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Blogs: An Essential Teaching Tool

Students 'find themselves thinking about course content in ways they might otherwise not have taken the opportunity to do so...'

By Sue Burzynski Bullard, Classroom Blogs

October 6, 2010

ESPN links to a sports blog created by a journalism graduate student at Arizona State University and offers a potentially huge readership.

In North Carolina, some employers check out the critical thinking skills of job prospects by perusing their work on an editing professor's blog.

In a class at Michigan State University (MSU), students use blogs to report on local news—covering the mayor, school boards, crime and courts.

Blogs are a good way to teach journalism. In fact, there are many journalism professors who contend that they are an absolute necessity if students are going to have marketable skills for potential employers. Or for those students who head down the entrepreneurial path, a blog can be the lifeblood of that enterprise. In creating and using blogs, students become aware of—and familiar with the use of—a popular and ubiquitous and (virtually) no-cost digital platform on which journalists work these days. For them, it's like collecting "clips," only without having to clip anything.

"Nowadays, editors and reporters are being asked to blog," said [Andy Bechtel](#), assistant professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. "It's part of the job now and our courses need to reflect what's happening in the field." A 2008 study by the Bivings Group found that 95 of the top 100 U.S. newspapers use reporter blogs.

Bechtel and others don't believe—as some diehard detractors do—that adding blogs to the work students do in journalism courses diminishes the teaching of traditional skills. "I don't think blogging is a nontraditional skill," Bechtel says. "It's a writing skill; it's still headline writing. We're simply adapting our traditional skills to a different medium."

In his advanced editing class, students write guest posts about editing topics on Bechtel's blog, [The Editor's Desk](#). As he reminds his students: "It's not a technology class. It's not a software class. It's an editing class."

At Michigan State University (MSU), students in [Joe Grimm's](#) public affairs reporting class create blogs to post stories, maps, charts, photos, slideshows and video stories from their beats. "When it is posted on the Web, it becomes more real, more important," says Grimm, visiting editor-in-residence at MSU. "People actually look at it." In the Fall 2010 semester, each of the three sections of this course has 17 students, which is far more reporters than the local newspaper. "We have enough people that we can start to become a resource for the community," Grimm said. "That's especially important as traditional media cut back."

To convince faculty skeptics that blogs go well beyond opinionated rants, Grimm shows colleagues the work that his students produce. "One student created a chart showing how a property tax proposal would affect your taxes, giving readers a worksheet on taxes. That's real public service, public affairs reporting." When Lansing's mayor held a press conference to announce he would run for governor, a student texted Grimm asking if she should attend. "They're acting like real reporters," he said. Not only did she post a story, she created a slideshow too. "We've learned amazing things can be done."

Journalism professors cannot be fearful about learning or teaching technology. It is simply a part of how their job needs to evolve. "One thing professors need to get over is this idea we're oracles," Grimm says. "Students are very comfortable with this stuff, and we need to get past the idea that they don't learn anything unless we teach it



Editing Matters: A blog for a beginning editing class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

to them. We still teach journalism—accuracy, ethics, and responsibility for public service. We still teach those traditional hard-core elements.”

What Grimm has discovered is that students quickly figure out how the technology works and help each other. They don't need to be taught the mechanics of blogging; where they need our guidance is with the content.

[Leslie-Jean Thornton](#), an assistant professor at Arizona State, uses blogs in all of her classes. In her graduate-level multimedia class, students have created blogs on topics as varied as frugal vegetarian dining and Arizona immigration issues. In her undergraduate advanced editing class, students use portfolio blogs to showcase editing and design work. “I do it because it's a neat tool and it gives me incredible flexibility for reinforcing work, for teaching traditional talents and skills,” Thornton says. “It immediately gives them real world experience no matter how they are using a blog.” She also posts class readings and other content, including assignments, on a blog. “It's a gold mine for sharing resources and an outlet for collaboration if you want it to be. It teaches how to use content management systems,” she observes.

In creating and updating their blogs, Thornton's students also absorb traditional lessons. As they create blog headers, they learn about typography, about cropping and sizing photos, and about expressing a theme visually. As they produce content, they are picking up beat reporting techniques. “I'm just showing them a current application for traditional skills,” Thornton explains.

Blogs in Journalism Curriculum

A 2008 study on the use of blogs in journalism curriculums concluded that having this opportunity to use them adds to student learning. Students “find themselves thinking about course content in ways they might otherwise not have taken the opportunity to do so,” wrote Jane B. Singer in “Posting for Points: Edublogs in the JMC curriculum,” published in the Spring 2008 issue of *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*.

Thornton sees a role for blogs in virtually every kind of class from journalism history to reporting, editing and statistics. “It's just a tool,” she notes. But it's a tool that many students need to master if they are going to find a job. It's essential, said Grimm, who writes the Poynter Institute's “Ask the Recruiter” column and is a recruiting consultant for AOL's Patch.com, where a job candidate's knowledge about blogs, video and social media is essential since its reporters need to use a wide variety of multimedia tools.

These are the skills that Grimm expects his students to learn and practice in his reporting class. Using the fundamental building blocks of journalism to guide them, students are producing stories on the Web. “We teach them how to go for a better source, to wait for the right quote, to ask the right questions, and to structure an interview,” Grimm says.

Thornton believes that having students create blogs—for beats or portfolios—also helps them learn how to brand themselves, and this is vital in today's news environment. “I think one of the harder things to teach is that journalism is shifting away from one's identity coming from a news organization at which one works to being a journalist who earns respect, credibility and clout,” she says. With this reality there for students as they enter the job market, Thornton underscores the necessity of using tools like blogs so that students can discover as part of their education how “to use these tools to establish one's self.”

Sue Burzynski Bullard is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She spent 30 years as a reporter and editor including 21 years at The Detroit News, serving as managing editor for three years. In 2010, she won a Promising Professor Award from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

