

Converse!

Blogs. They're everywhere. According to a source that tracks the number of blogs in the "blogosphere," there were over 70 million blogs back in March 2007. Technorati¹ determined that between 2003 and 2006, the growth rate of newly created blogs doubled every six months. And while this growth rate has slowed a bit, there are still over 120,000 blogs being created every day; that's an average of a little over one blog created every second! This is a significant online technology that teachers can use as part of classroom instruction to promote idea sharing, reflection, dialogue and critical thinking.

So What Is a Blog?

Blog is short for web-log, which is basically a personal website designed to post your thoughts and share them with whoever is interested in reading them. Blogs were developed to make it easy for anyone to have a presence on the web, so you don't need to know HTML or have any sort of web design skills to have a blog site. Blogs also make it easy for you to share other peoples' blog postings with your readers. What makes a blog different from a regular website is that they are designed to invite and accept comments from readers about your postings. With this basic idea in mind, let's take a look at a couple of blogs.

If you jump to <http://wordpress.com>, you'll see that this site provides free hosting of blogs for anyone. Now rather than choosing just any old blog to explore, we want to find ones that contain both posts and reader comments so you can get a sense of the kind of communication that can happen on a blog. Do the following:

1. Look at the right-hand side of the site and you'll see a list of recent topics that people have been blogging on. Topics that often generate comments include news, politics and religion (no big surprise, right!).
2. Click on a topic and you will see a list of specific postings to read.
3. Click on the title of a post and scroll down to the bottom to see if others have commented on the post. If you see a few comments, read the post and follow the comments.

Converse! aligns with the following Michigan Merit Curriculum Guidelines for an Online Learning Experience:

- Develop Life-long Learning Skills
- Use of Technology Tools
- Content Alignment and Use of Media
- Educator, Expert and Student Involvement
- Sustained Learning

¹<http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html>

Now take a few minutes to find at least two postings with comments so that you can get a sense of how blogs facilitate idea sharing and discussion. For this little exercise, remove your “teacher hat” for a moment so that you are not trying to both get a sense of the communication and trying to filter out inappropriate or potentially controversial material for your students (you’re bound to run into controversial materials during this explorative stage). We’ll talk about dealing with inappropriate comments a little bit later.

Did you find a few interesting postings? Did you find the comments equally interesting? If you didn’t find anything interesting, here’s a post with a few comments regarding teaching controversial subjects in school:

<http://samueljscott.wordpress.com/2007/04/08/those-who-do-not-remember-the-past/>

In addition to retelling a news story or stating facts, many interesting postings also include a unique perspective or a personal anecdote regarding the item. This not only draws the reader in but it also compels the reader to make a comment or engage in dialogue with others. The example above does a good job of combining both information and perspective in a manner that gets readers’ attention.

Comments Made Easy

In order to make comments on some blog sites, the owner will require that you register on the site so that you are a known user who isn’t trying to sell some oceanfront property in Arizona. On other sites, anyone can post a comment but the blog owner will first review the comment before making it visible on the blog site. This allows a lot of editorial control on the site which is something that you as a teacher will want to have for your instructional blog.

So let’s leave a comment or reply on a blog:

1. Return to <http://wordpress.com> and select another topic or a blog post to read.
2. Scroll down to the bottom of the post to see if there is a form called “Leave a Reply.” If so, you’re golden. If not, select another blog posting.
3. Read the blog posting and then fill in the form along with your comment. You’ll be required to fill in your name and email address. And while you don’t have to provide a real or full name, your email address (which will be hidden from others) should be an active account.
4. Click the Submit button.

If the blog is set up where there is no approval necessary for comments, then your comment will appear instantly. Otherwise, you will have to wait until the owner approves your post.

Take a moment to think about how your students might comment on your blog and the kind of policies you’d want to have in place for your blog:

- Would it be necessary to verify a student’s identity on a reply or post?
- What about approving all comments before making them available to the public?
- Would you have your blog open to the entire world or just your students who have accounts on the blog site?

It's a Process, Not an Event

These are a few things you will need to consider in order to effectively use and manage a blog for instruction. But perhaps a bigger question is how can blogs be incorporated or fit into the teaching and learning process?

In addition to building content knowledge, the sharing of ideas, reflecting on one's work, dialoguing with peers and critical thinking are all skills that we hope our students will learn to develop in our classes. And as mentioned earlier, blogs are great for promoting these kinds of learning skills. This is important to remember because the first thing that many teachers make the mistake of doing is to try and figure out how to assign points to blog comments. This would be the same as trying to assign points for sharing ideas or for thinking critically. Blogs are just another means by which students have the opportunity to think out loud, share out loud and to find out what their peers are thinking about a particular issue. It gives them another way to develop their ideas and knowledge so that they can apply their new learning toward something that can be worth points, such as a paper, project or presentation.

The early part of any process is often times not well formed and pretty rough, so don't expect perfect thoughts and flowing dialogues among students the first time out. You should help your students build on what they're learning in class and coach them on how to express and integrate their new knowledge into their comments. Your instructional goal in using a blog should be to facilitate, track and encourage change over time.

Gentlemen and Ladies, Start Your Blog!

So using the WordPress.com site, here's how to create your own blog:

1. Go to <http://wordpress.com> and click on any link that says, "Start a blog," or "Sign up."
2. Create a username that you can remember. This will also serve as first part of your blog's address. For example, if you choose the username, "blogdaddy," your blog's address would be "blogdaddy.wordpress.com."
3. Provide a working email address. This is where you'll receive your initial password to your site, as well as notifications on who has made comments to your blog postings.
4. Check that you have read the terms of service and that you want a blog (and not just a username) and click "Next."
5. Check your email account to activate your blog.
6. Log in to Wordpress.com
7. Locate "My Dashboard" at the top of the page and click on it. You'll see a page where you can manage your site.
8. Click on the "Options" link located in the first row of menu items at the top of the page.
9. Next, select "Discussion" from the second row of menu items. Here is where you will set your options for email notification and comment approvals. Click "Update Options" to set your options.
10. Now you're ready to post to your blog. Locate and click on the "Write" link located in the first row of menu items.
11. Provide a title to your post and then type in your thoughts. When you're ready to publish, click on the "Publish" button.
12. To view your new site with your new post, click the "View site" link at the top of the page.

Congratulations! It's a blog! Now it's up to you to practice using it and inviting peers or other people to visit and make comments before unleashing it on your students.

Sample Converse!

Activities in CareerForward

Module 1 – Additional Activities – “Activity 2”

Get in a group with other students who are taking this course, in person or via instant messenger or blog, and talk about your work values. Let people list the most important things that they would like to get out of their careers, such as money, leisure time or helping people. Think about how your values overlap with some people’s values but are different from other people’s values. Where do your values come from? How are you going to find a job that lets you satisfy your values?

Lesson Preparation and Teaching the Lesson

You should already have a good idea about how your blog functions and confident about how you will manage your students when they begin to post comments. And it’s worth mentioning again that the purpose of using a blog is to help students begin the process of building knowledge over time by having them comment on your blog postings and the comments of others, engage in dialogue with their peers and to share their ideas.

You will need to come up with three blog postings that you will use over a period of time; each one helping your students apply what they have learned in class or learned through the comments made on the preceding blog posting. For example, you could find a rags to riches story online and share that with your students, one segment at a time. The first post would introduce the person at the center of the story and their situation during their “rags” period. You would then share your thoughts about how difficult it must have been to live like this person and what you thought this person would value the most if they had a job. This would set up the notion of whether or not a person’s values change based on their quality of life and how important a person’s values are in deciding the kind of work they would like to eventually have.

The second post would describe the “riches” stage of this person’s life and then you would write about the changes you see (or didn’t see) in regards to their values. You would then direct your students to write their own reflections about this person’s values and whether or not your students’ previous comments show a change in this person’s values based on riches or if they’re still the same. You would also ask why they think the values changed or remained the same.

The final post would describe the return to “rags” for the main character of the story. Following the same pattern, you make a comment and then have your students draw their final conclusions about the significance of values and work. What you would hope to see at the end of this lesson is a change over time in your students’ perceptions of how significant personal values are in making decisions throughout one’s life. They can then take this new knowledge and find their own rags to riches to rags story to report on and compare their person’s life to the one they studied via the blog .

Other Converse!

Activities in CareerForward

Module 1 – Additional Activities

- Activity 6

Module 2 – Additional Activities

- Activity 3

Module 3 – Additional Activities

- Activity 1

Module 4 – Additional Activities

- Activity 3

Notes
