

why use blogs in your teaching?

Computers are not “just tools” for writing. Networked computers create a new kind of writing space that changes the writing process and the basic rhetorical dynamic between writers and readers.

Computer technologies have changed the processes, products, and contexts for writing in dramatic ways—and rhetoric theory, composition practice, and writing instruction all need to change to suit how writing is produced in digital spaces.

WIDE, “Why Teach Digital Writing?”

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence on the benefits of blogs as teaching tools. Most teachers who use blogs in their teaching swear by their effectiveness in engaging students in critical thinking, but very few studies have been done to determine what exactly blogs do in a classroom (see **Cooper and Boddington, 2005**). Until such studies are done, we’ll have to rely on smart sorting of the anecdotal evidence available.

I’ve categorized blogging benefits to students according to three main concepts I see referred to in my own and others’ experiences with blogs. The arguments I present below are not necessarily my own, although I find merit in them.

- **relevant literacies**
- **network effects**
- **student engagement**

relevant literacies

Many teachers who use blogs in their classrooms argue that they allow for a kind of writing that is more relevant to their students’ lives in the 21st century than more traditional forms of writing. Writing within the rhetorical situation of the web, with many disparate, demanding and quick-to-click-away readers, is probably closer to the situations our students will encounter after college than the captured-audience-of-one that formal, academic essays often assume. Educator and blogger **Will Richardson claims** that the synthesis students are able to accomplish through blogs is more relevant to their lives outside of school:

Blogging, however, offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a lifetime, c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking and d) synthesize disparate learning experiences and understand their collective relationship and relevance. This just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I see those things sorely lacking anywhere in traditional education.

While teachers experienced with teaching according to a more traditional structure may not want to admit it, technology and the new ways information is distributed is a part of writing now. The revolution has already happened, and it’s up to teachers of writing to catch up. As the “Writing in Digital Environments” (WIDE) cluster at Michigan State **argues**, “[u]nderstanding how the technology impacts the writing process and rhetorical effect of the writing IS part of teaching writing.”

WIDE doesn’t entirely discount traditional tools of teaching writing, however, the new generation of teachers of “digital writing” must shift their strategies to account for the shift in demands for writing in the 21st century: “...conventional, print-anchored rhetoric theory offers some means for understanding writing and production, but [...] we also need to foster new rhetorical tools and theories to better negotiate our tasks as instructors of digital writing” (“**Some conclusions**”). They argue specifically that:

Writing instruction must equip students with the tools, skills, and strategies not just to produce traditional texts using computer technology, but also to produce documents appropriate to the global and dispersed reach of the web. This change requires a large-scale shift in the rhetorical situations that we ask students to write within, the audiences we ask them to write for, the products that they produce, and the purposes of their writing.

The WIDE research group describes digital writing in a larger context than blogs; it's a kind of writing that blurs form and content, integrates images and is highly conscious of visual presentation. However, while WIDE presents the creation of webpages, digital posters and podcasts as ways of accomplishing this digital writing, they fail to note that they require a great deal of technical competence from instructors. Blogs have a lower technical bar to entry, both for instructors and students, and can still hone students' digital writing skills. When uploaded to public sites, student blogs are subject to the rhetorical situation of the web, and force students to acknowledge their immediate audience of their peers as well as a larger audience, which may include friends, family, and random visitors to their site.

In his 2004 book *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber describes three different kinds of literacy pertinent to a digital age: functional, critical and rhetorical literacy. For Selber, rhetorical literacy involves the creation of software and other technical tools that facilitate digital communication, having critical literacy means one can critique and describe the ways that the technology they use circumscribes them, and having functional literacy allows one to comfortably use many technologies available. Functional literacy, while not the limit of what students should achieve in college, is "a necessary if not sufficient condition of all other forms of literacy" (p. 33). Using pre-packaged blog software does not allow a student to achieve rhetorical literacy in Selber's sense, but it does aid a student in achieving functional literacy with one type of tool available to them, and with teaching that aims for it, the goal of critical literacy can also be met with blogs.

This critical literacy can be achieved if you offer multiple tools and critique them in class, or if you discuss the means by which people publish to the web in general. One goal of this site is to make the utilization of blogs in teaching less complicated, however, and while this teaching of critical literacy may be comfortable to you immediately, if it's not, you can still use blogs effectively in class to boost their functional literacy with technology and their skills in digital writing.

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network effects

The computer's innovation on writing and communication isn't the fact that it makes a good typewriter; it's the communication it facilitates. WIDE claims, "the dramatic change is the networked computer connected to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Connectivity allows writers to access and participate more seamlessly and instantaneously within web spaces and to distribute writing to large and widely dispersed audiences." Blogs allow students to connect to their peers not only face-to-face in the classroom, but also beyond the classroom, where they must rely more on the words they write than on their personality and verbal delivery. They can communicate with each other about the class or about outside interests (depending on how you choose to assign blog prompts) and thereby enrich the classroom atmosphere. As one of my students wrote in a cover letter to his blog portfolio, "It's easier to start up conversations with my peers because we have something to talk about."

Blogs are a natural form of peer review, and allow students to respond to each others' ideas through comments. Teacher [George Siemens claims](#) that "Additional value is provided in the ability for learners to teach each other. Reading the opinions of 30 classmates is a far richer learning ecology than hearing the opinion of one teacher. The learner is the teacher is the learner."

[Efimova and Hendrick \(2005\)](#) describe the network that naturally emerges in blog connections outside

of schools:

In comparison with many other types of online communities (e.g. those forming around forums or chats rooms), weblog communities emerge from connections between weblogs and their authors, and not around a single shared space. From one side emergence of weblog communities is paradoxical: the existence of highly personal spaces guarded by individuals results in emergence of social structures. From the other side it does not seem strange as human beings are quite used to living in cities where private houses and public areas merge into a whole, providing spaces for both individuals and communities.

When linked through a central blog or website, blogs in classrooms can accomplish this space of merged individuality, a community meeting space. When bloggers choose to add links to other blogs and websites, within and outside of the classroom community, that central meeting space becomes less rigid, and more connected to the world beyond the classroom walls.

Blogs also allow students to connect classes to their social world outside classes. Many of my students share their blog urls with their partners, parents and friends and these individuals often star in their discussions of ideas on their blogs as well. With blogs that allow for personal reflection, students are given a space where they can formalize and theorize their own connections between school and life outside of school. This connection makes their formal learning more relevant to their lives.

In a blog entry "Metablognition," **Richardson claims** that blogs allow for students to connect information and get beyond rigid department lines. He wonders, "[c]ould the Weblog serve as the space where learning from the various disciplines comes together, gets synthesized? I mean, is this departmentalized construct of learning that we impose on our students anything like the way we learn when we get out of school? Could a Weblog space be the place where students make the connections between science and English, social studies and math, etc.?" My answer to Richardson is yes; in my students' blogs, I've seen evidence of these connections in posts on gender in science, psychology in rhetoric, humor in lecture.

Blood thinks that blogs are useful because, "[w]e are being pummeled by a deluge of data and unless we create time and spaces in which to reflect, we will be left with only our reactions." Drawing on Vygotsky, educational theorists **Richard Ferdig and Kaye Trammell likewise claim** that students need a place to publish their changing interpretations and meanings, and blogs are a great medium for that. Blogs are useful teaching and learning tools because they provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings. And because blogs can be commented on, they provide opportunities for feedback and potential scaffolding of new ideas. As middle school teacher **Konrad Glogowski describes his students' writing on blogs**, "[t]he community's buzzing and I know that in that noise they have found meaning, and that they have built knowledge."

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student engagement

If you buy the arguments above that students actually benefit from writing in blogs, then the fact that they actually *enjoy* writing for blogs should be an additional incentive to use blogs in your class. Glogowski **describes his middle school students' dismay** when their technology failed and their blogs went down:

"Now that my blog is gone, English feels different"
 "How are we gonna discuss things?"

In the cover letters my students write to me when they turn in their blog portfolios, nearly all of them cite their initial skepticism about blogs, but admit that they ultimately found them enjoyable. They don't necessarily want to continue blogging after the semester is over, but they appreciated the forum of their

linked blogs to connect and communicate with their peers during the semester. Granted, this evaluation of blogs was given as part of a graded assignment, but I've heard the same kinds of things from my students in the anonymous surveys I give them, which I let them know that I read after I turn my grades in for the semester.

In the surveys of my first-year composition classes, students did not seem to mind using blogs, and some really enjoyed it. They claimed, "Blogs made my arguments more personal" and "My favorite thing about the blogs is that we could write about whatever we thought was an interesting argument." One student claimed his favorite part about blogs was "stacking my writing up to my peers, and seeing how I rate." While we may not want to encourage our students to compete with each other, allowing them to read each others' work may remind them that they are not writing in a vacuum.

Many students liked the internet-accessible format of the blog and found it more convenient than paper assignments, though some requested more reminders because it was easier to forget a non-physical assignment. Overwhelmingly, students enjoyed reading what others had to say and finding something in common with their classmates. Typical responses to my question, **"What did you find enjoyable about blogs?"** were

- "Seeing what others had too and getting feedback from them."
- "I liked that we could communicate outside the classroom in a relaxed setting."
- "I thought it was a good experience to read about the hard time that other people wrote about in their blogs and be able to relate to their stories. It's always nice to know that you're not alone and other people have gone through the same things you have."
- "The comments from my peers about my writing helped."

Students seemed to agree with me that blogging made their arguments stronger by forcing them to consider their audience and come up with their own topic and angle every week. In response to my question **"What did you find useful about blogs to help your writing?"** students responded:

- "In other classes, I will be able to write stronger arguments."
- "It helped to better understand how to make a claim and support it through different ways."
- "helped me get my opinion on some topics out there and then other people told me what to do to make my argument stronger...I think it has given me more confidence in writing and having my peers look at it."
- "They gave me a lot of practice setting up arguments and backing them up which I think helped in writing my papers...I think they've helped me to be more critical of my own writing."
- "They helped me be creative and think outside the box."
- "I began to look at how everyday occurrences coincided with things we discussed in class (i.e. arguments, counterarguments etc.)...Yes, it developed my critical analysis of my own work as well as my peers, this should prove helpful in all my writing."
- "It made me more aware of counterargs and how to address them in my papers."

In general, students in my first-year composition class seemed to enjoy doing the blogs and engaging with their peers through them. All first-year composition students who responded to my survey indicated a preference to the blog format over the paper journal format, which I used initially as a transition to the blog format. Suggestions for improvement of the assignment included mostly suggestions that blogs be less frequent (they had to post and respond each week), but in my experience, workload complaints from students aren't limited to blogs. The weekly posting to blogs is, in my opinion, what gave them many of the benefits of connection to their peers and practice making arguments that they cite in their own evaluations of blogs.

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