blog media. Others sought to block or spin news items.

Other Campus Uses

In addition to instructional uses, blogs are being used by administrative units to promote student experiences and to provide information on services and resources as well as on specific programs. The MBA and Undergraduate Programs departments in the College of Business and Public Administration, the Office of Enrollment Management, the College of Nursing admissions office, and this summer's new student orientation programs are experimenting with blogs. In some cases current students are recruited to write about their college experience and in other cases the unit uses the blog to promote its resources and as a way to share information.

Conclusion

For a relatively simple and inexpensive tool, blogs have great potential in instruction. University of Arizona faculty and instructors are demonstrating the tool's versatility in a wide array of undergraduate and graduate courses. Student responses have been positive, on the whole. Faculty members who have used little instructional technology in the past, have been pleased with their experience and plan to use blogs in future classes. Our experience shows that instructional blogging has many applications and will be used by more and more faculty, instructors, and administrative units in the future.