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Tumbling Political Theory

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Abstract

Blogging in the classroom is not a new idea, but my students have tended to view the blogging assignment negatively, as a homework assignment that simply needed to be done each week and then forgotten until the next time they were required to visit the blog. With that in mind, I decided to employ a very different method of educational blogging—using the Tumblr platform—in which each student would take ownership of his or her own blog and which would make the best possible use of social networking technology to boost interaction among the students and engagement with the course material.

Keywords: teaching, blogging, political theory, Tumblr, internet

'If I was forced to do something for school, this would be it.' (POLS383 Student)

In recent years, political theorists have begun experimenting with Web 2.0 technology in and out of the classroom.¹ I decided to build on this experimentation by doing away entirely with the medium-length essays in my ancient political theory course—which cause a great deal of angst, don't offer opportunities for revision, and in which students show the least improvement over time—in favor of shorter, more dynamic online writing assignments.

I wanted to increase student engagement with the material they read, with one another and with me; and, of course, I wanted the students to actually learn from their writing and from the mistakes they made when they wrote. The best way to do that, I decided, was to give students a public space for their writing and to assign a certain amount of writing each week. This would be, I reasoned, far more effective than the traditional two-essay model I employed in my theory classes in years past—in my experience, I would spend a full week writing comments on students' first essays and then they would make exactly the same mistakes on their second essays. It would also be, in my estimation, more reasonable in terms of workload—for both professor and students. Finally, the model I had in my mind was a good fit with the subject matter of the ancient political theory course: a sort of ongoing, virtual symposium. While most people don't envision a blogging assignment relating to the subject matter of a class on Plato and Aristotle, I believe this is largely due to misperceptions about political theory. What students learn when they read Plato's *Republic*, for example, is the importance of crafting arguments for an audience. Combining that lesson with lessons about critical thinking and careful reading, which are at the very heart of any political theory course, blogging seemed a natural fit.

To that end, I decided to make use of Tumblr to afford students a venue for their ideas. I chose Tumblr as the platform because it's easy to use and has a built-in social networking component. Once a student creates an account and configures a blog theme, it is possible to access the blog and to post to it from any number of devices, including computers and smartphones. Thus, students could blog from their desks or on the go. And, with Tumblr's Dashboard feature, students are able to follow one another's blogs and easily reply to and re-blog what their classmates write.

Blogging in the classroom isn't a new idea. Even the most cursory Google search for "blogging in the college classroom" yields almost six million results ranging from the helpful to brief how-to guides to the truly bizarre. The strangest focuses on using a live blog in class in lieu of note-taking; from my own experience with live blogging, employing this sort of assignment in a relatively small class would shut down any possible discussion because students would have a difficult time keeping up with a live blog of what the professor is saying while also making contributions. More helpful, of course, are the myriad professional articles tackling the issue of blogging in higher education and the rare piece looking specifically at political science blogging (cf. Brescia and Miller, 2006; Davi, Frydenberg and Gulati, 2007; Ellison and Wu, 2008; Ferdig and Trammell, 2004; Lara and Lomicka, 2008; Lawrence and Dion, 2010; Sim and Hew, 2010; Williams and Jacobs, 2004). The rapidly expanding catalogue of such articles demonstrates both the growing popularity of educational blogging, the ways blogging is being used in classes on virtually every topic and the importance of reflecting on the pedagogy of using blogs in a classroom setting.

To this point, the majority of classroom blogging seems to take one of two forms: a blog run by the professor (Saint Joseph's College of Maine, 2006), or a class blog to which all students contribute (Sample, 2012). The former seems generally to have been subsumed by technologies like Blackboard, which allows professors to post the class syllabus, send messages, post announcements and share articles—all with relative ease and in an enclosed environment accessible only by students. The latter is a tried-and-true method of incorporating technology into the classroom; it spreads around the task of blogging so everyone is responsible for just a little bit of the work over the course of the semester. I previously employed the group blog assignment but I turned away from it when I found that this lack of ownership almost always led to decreased engagement. If students were required to contribute two posts to the group blog each week and to comment on one additional post, they did exactly that and nothing more. They tended to view the blogging assignment negatively, as a homework assignment that needed to be done each week and then was forgotten until the next time they were required to visit the blog.² With that in mind, I decided to employ a very different method of educational blogging in which each student would take ownership of his or her own blog and which made the best possible use of social networking technology to boost interaction among the students and engagement with the course material.

The setup

Students were required to create their blogs during the first week of the semester and to follow the class blog, which I used on the first day to give students a basic run-down of how to use Tumblr. I also strongly encouraged the students to spend an hour just looking around or testing the platform, but to be certain to turn on several important features that are not turned on by default; these included features that allow others to reply to posts

and that allow anyone to ask questions of any blogger. These features would facilitate the maximum amount of interaction between the students.

I also insisted that the students blog anonymously. There was some push-back from students when I announced that they should abstain from using their names, photographs or other identifying information on their blogs. Students wanted to own their corner of the internet and, especially in the case of the three or four students who were already using Tumblr, wanted others to know about their writing. My reasoning for employing anonymity was to encourage students to take risks with their writing. I wanted, specifically, for them to be able to make arguments that might be unpopular and to criticize one another without worrying what their classmates would think of them. In other words, anonymity would provide them with sufficient cover to either write what they really think or to write things they didn't actually believe in order to see where a line of argumentation would take them. The freedom from worrying about the opinions of their peers would be helpful to the assignment and would allow them to embrace the whole concept behind a class that encouraged them not only to think critically, but to live philosophically. Of course, because they would be blogging anonymously, I required the students to send me an email with their blog's URL so that I could create a database for myself.

Once the students had created their blogs, I divided the class into three groups. Every member of each group was required to follow the blog of every other member of the group. Students could also choose to follow other blogs, both within and outside of the class. This provided each student with a built-in audience as well as additional material about which to write. In other words, rather than writing simply for the professor, the students knew that at least nine of his or her classmates would be reading whatever was published. And, of course, students could respond directly to anything written by classmates, either by re-blogging with commentary or by writing an entirely new post devoted to the same topic but approaching it from a different angle. While I suspected that students would perceive this as an increase in the reading load for the course, it also made the blogging assignment a bit easier because it meant that students wouldn't constantly be searching the internet in order to find new stories about which to blog.

The blogs took the place of traditional writing assignments, but I didn't toss out the notion of evaluating students' writing altogether: students were graded on whether or not they blogged, but also on what and how they blogged. The posting guidelines I gave them on the first day make this clear:

Argumentative Texts should be a minimum of 500 words on a topic related to our course readings. All of these posts will be evaluated for the quality of writing and argumentation, and the ability to prompt (thoughtful) comments from other students will count as a positive. Students will be expected to write a minimum of one such post every other week. Each such post should be tagged #pols383 (in case you want to follow this tag to see what all of the students are writing).

If students think that something they've seen online resonates with our discussions, they might write a **Heroism and Justice in the News** post about it. This should be a short post of approximately 100 words and should include a hyperlink to the original story, post, or item that they read. These posts should do more than describe; they should explain and/or analyze. Students will be expected to write a minimum of two such posts each week.

Commentary on other students' posts will count as a form of writing in this course; students may comment as often or as infrequently as they choose. Standards of civility, quality of argumentation, and writing apply.

As these different types of writing demonstrate, the basic concept was to keep students engaged with their blogging throughout the semester, rather than at particular times, and to encourage them to think about the ways in which the themes of the course are also highlighted in contemporary political life rather than solely in the ancient texts we read. I hoped that students would treat Tumblr as they do other social networks—most notably Facebook—and would check in on their Dashboard at least on a daily basis to see what their classmates were writing. And I hoped the students would be especially interested by moving between the ancient texts we discussed in class and the contemporary examples of heroism and justice they found online.³

My ultimate goal was to make students aware that political theory is a living field of study that's written for a larger audience. It need not be written only by dead philosophers or for a college professor who will assign a grade. I hoped also to demonstrate that blogging affords immediate feedback and gives student bloggers opportunities to easily re-evaluate their ideas and to re-write.⁴

Student reflections

At the end of the semester, students were asked to reflect on the experience of blogging. Having gotten into the habit of writing up their thoughts, they were honest and quite thoughtful about the experiment at the heart of our class. One student nicely summed up many of the reasons I opted to try this blogging experiment in the first place, effectively arguing that my choice suited this student's goals:

When I am forced to frequently reflect and incorporate what I'm learning in class into my writing I am able to better retain the information I'm learning. ... Also, spreading the writing assignments out over the course of the semester made me feel less stress because I knew that I didn't have a long paper looming over my head all the time. My last point about why I liked blogging is that I really enjoyed being able to hear what other people were thinking. In every other class the teacher assigns a paper, students write the papers and turn them in, and no ideas are shared. **Blogging is really cool because it allowed me to see what all of my classmates were thinking. And really, I think that sharing ideas with one another is one of the main purposes of coming to college, not just listening to a professor and then regurgitating his/her thoughts in your paper so that they'll give you a good grade.** [emphasis added]

Another student described the way in which blogging allowed for participation that would otherwise have been difficult, while also noting that blogging allowed other students' voices into the discussion:

I am not one for talking up in class unless I feel strongly about something, I am also not particularly a fan of discussing literature in groups. So being able to think about something and write about what I thought was helpful. In addition I hold a belief that I already know what I think, and I am not going to college to learn about just what I think so I like to listen in class to what other people have to say, then digest that, many times by the time I have hashed out what I want to say the discussion is passed that juncture. In this sense blogging let me get my opinion in, and so I enjoyed it.

This was a particularly important point for me, though it was not one of the things I had in mind when I designed the blogging assignment. Too often, class participation is filtered entirely through the professor. This is especially true of large and medium-sized classes, but can also be seen even in seminars because students are less familiar with the seminar format and thus treat it as they would any other course. What tends to happen is that the professor asks a question, students raise their hands to respond, the professor selects one student, that student responds to the professor, the professor then responds and so on. Each time, the students are speaking to the professor rather than to one another; they are discussing the topics that the professor has set out for them; and, quite often, the professor takes the students' responses and repeats them back to the class in a way that makes those responses useful for moving on to the next piece of the lecture. The blogging assignment allowed students to interact with one another and to engage with one another's ideas without hearing the professor's opinion first.

Another student recognized that the whole blogging experiment was valuable, even though it was unlikely to be something the student would continue to do after the class ended:

I think it was valuable to experience this kind of format at least once because it was entirely new to me to blog/social media interact in an academic way, which I assume is only going to increase with the technological future and advances of the workforce.

This is an insight I'd hoped students would have as a result of using Tumblr rather than some other blogging platform (including Blackboard, which I specifically chose not to use because of its association with homework). For many students, social media is used entirely for fun; it's difficult for them to imagine using Facebook or Twitter in an academic manner. It's too simplistic to say students think of the internet as something to be used for fun rather than for work or education; clearly, they do most of their research online rather than at the library. Instead, students compartmentalise the internet: Google and Wikipedia for school; the *New York Times* and CNN for news; and Facebook and Twitter for fun. The blogging assignment sought to combine all the ways in which students use the internet, highlighting that social networking and news websites can also contribute to academic pursuits.

One student enjoyed the assignment but also recognised its limitations—at least on this first experimental attempt:

I feel like I'm somewhat alone when I say I embraced the blogging assignment. I would like to have participated in more contentious debates, but not enough people took my bait (most of the time). ... Sure, I can whip up a 5-7-page essay as easily as the next jaded political science senior, but I do that in every class and blogging forces me to write my entries in a way accessible to the public instead of just academics. I think that's important because the essence of political philosophy/theory is debate, which is facilitated by public discussion like these blogs. I think the system failed to live up to its potential this time around, but I'm not sure it's still not a better option than papers.

It's instructive that some students hoped to be able to continue blogging for my classes rather than returning to the usual essays. This fits with the majority of the comments students made, not only at the end of the semester but also in the midst of their reading and writing. They were generally quite happy with the idea behind the assignment, even as they recognised it might not be going as well as it could.

One interesting exception to my conclusion that students generally enjoyed blogging, even when they wished it had gone a bit differently, can be found in this reflection:

I have to say that I was not really keen of the blogging that was assigned this semester. This could have been for many reasons, but I think the main reason I did not like it is because I am already a part of so many social networks I did not really have room to add another one. Kind of a selfish reason I know, but I also found that this course material would have benefitted me more if I had written them out on paper and were able to connect more in a structural format I would have benefitted more from the course content. I know that writing papers in a course like this is usually not all it is cracked up to be and let's face it we are college students, procrastination is our best friend which usually turns out some pretty worthless papers, but personally, if I would have had to write a paper based on the course content for this semester I think I would have kept up on the readings more.

Knowing the quality of this student's writing over the course of the semester and even considering the quality of the writing in this particular reflection, it's clear the student benefitted a great deal from the blogging assignment, at least in terms of the grade the student would have received had the course been structured as in previous semesters. To put a finer point on it, the blogging assignment was graded far more charitably than I grade traditional essays. Indeed, students admitted in our last week of the class that my essay grading was a popular topic of conversation when they told their friends they had enrolled in one of my courses and they noted this reputation did not seem to align with the grades they received on their blog posts.

Lessons learned

One of the benefits to this blogging experiment was the ability to think about the way it was playing out and possibly make adjustments as it unfolded over the course of the semester. To that end, I frequently asked students about their blogging at the beginning of our class meetings, discussed the assignment with those who came to my office hours, and spent a good deal of time reminding them to think about the assignment throughout the week. Of course, even with minor adjustments that might be made during the semester itself, there were still many problems with the blogging assignment upon which I can now reflect, hopefully profitably for the next iteration.

The first and most obvious problem is one that many students mentioned in their own reflections and that we discussed during the semester – namely that students are procrastinators. This is true when they are tasked with writing essays and it is true when they are tasked with writing very short blog posts. In semesters when I assign essays, I hand out a list of paper topics from which students can select or create their own topic; I typically allow students three weeks to complete them. Invariably, they wait until the last week to begin. With regard to blogging, the weekly “In the News” assignment – which required approximately 200 words of writing, fewer than the number of words in this paragraph – seemed most difficult and even odious to the students as it required them to find two stories, articles or posts dealing with either heroism or justice on any website and write about (not summarise) them. Invariably, students would wait until the last minute each week to write these posts. And, since they had to write two such posts each week and since the week ran from Sunday morning to Saturday night, I would be facing something like fifty posts on Saturday nights, which I'd previously assumed was not a prime time for college students to sit in front of their computers.

What this meant was students received very little feedback from me on these posts because I simply couldn't spend much time on any single one of them. It was a chore to them, and for that very reason it became a chore to me. It also meant students barely interacted with one another, which was one of the principal goals of the blogging assignment. The vast majority of posts that students re-blogged or commented upon were published earlier in the week, when posting was generally sparse and other students had plenty of time to read, consider and respond. Thus, fairly early in the semester, engagement—which started out quite strong—dropped precipitously and remained low thereafter. This meant many students also tended to lose interest in the whole concept of blogging. As with any social network or blog, the dearth of other activity and the presumption of a dearth of readership led to a lack of interest. There is nothing as frustrating as logging into Tumblr several times a day only to see that no classmates have posted anything. After days without new content, students reported that they would check less often until finally they were checking only twice a week instead of twice a day. If they then checked on Saturday night or Sunday morning, the flood of new material was overwhelming and they didn't have any desire to scroll back through.

While students had plenty of reasons for their procrastination, the most interesting and most regularly repeated one is that blogging didn't feel like an assignment—at least not in the way homework for some other class did—and so they would put it off until the last minute. This, of course, meant some students failed to complete the assignment in a given week and their grade suffered, but because they didn't view blogging in the same way as other graded homework, they seemed unable to understand that simply not doing it was the equivalent of not turning in assignments. Indeed, even though students received weekly messages from me that they hadn't completed the assignment, they failed to recognise that this would have ramifications on their final grade for the course. When the final grades were submitted, some students were actually stunned to discover that missed assignments counted against their blogging grade.

Another issue was students wanted more feedback from the professor, not only from peers. This is understandable and presents a challenge for the assignment generally. The students, who followed the blogs of only nine classmates, recognized there was ample opportunity for them to comment on the blog posts of their classmates (though they did so relatively infrequently). However, they didn't recognise the challenge the assignment represents for a professor (who follows the blogs of all 30 students—most of whom post each week's assignment in a 24-hour window). As I emphasised to the students, the chances for interaction with any given post rises the earlier in the week it's published because spacing out posts means readers are more likely to read and respond to them. If somewhere between 60 and 90 posts are published on either Friday or Saturday each week, the volume is overwhelming, even for the professor whose job is to read and grade them. It might be a different story if the same volume of posts came in on a Wednesday and Thursday, as these are typical 'workdays' rather than weekend days (when professors might have other responsibilities that preclude sitting in front of a computer). But, even so, the volume of posts is far too heavy for anyone to respond to each one in even a cursory manner. Most often, I would simply count the "In the News" assignments—as two were required each week but quality wasn't assessed—and grade the longer posts, as there were only 30 every two weeks. I responded to as many posts as possible, but students generally did not see a response from me to the majority of the posts they wrote and thus they assumed I wasn't responding or interacting with students generally; each one did, however, receive a weekly email if they failed to complete the "In the News" assignment or to give them a grade on their analytic post (if they wrote one that week).

In part, this was by design. As I explained to a few students who asked about this point during office hours, I tried not to comment on students' writing on my own blog or on the class blog because I feared doing so would have a chilling effect on the discussion. Once the professor weighs in on a given topic, many students consider the question answered and they will not respond, either in agreement with the professor or in opposition. Given that one reason for trying the blogging experiment in the first place was to give students a wider audience than the professor and to have an opportunity to participate in a serious exchange of ideas, it seemed public responses from the professor could do more harm than good especially as those responses were far more likely to be critical in nature than supportive of the ideas contained in the students' posts. This played out on several occasions, especially toward the beginning of the semester when students were posting at various times during the week rather than principally at the end of the week (thus giving me more time to converse about the posts). Most often, I would send a brief note to the student, using Tumblr's Ask or Fan Mail feature, and attempt to tease out points they hadn't addressed or thought about fully. Sometimes the student would respond, sometimes the student did not get the note until much later in the week and too much time had passed for an exchange of ideas to take place, and sometimes the student wouldn't respond at all. On only two or three occasions all semester did a student use the note I sent as a springboard for a new post in which they thought through and responded to the questions I posed.

It was also the case that I would frequently write to students to inform them their posts missed the mark, they didn't address heroism or justice sufficiently, or they simply missed some important component of their argument. A small group of students received these notes more often than the others, in no small part because they clearly spent the least amount of time on their posts and so they were most often filled with errors. A lesson learned is that, as with the normal essay assignment, students who spend the least amount of time on their assignments tend to monopolise the professor's time because there are so many problems that are easily identified in slapdash work. One challenge is to think through ways to avoid getting caught in this trap in the future and, in particular, to find a process by which to demonstrate to students who haven't spent much time on the assignment some of the weaknesses in their work while spending the most time engaging with the work of the most hard-working students.

In the end, the most important lesson learned from the blogging experiment is most students liked it even if they didn't do a particularly good job with it. Students preferred blogging to writing essays and understood they missed an opportunity with this assignment by failing to really throw themselves into it. This suggests what I've always known—namely that so much of the success of a class hinges on its composition. The students who populate a class matter more to the quality of interaction and level of engagement than the assignment. With that in mind, it seems clear that repeating this experiment in another political theory class would be very useful as it would surely lead to different results. This class was simply not an engaged one; there was a large percentage of irregular class attendees and a low level of in-class discussion, examination grades were poor, and there were days when it was clear only a tiny handful of students had done the assigned reading. Now it might be the case that the blogging assignment was directly responsible for their lack of engagement; this was a possibility I took very seriously. The reason I ultimately rejected this factor and decided to attempt the blogging assignment in the future is that the students themselves—those who weren't engaged, who simply chose not to complete assignments, who failed midterm and final examina-

tions—found the concept of blogging as an assignment to be valuable even as they chose not to do it with any seriousness. Further, these students admitted quite freely that they would have procrastinated with any other assignment in the same way and thus the results would have been quite similar.⁵

Of course, this leads me to conclude by thinking of ways I might better incentivise blogging from the outset so that students are more likely to get involved and remain engaged throughout the semester. One possibility is to assign particular days of the week by which ‘In the News’ blog posts must be published to the blogging groups. If there are three groups of ten, the first could have posts due on Mondays and Wednesdays, the second on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the third on Wednesdays and Fridays. Even if the students continue to procrastinate about publishing their posts, this change ensures a steady stream of posts throughout the week, which is likely to result in greater engagement from both the professor and other students. My theory is the more posts a student sees throughout the week, the more likely the students will be to visit Tumblr on a regular basis, and this will in turn lead to more interaction between students. While I still don’t intend to write many of my own posts responding to students, my hope is spacing out their posts will allow me to offer comments—on both the ideas and quality of the writing—throughout the week so more students are hearing from me more often. In this way, students will have the sense that their work is being read and will know they’re being actively assessed by the professor as well. One student recommended talking about blog posts at the outset of each class; this would draw attention to the blogs, encourage students to read the post in question, and demonstrate what goes into a successful or unsuccessful post. While I experimented with this—briefly discussing posts I thought were flawed or putting some of the best posts on the class blog for everyone to see—it wasn’t done systematically. On at least one occasion, my discussion of a post led to an interesting online discussion; my sense is the student who recommended more regular discussions of posts had this example in mind and is likely correct that talking about one post at the beginning of each class would pay dividends. In terms of assessment, it seems clear that higher grades on the blogging assignments, more frequent and higher quality interaction between students on their blogs, and further positive feedback from students would all be indicative of success. Also, while some students recognised that the debate and deliberation central to the study of political theory fit very well with the blogging format, a further sign of success would be heightened interest in political theory courses among the students resulting from the recognition that studying ancient texts yields a distinctive voice to offer the world of political blogging.

Making relatively small changes—which seem easy to implement, require minimal additional effort and could be assessed by looking at changes in engagement—is almost certain to improve the assignment overall. Given the positive response from students about the concept of this very different sort of writing assignment and taking to heart the ways in which it can be improved can only lead to a better all-around experience and a more successful attempt to integrate technology into the study of political theory.

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Notes

1. Cf. Kohen (2012). Political scientists, more broadly, have employed blogging as a classroom exercise or assignment for some time, though most suggest political science educational blogging fits best into American politics, international relations or comparative politics classes (Lawrence and Dion, 2010).
2. This runs counter to arguments by Lawrence and Dion (2010, p. 154), who seem most supportive of the notion of group blogging in the classroom. My replacement of essays with blogging rather than adding blogging as a supplemental assignment also runs counter to their advice.
3. As Lawrence and Dion (2010, p. 151) note: '[B]logs, by design, are best suited for assignments that require students to write essays in response to other blogs and other online media.'
4. My assignment was specifically intended to follow the observation by Ferdig and Trammel (2004, quoted in Brescia and Miller, 2006, p. 46) that 'the use of blogs helps students become subject-matter experts, increases student interest and ownership in learning, gives students legitimate chances to participate, and provides opportunities for diverse perspectives both inside and out of the classroom'.
5. It's noteworthy that, from an initial enrollment of 34, five withdrew from the course before the end of the term and an additional six earned final grades below the C- required for the course to count toward their political science major.

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