

Advances in Technology Pave the Path to Actual Learning: Using Blogging as a Learning Tool

by Toni Ann Brzeski — August 17, 2015

Do you know what the most common electronic device that college student's possess? According to Joshua Bolkan, a multimedia editor for Campus Technology and The Journal, "85% of college students own laptops while smartphones come in second at 65%". If technology is becoming a common practice among our students, what are we doing as professors to incorporate it into our classrooms? How can students use technology to reflect on their work? How can instructors use technology as a supplement in reading and writing courses? How can technology be used to deepen our student's critical thinking skills? These are questions we should be asking ourselves in a world where technology is paving the way to learning.

INTRODUCTION

After attending school, working at part time jobs and internships, participating in extracurricular activities and spending time with family, it might seem that college students are too busy to fit all of their activities into the hours of the day. Given the hustle and bustle of their everyday lives, most students simply do not have the time to reflect on any part of their day, let alone what they learned in their college courses (Sharkov, 2012). It is our responsibility as educators to keep up with our students, to understand them, and to make reflection on course work a priority. If our students are not reflecting on their learning as a part of their everyday lives, then we are not really doing our jobs as educators.

In order to get to the bottom of this issue, and make reflection a priority, we must ask ourselves what we are we doing inside of our classrooms to promote reflection outside of the classroom. What are we doing in our classes to develop better reading, writing, and critical thinking skills?

MAKING A CONNECTION WITH TECHNOLOGY

Each semester, students step foot into my classroom with needs and interests different from those students with whom I worked before. Every semester, it is my job to take needs and interests and learn how to integrate them into my courses. While every semester is different and challenging, I have found that today's advances in technology have been the key to bridging the gap between my students' needs and the course curriculum.

Four years ago, during my first semester at Bronx Community College, I asked my reading students to purchase the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. At that time my students purchased the book from an actual bookstore or an online source and came to class with a paperback copy. In the fall of 2012 I asked my students to purchase the same book. What they did next surprised me: my students took out their Kindles and iPads and immediately purchased the book. It was simple: given the speed with which these electronic devices allowed my students to purchase the book, we were prepared

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to start reading it the following week.

There was not one student waiting on a delivery or taking time out of their busy lives to purchase it at the bookstore. What I learned from this experience is that we are in a world where our daily activities are rooted in our electronic devices. Kindles, iPads, and smartphones are devices that our students are not only actively using, but using comfortably. This is just about the time when I discovered blogging.

If my students were using technology to complete very ordinary tasks, such as buying a book for their college course, I then asked myself what other ordinary tasks my students are using technology for. At first I was hesitant—call me old fashioned—but I didn't believe students would become better readers and writers by posting their reflections online. I continued to question myself. What good is this? Aren't journals a place for reflecting and expression?

BLOGGING AND THE BENEFITS TO THE COLLEGIATE COMMUNITY

WHAT IS BLOGGING ANYWAY, AND HOW IS IT BENEFICIAL FOR THE COLLEGE STUDENT?

As stated by George Couros, the Principal of Innovative Teaching and Learning at Parkland School Division in Alberta, Canada, "We want students to think critically about what they write. They are more likely to do this when they write for a larger audience as opposed to simply [writing] for the teacher. [Blogging] gives students the ability to archive their work for many years to come." Therefore, having the "ability to [blog] [and] write for a worldwide audience has made an impact on many of our students" (Couros, 2013). Like Couros, I have found that blogging has had a significant impact. In fact, blogging is the very form of technology that has helped bridge the gap between my students' interests and required course work.

Blogging gives those students an outlet for expressing their own ideas and reflecting on what they learned in class from the comfort of their own homes. As less interactive students continue to exercise their writing skills through blogging, re-reading, and building on their blog posts, their writing gradually improves over the semester. The fact that students can go back to previous blog posts and add thoughts or reflect on their own blogs—thereby, revising their work on their own without being told to do so by their teacher—is extremely beneficial and rewarding (Sharkov, 2012).

Blogging can be done on a train, bus, or even in a student's own bedroom. Blogging doesn't require the school library, or even pen and paper. A student can simply use a smartphone to connect to the world through blogging. When you present this type of accessibility to the busy student, he or she has the opportunity to engage with classmates beyond the short period of time that the student spends sitting in the classroom before heading out to a job or internship.

I have witnessed the benefits of blogging first hand. Last semester, I posted a question as a homework assignment on my blog site regarding a reading on Edgar Allan Poe. Within an hour of my students leaving class, they started to write blog posts on the site. My students were responding to my question, expressing their views, and in turn completing their homework assignment, while commuting home from school.

As I read my students' blog posts, I was amazed at the level of insight that they were expressing in their entries. I had created a place where my students' voices could be heard, and a place where they were able to interact and discuss a topic outside of the classroom using information that they learned while inside of the classroom. In essence, my students were taking time to reflect on what they learned in

class, even with their busy schedules. In the past I would have taken a more conventional approach to this homework assignment by passing out comprehension questions on white paper and telling students to answer and bring them back to class the following week.

Blogging is beneficial to the teacher as well. For example, in my EDU 10 class, our class blog page contains all our work and posts can be found in one place with easy access. I find my students accessing our blog page from their cellphones, which tells me that they are able to complete assignments from anywhere—very convenient for them.

As a professor, I can easily assess my students' reading, writing, and critical thinking progress by observing the improvement in their blog entries. This also keeps the line of communication open between my students and myself, which is helpful since our class only meets twice a week for a little over an hour. This blogging platform keeps the reflection ongoing throughout the week. Further, blogging allows me to learn my students' point of view on certain topics and demonstrates their level of comprehension on what we are learning in class, in turn, helping me to create a lesson plan for the next class.

BLOGGING IS JUST FOR READING AND WRITING COURSES, RIGHT?

Many humanities, reading, or English professors may be rolling their eyes wondering how in the world blogging could be incorporated into a math or science course, where memorizing definitions, formulas, and equations are the foundation of the course. Isn't our primary goal as professors to have our students build upon their reading and writing skills across the curriculum? Especially for our developmental students, it is imperative that they leave these courses being able to utilize the skills they obtained in their reading and writing courses, so that they can apply them in more advanced classes in the future.

Over the past few years, many of my colleagues have tried to gear their lesson plans toward teaching students reading skills that can be applied in other courses. For instance, many of our students struggle in their math courses due to a lack of vocabulary skills. According to Miller and Koesling and their "Mathematical Reading and Reasoning Process," students must first ask, "What vocabulary do I not know?" Second they must ask, "What is the real-world context of the problem?" (Miller & Koesling, 2009). As a reading professor, I teach my students to enhance their vocabulary using context clues, which involves having them figure out the meaning of a new word by using the sentence or paragraph in which the word is used.

By focusing on context clues and strengthening vocabulary skills, my students will be better suited to handle their coursework in math. Derek Bruff, a senior math lecturer at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, uses a blog site to post pre-readings and questions. He asks his students to leave comments and answer the reading questions on his class blog. Some questions are open-ended while others require one correct response. Some examples are: "What is your opinion on X?" "How do you feel about the author's statement?" Bruff suggests, "Not only do my students respond to my questions, but [they also respond to] other student's comments, as well, which allows for defensible arguments in my courses." (Bruff, 2010).

In my opinion, Bruff has opened up a new door for math and science professors to use blogging as a supplemental resource in courses. Bruff has laid a foundation that, if used properly, can be beneficial in many ways for any college student. When Bruff encourages his students to respond to questions and analyze data on a blog discussion board, he is actually

reinforcing the use of reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, just as I reinforce the vocabulary skills necessary for my students to understand a math problem. Where you are teaching math, science, reading, or writing, certain skills are essential for a student to succeed, and blogging creates a pathway for our students to exercise and develop those necessary skills.

Blogging can have positive outcomes in terms of communication among students and is a helpful way to promote discussion and reflection in the classroom, yet many professors reading this article may still be hesitant to incorporate it. So many of us believe in that conventional model of teaching where the instructor lectures and the students take notes. We use the computer lab for supplementary programs to enhance certain skills and our students use Microsoft word to type a paper, but the idea of blogging might seem like a joke (Boling, 2008). I know this is true because I was this professor at one point, believing that my students could only be good readers if they are using books and I am lecturing. I have found over the years that technology is not a bad thing if we know how to use it correctly.

EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN

HOW CAN BLOGGING BE INCORPORATED INTO OUR COURSES?

I introduced my first blogging assignment in the fall of 2012 when my class was reading the works of Edgar Allan Poe. As part of their assignment I had my students log onto the Edgar Allan Poe website and post their reflections in the comment section, which allowed them to respond to the works of Poe that they were required to read. For instance, one student posted her feelings and the details that led her to her conclusion after reading "The Tell Tale Heart."

Other users of the website were able to view the section as well and respond to her post, leading to curiosity about the student who originally posted. Therefore she continued to post her feelings and opinions on other readings, even though it was not part of the original assignment. In past semesters, my students participated in the same assignment, however, I handed them a printout of what was contained on the website and asked the students to hand in the written assignment to me when it was completed.

The final product of the electronic version of the assignment was very different. I had a higher rate of student completion than ever before, and instead of my students just commenting on one piece of Poe's work, they were commenting on four or five pieces. My students were then reading Poe stories at home during their own time. I was amazed—my students could not wait to log onto the Edgar Allan Poe website and read what their peers posted. It was incredible to see the amount of participation that I had for this one assignment, and even more exciting that it lasted through the semester.

My students were reflecting on not only their own ideas, but others' ideas as well. Through this little experiment of mine, I discovered that the motivating factor behind my students' new found initiative was reading what their peers posted and responding to others' comments. My students were utterly driven by reflecting on their own ideas as well as the ideas of others. The more my students responded to each other, the more ambitious they became to read more works and respond again. My students were able to see how passionate their peers were about the same assignment. This is when I decided to create a class blog on edublogs.com.

On my first blog page, I posted analysis questions and asked my students to leave a comment responding to my statement. Every week, I had 100% participation from my students. They

argued the topic by analyzing each other's comments in their own responses and edited their own comments. For instance, one student of mine had a grammatical error in his first comment; he then reposted the comment correcting his mistakes. This is yet another example of how blogging reinforces critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, as students improve their skills by recognizing and fixing their own mistakes.

Finding a balance in your classroom is what makes using technology like blogging successful. We do not want to take away the traditional model of instruction altogether. We should not replace our textbooks and workbooks with computers, because we want our students to be engaged and focused while in class, without dealing with some of the distractions a computer may offer (Boling, 2008). However, incorporating technology into your courses will encourage students to become engaged with you and other students, and reinforce the essential skills that are necessary in all course curriculums. Jean Shaddai, a Professor at Bronx Community College, told me "even though I have stated on my course outline that they are not allowed to use their cellphones in class, they still do. So I try to get them to use their cellphones for something productive." This is where a form of technology can be weaved into a course and help encourage student engagement.

CONCLUSION

If you asked me five years ago if blogging could be used for reading and writing reflection, analysis, and discussion, I would have probably said no. Journals were the place where students wrote their reflections or the traditional comprehension questions on paper, to be answered by students, then handed in when finished. This is what I knew; this is how I was taught. I've come to realize that conventional models must let technology act as our bridge. In today's world, people use technology to socialize, to communicate, to work, to purchase groceries, etc. Just ask Joshua Bolken, a multimedia editor for *Campus Technology* and *THE Journal*. He reports that Facebook use among our students is up five percent, which puts us at 86%. Bolken also reports that 70% of our students are using their laptops for research and coursework (Bolken, 2013).

As professors or teachers, we are challenged to keep up with students who are born into this new world, where electronic devices are the way of communicating or socializing. How can we keep up with this trend? How can we use technology in our classrooms, and not have it overpower the traditional way of learning? These are the questions that we are faced with today. It is our job to find the resources to keep our students actively engaged, and technology is what our students know. So why not use technology in the form of blogging, to help teach our students course work in a way that they can relate to, a way they can comprehend the information. Through blogging we can ensure that our students are communicating with each other, expressing themselves, exercising their writing, reading, and critical thinking skills, and reflecting on the information that you taught them earlier in the day.

This is how we can determine that our students are continuously learning. Our students are not just kids, who are attending school and completing homework. Our students are also parents, employees, volunteers, and more. Our students are people who lead busy lives. However, despite the lifestyles of our students, it is still our jobs as educators to arm them with the tools they need to succeed. It's our job to find the resources to keep our students actively engaged, and, in order to do that, we must find a way to connect with them (Couros, 2013).

Some may walk away from reading this article unconvinced that blogging has use in any course and or that it is what a

college student should be doing in a class. Many may believe that while students are in your courses, they should shut off their technological world and be required to take notes and listen to the lecture. If we are looking for new ways to make our students better readers and writers, something like blogging can't hurt. Part of being an educator is meeting the needs of our students in any way possible. We are learning every day what we can do to engage our students or build on previous learned skills. Trying different approaches to how we teach a topic is what makes us better educators.

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