Best Practice Blogging: Connecting What We Know to What's Next

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Sometime in the next week or so, ask your students if they blog. Or better still, ask how many of them blogged this morning. Chances are, at least one or two of your undergraduates, high school seniors, or even seventh-graders will raise a hand: according to a recent survey conducted by Perseus Development Corporation, over half of the approximately 10 million blogs in the blogosphere are created by teenagers ("The Blogging Iceberg"). You may even need a teenager to explain just what *blogging* and the *blogosphere* mean.

A blog, or web log, is a web site that features regularly updated, chronologically ordered posts, a sort of online diary accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Beyond this most salient characteristic, blogs vary widely in purpose, format, and readership. A blog might be a personal diary read by a handful of friends, a journalistic news filter with enough clout to shape (and scare) the mainstream media, a soapbox for a political candidate, a corporate marketing tool, a celebrity confessional, or a wartime correspondence from Iraq. Most blogs allow visitors to leave comments, sometimes logging hundreds of responses per day.

In the past three years, blogging has come into its own, its leap from geekdom into the mainstream boosted by enormously popular and user-friendly services like Google's Blogger, now host to over 1 million blogs. The popularity of blogging, particularly among adolescents, may refute those cultural critics intent on blaming the electronic media for the perceived decline in literacy skills. Every day, hundreds of thousands of school-aged kids are writing—voluntarily—on their personal web logs. Such blogs, typically focused on social issues and characterized by truncated syntax, unconventional spellings, and e-logisms, may nevertheless provide an inroad into adolescent literacy.

Educators at every level, and particularly those at colleges and universities, have recognized and begun taking advantage of this opportunity. In the last few years, classroom blogs, or edublogs, have become an increasingly popular tool, providing many of the benefits of classroom web sites, while being far easier to create and maintain. Services like Schoolblogs allow educators to design classroom blogs (for multiple student users) and take part in a flourishing online community. And there are hundreds of commercial blogging services, many offering advanced features for no cost. More adventurous teachers have installed blogging applications like Movable Type or Manilla on their school's server. The rise of edublogging has also spurred the development of online support resources: the Educational Bloggers' Network, sponsored in part by the Bay Area Writing Project, helps teachers at all levels in accessing and using blogs for writing and reading instruction across the disciplines. Exemplary K-16 edublogs are archived at the *EdBlogger Praxis*, a valuable blog that also keeps track of the latest in edublog news. Similarly helpful blogs about edublogging include *Weblogg-ed*, *CogDogBlog*, *Pedablogue*, and *Jerz's Literacy Blog*.

Within the English language arts, a growing number of teachers and teacher educators are aligning blogging with the practice and theory of literacy instruction, and particularly writing instruction. In a recent issue of *English Journal*, for example, Greg Weiler contends that blogs encourage both individual and collaborative writing in multiple formats, including the personal journal, classroom bulletin board, and electronic portfolio (73). Will Richardson, whose *Weblogg-ed* offers the most sophisticated and ardent advocacy of edublogging, has shown how blogs can improve discussion, both in and out of the classroom ("Weblogs in the English Classroom" 39). Sarah Kajder *et al.* connect six key characteristics of blogs—economy, archiving, feedback, multimedia, immediacy, and active

participation—to instructional activities suitable for the English language arts classroom (33).

More theoretical considerations of blogging are also emerging. Panel discussions and presentations about blogging are regular features at the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Computers and Writing Conferences. In these venues, blogging is woven into scholarly discourse on rhetoric and composition studies.

The richest theoretical treatment of blogging, fittingly, may be the online essay collection *Into the Blogosphere*. Published by the University of Minnesota, *Into the Blogosphere* explores the rhetoric, community, and culture of weblogs. Here, Charles Lowe and Terra Williams examine the rhetorical effects of online publishing, arguing that "[public] weblogs can facilitate a collaborative, social process of meaning making"; Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe find print antecedents for three dominant types of weblogs—the journal, the notebook, and the filter—and contend that familiarity with print-based genres influences student motivation in maintaining weblogs; and Christine Boese, arguing within a Freirian framework, problematizes the "knowledge revolution" that is optimistically envisioned by media-independent bloggers. These and other *Into the Blogsophere* contributions represent the developing body of blog scholarship.

What may be most useful to K-16 English language arts teachers who are considering blogging is a set of guidelines, enriched by emerging blog research and rooted in what we know about effective writing instruction. What we know about teaching writing, without oversimplifying, is succinctly stated in the best practice principles established by Zemelmen et al. These principles can also provide a template for using weblogs in the writing classroom. What then, is best practice in blogging? The answers provided here are drawn from my own experience as a writing teacher, teacher educator, and for the past two semesters, edublogger. I also rely on excerpts from the blogs kept by my students, pre-service teachers in the secondary English Education

program at Grand Valley State University, as well as student blogs from a ninth-grade English class in a Grand Rapids high school.

1. All children can and should blog.

In the populist publishing world of the Web, the blog may be the most democratic form of all. With minimal expertise, very little time, and no money, anyone can create and maintain a weblog. This includes, as the *New York Times* recently reported, elementary-aged children: second-graders in Maryland school used a classroom blog to write about their field trip to a Native American farm; third-graders in the same district blogged about a statewide book award (Selingo G7). Primary school examples like these are still rare, but as more teachers learn just how easy blogging is, these numbers will increase. By lowering the bar on expertise, the blog may help to bridge the new digital divide—the knowledge gap between haves and have-nots that has emerged even as hardware equity has improved. In short, even students without extensive Internet experience (and their numbers are growing fewer each year), should be able to set up and maintain a blog. My own classes are populated with students, both traditional and non-traditional, who have never heard of blogging when I introduce it on the first day of the semester. Ten minutes later, these students are delightedly posting their first entry. The inaugural message reads:

> I never would have imagined someone would create a writing tool called blog. I never would have imagined myself being a part of this new phenomenon. I realize this is new to me because blogs have been in existence for quite sometime now. There are even blog awards. As of today I am a blogger.

In addition to attracting both the young and the inexperienced, the "new phenomenon" of blogging may also hold a special appeal for girls, who have long been more ambivalent toward technology than boys. According to the Perseus survey, girls or young women create 56 percent of new blogs; 67 percent of the blogs at LiveJournal are

maintained by female bloggers ("LiveJournal Statistics"). Such evidence suggests that all children *can* blog, regardless of age, experience, or gender. Whether all children *should* blog remains this article's burden of proof.

2. Teachers must help students find real purposes to blog.

As many war blogs, military blogs, and political blogs demonstrate, a blog can provide a platform for purposeful writing. A blogger may purport to offer an alternative view on a politics (*DailyKos*), critique the mainstream media (*Instapundit*), or supply specialized information to a particular audience *(Slashdot)*. In each of these cases, the purpose of the blog coincides with the *point of view* of its writer. *Baghdad Burning*, for example, is written by a young Iraqui woman whose unique perspective on military operations informs the central purpose of her blog: to inform the world what the war is really like.

Bringing the blog into the classroom does run the risk of diluting its purpose: the blog can easily devolve into just another writing assignment for school. As Colin Lankshear and Michael Knobel warn, "the blogging world and the world of classroom writing pedagogy are almost neatly reversed. Bloggers begin from a felt sense of purpose and take it from there, or else simply stop blogging. Writing pedagogy usually does not presume purpose, but somehow hopes to prepare learners for being effective writers in contexts where they do encounter serious purpose." My composition methods course requires students to blog about weekly readings, a purpose some found to be artificial. One week, I asked students to respond to the following prompt: "Does it feel phony to write about class-related topics on a blog? One student wrote:

> I like blogging more than Blackboard so far, because it is more personal, more open. But, even when I write in my blog, I feel a little phony writing about only classroom things. Although nobody cares that I got a 97% on my Spanish test this morning, was stalked through the parking lot for my spot, and had

a guy trip and fall down right in front of me, these are the things that I think about when I'm writing. On my Xanga blog, which is linked to all of my friends, I write all the random and trivial things that inspire me and make my day. . . . When I write about classrooms, and teaching practices, and blog's effectiveness, I feel like I'm holding back. I think people just project what they're supposed to be. My goal is to infuse as much of myself into the educational blogs as I do into my Xanga blog.

One way for teachers and teacher educators to counter the potential purposelessness of edublogging is to consider how students might write within existing blog genres. In her seminal *Weblog Handbook* (2002), Rebecca Blood defines three dominant blog genres: the personal journal, the notebook, and the filter. The personal journal, the most popular blog genre today, records personal incidents from the life of the writer.

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When it does include links, the links serve as accessories, pointing to favorite web sites or the blogs of friends. In blogspeak, personal journals are sometimes considered *sticky*, since their truncated and often idiosyncratic entries attempt to retain readers rather than redirect them, via links, to other web sites or blogs. The second major genre, the notebook blog, is a hybrid of personal observations and comments on the external world. The chief purpose of a notebook blog is to record ideas rather than daily events: notebook entries are typically longer and more carefully considered than journal entries, and notebooks frequently link to sites with corroborating evidence. My own blog, focused on the exploration of teaching, technology, and English language arts, can be categorized as a notebook.

The final blog genre is the filter. As the name suggests, the filter provides a gateway to the web through carefully selected links, typically organized around a single subject. The filter has less authorial voice than the journal or notebook: its links may be accompanied by short descriptions or no commentary at all. When the web was young and comparatively small, filters maintained by web enthusiasts pointed out the best the web had to offer. The filter in this original sense is all but extinct, though the practice of accumulating and annotating online resources remains germane to blogging. Today, media-savvy bloggers have expanded the idea of the filter by using their blogs to point to online articles from major news sources, often interspersing clips from the articles with commentary or critique. The blogger behind *Daily Kos*, for example, routinely samples articles from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, usually to take issue with the coverage of a particular event. Authors of such blogs often subscribe to "feeds" from online media sources, using free software such as *RSS Reader* or an online news aggregator to parse hundreds of news headlines in one convenient location.

As Brooks *et al.* note, these three dominant blog genres remediate forms that exist in print, namely the print journal, the notebook, and the notecard. As English language arts teachers and teacher educators, we can help our students find real purposes to blog if we keep these print-based predecessors in mind. Our students might use journal blogs to respond to literature, share experiences from student teaching, or write poetry; notebook blogs to brainstorm ideas, record thoughts, and point to informative sites; and filter blogs to annotate and critique online resources. A single blog might even blend all three genres. Imagine, for example, an assignment that asked students to blog about a school issue. A student blog about bullying might contain a mixture of personal anecdotes, comments provided by sympathetic readers, informed critiques of online articles about bullying, and links to other related resources, both print and electronic. Many of my students offered their own imaginative suggestions for purposeful blogging:

I will say that blogging offers writing in its purest form allowing students to see in it what they want to get. It can be a personal diary offering personal fears and triumphs, yet it can also be a megaphone for opinions heard and not so heard.

If students were able to blog throughout the day, they might enjoy a multitude of ideas stimulated by teachers with which to write about. Many of those ideas would naturally spring from classroom discussions; others might be through teacher/student conferencing. The possibilities are endless.

3. Students need to take ownership and responsibility of their blogs.

Because bloggers publish to a potentially large audience, many take a great deal of pride in their products. Such pride is evident in the way bloggers personalize their weblogs, uploading pictures of themselves and their families, linking to interesting non-academic sites, publishing lists of their favorite movies, books, and music, and modifying the layout design. While such content may dilute the academic purpose of the edublog, as in the case of a ninth-grader who used his blog to upload pictures of his favorite shoes and cars but neglected to finish his writing assignments, personalized material can also enrich the edublog, providing a backdrop for the writing that occurs there. "One of the coolest parts of about blogging," a student of mine told me in a recent classroom conversation, "is that I can personalize it by choosing from different designs and looks." Teachers who use blogs in the classroom should not discourage these small acts of ownership, unless students post offensive material or endanger themselves with the content they include.

More importantly, teachers should promote ownership by encouraging students to update their blogs on a regular basis, even if this means allowing for non-school content. Cyberspace is littered with blogs that are rarely updated or even completely abandoned. In fact, over two-thirds of new blogs are

deserted shortly after startup ("The Blogging Iceberg"). Requiring a minimum number of posts or words per week is one way to counter this trend, though ideally students should want to write more on their own. My students must meet minimum weekly and semester requirements, but we also discuss how frequent updates are the *sine qua non* feature of the blog, or at least any blog that hopes to retain its readership. In theory, the more students write, the more responsibility they will take for their blogs.

4. Effective blogging involve the writing process.

As research has illustrated, digital tools support the recursive nature of writing, chiefly by allowing for fluid revision throughout the writing process. Our students, to whom the word processor is as transparent a technology as the pen or pencil, have become adept at single-document revision— drafting, revising, and editing the same digital text until it meets their satisfaction. Indeed, advocates of a more compartmentalized writing process sometimes lament that students resist producing separate prewriting, rough drafts, revisions, and final drafts. Blogs and other editable online writing platforms complicate this picture.

In many ways, a blog is ideally suited for process-based pedagogy: its journal-like format allows for brainstorming, prewriting, and all sorts of tangential explorations; the comment feature facilitates constructive feedback from writing teachers and peers; and the real-world audience makes publishing a reality, to the delight of many students who proudly display blogs to parents and friends. The reverse chronological structure would also seem to encourage critical reflection, giving students an opportunity to reconsider their previous entries at a later time. More generally, blogging gets at a core idea of process pedagogy: writing more makes writing better. Or, as Peter Elbow puts it, "What looks inefficient—a rambling process with lots of writing and lots of throwing away—is really efficient since it's the best way you can work up to what you really want to say and how to say it" (15-16). Seeing these connections, a few of my students were quick to align blogging with process pedagogy.

"Since a blog is ever-changing like the writing process," wrote one, "students will be able to continually update what they have written time after time allowing a continuing effort toward perfection."

Others were more cautious, however, basing their objections on the actual blogs they had read. "I don't think that blogs are often revised or drafted," one student observed on her own blog, "or really a planned type of writing at all. They are more like a journal, where drafting seems a bit ridiculous." The genre does seem to resist extensive revision and editing, emphasizing instant communication over craft. Among bloggers, revision of a published post is considered taboo—when they do revise, they strikeout rather than erase previous material, so readers may still read the original post. Of course, publishing updates of previous entries is acceptable and even routine, but consideration of audience deters bloggers from posting multiple versions of the same story. The best way to align blogging with process pedagogy, then, may be to use it early in the writing process, when getting ideas down and receiving content-oriented feedback from peers and the teacher is highly valuable.

5. Teachers can help students get started blogging.

The last decade has seen an explosion of technology resources at the K-12 level. Funding from federal and state governments, along with private corporations, has done much to close the digital divide between wealthy and impoverished schools, at least in terms of computer hardware. The increasing availability of technology resources has shifted the way we think about the digital divide, putting a new premium on teacher expertise. Today, more teachers ask, "How and why do I use technology?" as they struggle to learn and integrate new applications that seem to change overnight. One of the most attractive elements of blogging is that it lowers the bar on teacher expertise. Blogging demands no familiarity with coding language or web design software like Dreamweaver, and getting started requires only an Internet connection and about ten minutes' time. Most commercial services have helpful wizards that guide new users through

the setup process and introduce key features. Even so, less experienced technology users can learn from their students, who are generally willing to show novices the ropes. In short, teachers can quickly become proficient bloggers, without in-service training or specialty software. This means that instead of focusing on technical skills, teachers can start their own students blogging almost immediately.

6. Grammar and mechanics are best learned in the context of actual writing.

Technology is a favorite target for champions of usage, spelling, and punctuation. Kids these days, goes the argument, cannot spell correctly, write complete sentences, or spot grammatical errors because the technology they use encourages sloppy habits. As proof of the downward spiral, proponents of this view often point to examples like "BRB" (be right back), "CU" (see you) or other e-logisms. English teachers are horrified—perhaps rightly so— to find these coinages smack in the middle of an essay on Thoreau or Shakespeare. But the reality may be that digital writing has its own grammar, with rules more informal than the print. Is there a "digital grammar" that teachers could use to bridge to mainstream grammar? When is e-lingo appropriate? When does consideration for the audience demand conventional spelling, punctuation, and usage? Exploring these and other questions through blogging seems more productive than lamenting the widespread demise of writing skills.

7. Students need real audiences and a classroom context of shared learning.

Perhaps the most compelling recommendation for blogging is the real-world audience it provides. The question of audience is fundamental to writing, and for most of us, fundamental to our writing classrooms, where we insist that students define their voices, weigh their purposes, and temper their diction according to the demands of their audience. Admittedly, this audience is more often hypothetical than real, with the bulk of student writing destined for our eyes

only. But blogging gives students a chance to write for a real audience of peers, parents, teachers, and even the global web community. This audience differs from the audience provided by a threaded discussion, a common feature of course management systems like Blackboard and Web CT. Such course management systems are gated communities, in the language of Lowe and Williams, artificial rhetorical spaces that compel students write to the instructor instead of each other or a larger community. The weblog, in contrast, offers a more authentic audience. "As two teachers who have used weblogs in our classrooms for the past two years," Lowe and Williams write, "we have found that by extending the discourse to a large community outside of the classroom, our student bloggers regularly confront "real" rhetorical situations in a very social, supportive setting."

This is not to say that edublogs must be published to the web at large. Many teachers make use of the password-protection option offered by most commercial services, effectively restricting blog access to class members alone. Still, even when password-protected, a blog likely provides a more authentic audience than a threaded discussion within a course management system. Students in my teaching assisting seminar, for example, keep blogs about their classroom experiences. For reasons of confidentiality, these blogs are readable solely by me and the members of the class. Nevertheless, my students are acutely aware of their audience: "By having access to other blogs I've learned from others and felt like a member of a sympathetic and encouraging community," wrote one student. Another added that "Nothing feels better than sharing sad personal feelings about student work and finding your colleagues sharing in the same hurt and confusion." No doubt, the shared experience of teacher assisting helped to solidify my students' sense of audience. But I also believe that blogging allowed the "sympathetic and caring community" to develop more readily than it would within a Blackboard threaded discussion, perhaps in part because my own role as instructor was "demystified," as one student wrote.

To be safe, teachers should obtain administrative and parental approval prior to publishing student blogs on the web, and should warn students not to post their email address, home address, or telephone number. Such cautions should be contextualized within the broader truth that in all likelihood, a student blog will be read by a small circle of classmates, family members, friends, and no one else. The popularity of any given blog is measured by the number of inbound links pointing to it from other sites. Online indexes like Technorati rank the most popular blogs on the web by counting the number of links they have accrued. In his analysis of Technorati and other indexes, Clay Shirky found that blog readership parallels other patterns of power distribution: that is, just as 20 percent of a given population owns 80 percent of its wealth, the top 50 blogs receive over 50 percent of all inbounds links—currency, for bloggers. The great majority of poor bloggers—those millions with few inbound links—have tiny audiences of three and four readers. Most teachers can rest assured, if not complacently, that their particular corner of the blogosphere will not attract much global attention. My own readership consists almost solely of my students, despite my best efforts to alert the blogosphere of my presence.

8. Effective teachers use evaluation constructively and efficiently.

Because blogs come in so many shapes and sizes, they can be difficult to evaluate. One key step for teachers and students is to explore other successful blogs together, raising questions about their purpose, audience, content, and characteristics. In a sidebar on my own blog, I keep a *blogroll*, a list of links to other blogs that I read. Ranging from *Doc in the Box*, a military blog kept by a Navy corpsman serving in Iraq, to *Wil Wheaton Dot Net*, a celebrity confessional maintained by a former child actor, the blogs posted here serve as models for my students. Beyond examining these examples, I also provide my students with criteria for any successful blog: it should be purposeful, active, rich in content, carefully edited, and social. The last of these criteria

stipulates that student blogs must be connected to both classmates and the web at large through comments and outbound links. Thus far, students have struggled the most with this requirement, perhaps because they still conceptualize the blog as a personal journal rather than a record of ideas, as Brooks et al. suggest. It may also be that commenting on other classmates' blogs is more difficult and less rewarding than participating in a threaded discussion, as one composition instructor noted on the *KairosNews Weblog*: "Yes, I can require that they respond to another person's blog, but one student said that, compared to a discussion forum, leaving responses to blogs felt more like leaving a note for someone who is out."

Whatever the challenges—and for a more complete discussion of them, see the *KairosNews Weblog*—it is clear that blogging provides a unique opportunity for writing instruction, making online publishing easier than ever before, giving students new purposes and genres, promoting ownership of writing, providing a new platform for process-oriented pedagogy, and offering real-world audiences.

By reflecting on what we already know about best practice writing instruction, we can integrate this new technology into our composition classrooms, if not seamlessly, then at least with a strong sense of purpose and a keen critical eye.

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