

# Blogging With Graduate Students

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## INTRODUCTION

Blogs are mainstream, with 39% of American adults reading blogs and 8% keeping a blog (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). An increasing number of educators use blogs with their students in different ways. Two semesters in a row, I used a blog with art education graduate students with vastly different results. In this article, I describe blogs, my introduction to them, and their increasing popularity. Following that, I explore the ways I used blogs with two groups of graduate students, discuss the experiences, and offer my thoughts about the reasons for the experiences. I

conclude with my thoughts as to why the experiences were different and offer suggestions for others who wish to use blogs with their students.

## DEVELOPMENT OF BLOGS

The exact origin of blogs, also known as weblogs, is not entirely clear. Barger (1997) is often credited with the first use of the term “web log” which was shortened to “blog” in 1999 by Merholz (2002). Writing in a blog is termed “blogging” and the word “blogosphere” refers to all of the blogs on the Internet (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Though blogs exist on virtually every topic, they exhibit similar characteristics including:

- Automatic formatting of content in the form of “headlines,” followed by “entries,” or “stories”;
- Time- and date-stamp of entries;
- Archiving of past entries;
- A search function to search through all entries;
- A “blogroll”—a list of other blogs read by the author(s) of the current blog;
- A section associated with each entry where readers can post comments on the entry; and
- Simple syndication of the site content via RSS (Really Simple Syndication) (Martindale & Wiley, 2005, p. 56.)

According to Technorati.com, the blogosphere doubles approximately every 5 to 7 months (Sifry, 2006).



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Like many others, my introduction to blogs occurred in March of 2003 during the early days of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. A story on National Public Radio described a blog kept by a young Iraqi architect that intrigued me enough to start reading. Titled Salam Pax, a combination of the Latin and Arabic words for peace, his blog quickly became popular around the world. Through this blog, he chronicled many events in his life; one touching entry dealt with his sadness when he saw that one of his favorite buildings in Baghdad had been destroyed by bombs.

As I grew more interested in blogs, I investigated how others educators used them and found blogs that involved K–12 students (Downes, 2004; Poling, 2006), college students (Kapur, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004), academics (Glenn, 2003), and a brief discussion of blogs as part of research (blogsperiment, n.d.). The uses of blogs as a research tool intrigued me because there seemed to be much potential but little information. As Mortensen and Walker (2001) noted, “Traditionally, research and publication have been kept separate. Research blogs are not a final product but an indexical sign of the research process itself.” As a qualitative researcher with theoretical groundings in postmodern thought, the idea that the research process, the researcher’s thoughts, and the publication process could be combined through a blog was quite appealing.

### **BLOGGING AND RESEARCH**

In the winter of 2005, I worked with two graduate students as their thesis advisor and introduced them to blogs (on the blog our usernames were our first initials only, thus, I use them in this article to identify the different posts and responses). We met face-to-face every 2 weeks and communicated through the blog. The blog we used was created with Moveable Type and was accessible to anyone who could locate it

online. However, we were the only ones with the permission to make posts or comments. Blogging was voluntary for both students and it had no impact on their grades. Our blog started slowly, with a few test posts and discussions of passwords and the functionality of the blog. As time went on, the posts changed to questions about the research process, testing out focus group questions, analyzing data, and generating theories about data. Additionally, the blog became a place to share successes and challenges with both the academic portions of thesis writing as well as the intellectual and family challenges of negotiating the thesis process.

### **BLOGGING SUCCESS**

Working with these students and using a blog was both enjoyable and educational. Through our discussions about the use of the blog, my notes on the process, and my continued reading and thinking about the process, two main themes emerged about why it worked well for us. The first theme, the structure of the blog, includes its informal tone, its organized and chronological nature, and its limited focus. The second theme, the support of social interaction, includes the feedback and support students received along the way, the ways the blog supplemented our face-to-face meetings, the small size of our group, and the students’ similar motivations.

### **STRUCTURE OF THE BLOG**

Through our discussions and my notes about the process, three themes emerged related to the structure of the blog and how that contributed to our success; the themes are the informality, the organization, and its focus. When we began, we agreed that the blog was an informal space and would have no bearing on the students’ grades. One of the students mentioned how this informality, as contrasted with the formality of the traditional thesis

format, helped her think, generate ideas, and receive feedback, knowing that she could focus only on the ideas and not worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar, formatting, and so forth. As contrasted to submitting a chapter of a thesis for me to review, the entries on the blog ranged in length from a few words to many paragraphs. This informality in tone, ideas, format, and length led to freedom to express ideas in emergent states and to experiment with alternate themes in data analysis.

Because of its inherently organized structure, students recorded their thoughts as they planned and conducted their research on the blog. When they wanted to rethink an idea or revisit a decision, their thoughts were still available, in reverse chronological order. An example of this comes from a post by S and a response by N that discussed questions S planned to use for her focus group:

February 16, 2005

Focus Group questions

This needs some editing but I want my girls to talk more about peer groups, name calling and academic performance.

Focus group questions:

1. Explain why traditional high school didn't work for you.
2. Explain the influence your friends or enemies had on your academic performance.
3. Explain where you think you fell in the social scene of your middle school and high school.
4. Did other girls bully you by them calling you names or did you bully girls? Explain.
5. What are signs of peer pressure and how do you think you've overcome them?
6. Have you ever been in an abusive relationship with a friend or friends?
7. What do you think a peer influence is?

Let me know what you think.

Posted by S at 09:56 PM Comments (4)

In response, the other student, N, posted the following:

I really like question #1 & #7. I think if you start with these 2 you might get all of the information you are looking for. #2-6 were addressed in your individual interview. If you ask them the same question twice or have them repeat what they have already told you they may think you are not taking them seriously or not listening to them. —Just my point of view!

Posted by N at February 23, 2005 04:57 PM

When S wrote about the development of her focus group questions in the methodology chapter of her thesis, she referred back to her initial post and our ensuing comments and was able to include details about the development of her questions. The organizational structure of the blog, with the posts and comments, allowed us to offer suggestions and feedback on research issues in an organized manner. Unlike face-to-face conversations, all of our interactions were recorded and available for additional consideration, clarification, or updating at any time. This organization assisted students significantly when they wrote up the results of their research.

This blog was narrowly focused on a specific topic, the research that S and N were conducting, providing all of us with a general framework for our responses. Though we did not approach the blog specifically as a research journal, I believe that there is significant potential to use it as such, especially with collaborative research. Creating this "space" within cyberspace for a specific, limited purpose helped this experience succeed by setting parameters for the blog, our interactions, and our comments.

## SUPPORTING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

In addition to the structural aspects of this blog, it also supported social interactions between and among us, an aspect of blogs widely hailed (Sifry, 2006). When considering the specific ways this blog fostered social interactions, the most salient ideas are the support the students received along the way, the manner in which the blog supplemented our face-to-face meetings, the small number of people involved, and the students' motivational level. Through the blog, we were able to offer support and feedback to each other during this process. There were times when the "other" responsibilities in the students' lives seemed overwhelming and insurmountable, as exemplified in a post by S:

March 14, 2005  
Stress

I'm not getting any real work done. Even now I'm trying to write this Steve is saying he can't get Jacob to bed and Jacob is hiding under my legs. Sometimes I feel like I have it together and I can get work done. Days like today which seem to be very frequent this semester I sit and look at my work and feel like I can't do it. I can't finish. My steps are so little I'm feeling hopeless. I think sometimes I should drop this semester....

Posted by S at 08:05 PM Comments (1)

Through the blog, S shared her frustrations and struggles and we offered support, suggestions, and guidance. The blog also provided a place to share excitement and successes with people who understood the research process. After the first day of a lesson for her research involving media images, N posted the following:

April 06, 2005  
First Day of Lesson

Today I showed the first part of the images and had the students respond to them in writing. It went really well.... We spent the entire art class on the lesson,

which involved mostly writing for them, but I don't think the students minded. By the end of the hour I still had a lot of hands up of students who wanted to respond to each other and to the responses they wrote. This experience was very exciting today and I was amazed at the responses of the students-I felt they understood the reason why I am discussing this with them.

Posted by n at 01:20 PM Comments (2)

This accessibility and contact in between our face-to-face meetings certainly helped the students maintain momentum while writing their theses and maintain a connection to others who understood the thesis experience. As an advisor, the blog also let me know when it was time to check in with them, when the students were encouraging each other, and when I needed to offer more feedback.

In addition to providing a place to share experiences, the blog also supplemented our face-to-face interactions. Both of these students lived a considerable distance from campus, held public school teaching jobs, and commuted to the university for their graduate courses and meetings with me. Thus, we met infrequently. During our face-to-face meetings, we discussed theories, data analysis, other research, etc. On many occasions, we started a conversation in person and then continued it later on the blog. Additionally, we also used the blog during our face-to-face meetings to refer to past ideas and entries. Throughout the semester, the blog supported what we did in person, and often there was a dynamic relationship between our face-to-face and blog-mediated interactions.

The small number of students involved in this project enabled the social support to be meaningful. At a very practical level, the number of posts was never overwhelming and, because of our small number, we were able to thoughtfully consider each post and our responses to it. Also, having two students who interacted on the blog

and in face-to-face meetings promoted a sense of teamwork, collaboration, and a genuine interest in the well-being and success of the other student.

The two students involved knew each other before the semester began and shared similar ideas about teaching and learning. Their motivation for earning a master's degree in art education was more than the pay raise from their school districts. They both share a dedication to improving their teaching and enjoy personal growth and learning. This intrinsic motivation and their interest in working together led to collaboration and support through the blog. Throughout this experience, we were continually pleasantly surprised by the results of the blog, how it worked to support social interactions, and how its structure benefited all of us involved.

### **BLOGGING WITH A CLASS**

Buoyed by the positive results from the previous semester, I used another blog the following semester, Summer 2005, with a class. This summer graduate class dealt with a newer and somewhat controversial topic in art education, visual culture. The 12 graduate students enrolled in the class met for 1 week on campus and had a final project due 3 weeks later. To ensure that the students continued to think about the topic during these three weeks, I required that they post to the class blog and assigned 5% of their grade to this. All the students worked as art teachers in public or private schools and some knew each other previously. Some of the students were actively seeking degrees in art education, some were working on degrees in other areas, and others were taking the class for their continuing education requirements. During the time on campus, all students learned how to use the blog and we had a few exchanges about topics from class through the blog. In the following three weeks, most students completed

the required entries on the blog; however, the results were lackluster when compared to the previous semester's experience

### **BLOGGING CHALLENGES**

Though there were a few students who wrote insightful postings and comments, in general, the student entries on the blog and the ensuing comments seemed to be forced and did not exhibit much interest in the topic or in using the blog. Some students posted several times within a day or two to meet the requirements and then did not return to the blog in the remaining weeks of the course. Other students seemingly posted their thoughts without reading the thoughts of others and never responded to another post.

The most surprising part of this blog experience was that a student posted a comment that contained racially insensitive and outdated language. As a teacher, this raised numerous issues that I had not previously considered with regard to blogs. Primarily, I was concerned with letting all the students in the class know that though this student thought he was promoting an idea backed by anthropologists, the words he used and the underlying concept was outdated, now widely rejected, and based on pseudoscience. Had his comments occurred in a face-to-face classroom setting, I would have immediately responded with the entire class present. However, because this was posted on the blog after the end of the formal class, I could not control who read his initial post or my response. Though I could tell who accessed which posts and comments and when, I had no way of knowing what the students actually read versus which links they merely clicked. None of the other students made any comments that indicated their belief that the initial post was inappropriate or offensive. Additionally, none of them made any further posts on the topic after my response to the initial post.

As I reflect on the experience and use the posts to theorize the differences between these experiences, two main aspects are paramount—the motivation of the students and the size of the class. The students enrolled in the summer class were interested in earning their credits quickly and did not necessarily prioritize learning and continuing the dialog from class.

The size of the summer class made following the posts and comments cumbersome for all participants. Though some students did not make the required number of posts, following several threads at a time with numerous subsequent comments and posts proved to be challenging. Also, many of these posts did not relate to the thread in which they were posted or simply were the comments of one person “talking at” the class rather than reading and responding to a previous post. Based upon the two experiences with students and my further reading about other uses of blogs, I developed suggestions for successful uses of blogs in higher education.

### SUGGESTIONS

Based on my experiences using blogs with graduate students, I offer the following suggestions for others who are interested in using this technology:

- Let students know that a blog is not meant to be a “soliloquy board” (K. Helms, personal communication, July 27, 2006) and that the concept will not work if they do not read and respond to the comments of others;
- Use a blog with a smaller number of students, perhaps two to four students. This will keep the number of posts to follow and respond to at a manageable level;
- Use a blog with students who are clearly dedicated to learning, highly motivated, and want to grow intellectually;
- Create the blog on a topic and include some parameters about appropriate posts;
- Use the blog as an ungraded space for the expression of ideas and emerging thoughts; and
- Encourage students to make thoughtful and meaningful comments.

### CONCLUSIONS

Though these experiences yielded vastly different results, they were both valuable experiences. As I develop future plans for incorporating online communication tools into my teaching, I continue to reflect back upon the blogs. Luckily, I can still refer to the posts, my comments, and student comments as I theorize these experiences. Thus, these blogs provided research data for me and also helped me develop plans for integrating technology into my teaching.

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