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Using Blogs for Interactive Learning in Composition

This semester I decided to try something new to help students write better in Composition 101, with the explicit goal of using active learning in the classroom. Instead of keeping a journal for daily writing, a common practice used by Composition instructors to promote good writing, I instead chose to have my students create blogs on *blogger.com*, and I used them to have the students publish their responses to our daily writing prompts.

What I found is that this activity does several things to improve the efficacy of student writing, all of which I note below. But the most important interactive aspect that results from the use of blogs is the ability for students (and the instructor) to review and comment on other student work. In other words, it facilitates instructor and peer feedback in an efficient and timely manner, which are extremely important components in interactive learning.

Here's how it works in my class. At some point in most daily classes I present a writing prompt with certain technical specifications. After finishing their responses, students are required to visit another student's blog, which is chosen from a comprehensive list posted on Desire2Learn, a website through which we organize class materials. They then comment on the content and technical aspects of that writing response. Once the peer review is completed, the students check the comments that were made on their own blog and correct any mistakes before

submitting a final draft for grading. Once the final blog is published, I am able to quickly link to their responses for grading and then respond to them if necessary as well.

Besides instructor and peer reviews, another benefit to using blogs for daily writing is the elimination of the use of paper. This helps the environment, of course, but it also frees up hours of time collecting papers, grading them by hand, and returning them to students (solving the problem of students not being able to read my handwriting!). Furthermore, grading responses on blogs is a faster process due to the ease of finding and commenting on student writing online.

An instant history of writing is yet another benefit for students using blogs. The entries are in reverse order, so the most recent writing prompt is on top of the website, and the other blog entries are cataloged by date. This helps in a few ways. First, there is a record of each blog by date and time. The grading process is improved because both the instructor and the student know whether he or she has blogged on a specific class date. Second, any blog can be easily revisited if grading components are in question by either student or instructor. Finally, and most important, by using a web-log (the term that was combined to form *blog*, by the way), the student can track his or her development from the beginning of the semester to the end, especially if the writing prompts are done with this in mind. Therefore, a writing prompt given at the end of the semester that is in the same format as one given in the beginning can be used as grand-scale feedback, meant to reinforce all the good writing habits the students have built upon the entire semester.

Using the web for writing has two other minor benefits. First, there is no spell-checker for students to rely on when writing. Thus their spelling and grammar mistakes are left for them to openly confront instead of continuing their reliance on automatic spell checkers. And second, blogging allows the students to design their own sites, a side effect which greatly contributes to

student interest in the activity. Students can choose their own colors and fonts and can make the design to their liking. Although I chose to have students omit their names from their blogs to circumvent anxiety this semester, if one allows names on the blogs, then links and other such information could be used on the blogs to further spark student interest. The students are more liable to be responsible for their comments if the other student knows who commented on his or her blog.

By using the web for writing in Composition, the possibilities for making blogs educational are endless. Research links, educational sources, fun sites—all of this information could be put on a student's blog. Then, perhaps, a student could use one site as a hub for all of his or her courses. Websites for other classes students would be taking could be linked to these blogs in order to facilitate cross-curriculum activities, an idea whose use would be promoted by the national English program *Writing Across the Curriculum*. Additionally, the educational class links we used in Composition could be attached to student blogs in order to further their usage after the class is over. The blogs created in class could then be a permanent record for them to keep for years to come, perhaps for possible use in a portfolio.

But let none of us instructors forget that the internet is simply a tool, and using the internet for student writing does not inherently make us better teachers. Contrary to what some education experts believe, computers make students write better as much as cell phones make students speak better. The possibilities of teaching and learning inefficacy are just as great whether our new and wonderful technologies are employed or not. What computers and blogs do, however, is help sound educational processes to go faster and to be more efficient, whatever they may be. Simply put, if used correctly with several other effective educational approaches,

writing on blogs could be an excellent fit within the context of a well-rounded interactive curriculum.

Finally, the application of this idea to classes other than writing is important to note as well. When used as a discussion format, blog accounts could be used for any class to further that discipline's student discourse. And furthermore, as studies show, informative writing is one of the best methods by which to assess for subject comprehension, and blogging provides an excellent tool to do this.