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Designing a Collaborative Blog about Student Success

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The term "web log," or "blog," was first coined in 1997 by Jorn Barger (Blood). Blogs have been used in education as online journals, discussion platforms, course websites, and alternatives to mainstream media publications (EDUCAUSE, 2005). Two of the more common blogging platforms, Wordpress <http://www.wordpress.com> and Blogger <http://www.blogger.com>, are relatively simple to use, requiring no knowledge of HTML to post entries. One of the many advantages of using blogs is that they can foster interaction among peers, thereby building community (EDUCAUSE, 2005; Richardson). For further explanation of how blogs work, Common Craft has created an easy-to-follow video entitled *Blogs in Plain English*.

According to the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research's 2010 Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, which surveyed close to 37,000 college students in the United States and Canada, 36% of the students noted that they contributed to blogs on at least a monthly basis; 11.6% of the students were using blogs in a course they were taking at the time of the survey, 37.6% of whom were using blogs collaboratively as part of the course; 15% of the students read or contributed to blogs via an Internet-capable handheld device; and 37.3% of the students noted that they liked to learn through contributing to blogs, wikis, and websites.

The primary author has used blogs in honors courses since 2005 to post online discussion questions, course announcements, and project photos as part of a course blog (see Johnson) as well as to prompt students' personal reflections on their own individual blogs. The purpose of this article is to describe the most recent blogging project in an honors course—a collaborative student-success blog written for and by honors students.

COURSE BACKGROUND

The student-success blogging project was conceived as the primary project for the course Honors Professional Development: Community Outreach for sophomores in the University of Florida Honors Program. This course was the third in a series of four professional development courses available to honors students starting in their freshman year. Students first had the opportunity to take Introduction to Honors Professional Development, a one-credit first-year-

experience course focusing on an action plan for involvement in undergraduate research, study abroad, internships, leadership, and community service as well as workshops on resumé development and interview skills. Assignments included weekly online discussion topics, faculty interviews, community service and philanthropy projects, activity papers, reflections from the various workshops, and a final action plan. With six sections of the course offered, close to 150 first-year honors students typically take the course during their first semester.

Students who took the Introduction course during their first semester were invited to apply for the second course, Honors Professional Development: Leadership Development. Twelve students were selected for the initial leadership course. While the Introduction course focused on acclimating freshmen to college and campus involvement, the leadership course more thoroughly defined the leadership goals and refined the skills needed to accomplish these goals. The small size of the class was beneficial to the students, allowing them to develop strong relationships with one another and get more personalized feedback on accomplishing their goals. The intimacy of the class also created a sense of responsibility and accountability among the individuals; when students presented their goals as part of weekly status updates, they were expected to follow through on the goals and let their classmates know the results.

In the Leadership Development course, each student was required to create an individual blog. Students developed at least ten blog posts throughout the semester about their efforts to get involved with research, internships, leadership, and other activities. While the in-class status reports were good for creating accountability among the students, the blogs served as a beneficial tool for individual reflection. The blogs forced the students to think about what they had accomplished and reflect on what they did well or what they needed to improve on moving forward; it was also helpful in formulating new goals.

The third semester course was developed by the students enrolled in the Leadership Development course. Ten of the twelve students from the leadership course continued into the third semester. Honors Professional Development: Community Outreach was offered for the first time during fall 2010. Students wanted an opportunity to give back to the general honors community after learning so much about themselves and developing their strengths throughout their first year. Students by this point had developed a strong sense of identification with the program and each other. While the students continued to provide in-class status reports and work on their individual blogs, much of the class was designed to work on a collaborative project for first-year honors students, which has garnered university-wide attention.

The fourth course in the series is being taught for the first time during the spring 2011 semester. In this capstone course, students will continue working on their collaborative project and also develop an electronic portfolio to display artifacts from all four semesters of the course series. Finally, students in the course will serve as mentors to the next cohort of students in the Leadership Development course.

STUDENT-SUCCESS BLOGGING PROJECT

The student-success blogging project was designed to help honors students achieve success in their first year. The students in the Community Outreach course wanted to share the knowledge and skills they had developed in their first year that potentially could benefit younger students. Entitled the Swamp Survival Blog <http://www.swampsurvival.wordpress.com>, this project enabled experienced students to share information about the resources and opportunities available on campus that could foster professional development and facilitate achievement of goals. These veteran students observed that many first-year students had several set goals but lacked a resource for information and assistance in achieving their goals. While the blog was geared towards first-year students in the honors program, the students noted that its content could be helpful for all first-year students.

At the beginning of the semester, students in the advanced course selected a blog as their chosen community outreach outlet. The blog was modeled loosely after the Grade First Aid Blog, produced by Office of Undergraduate Advising at the University of Oregon, which focused on academic advising tips and resources in blog and video-blog form. The class elected to post both regular and video blogs, with content focusing on a combination of personal advice and tips about campus and community resources.

A quick note about the video blogs: According to the 2006 Horizon Report, video blogging, or vlogging, was recognized as a technology to watch, particularly when it came to students being able to create their own content for educational use. The 2008 Horizon Report noted that grassroots video development, popularized by the ease of creating and distributing video via sites such as YouTube, was another up-and-coming educational technology phenomenon. The class thus decided to post their video blogs on a YouTube channel <http://www.youtube.com/swampsurvival> designed by the class.

Students posted content on the blog every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday throughout the semester, with the Friday posts in the form of video blogs. Each of the ten students was responsible for posting two of the blog topics individually and, in pairs, two video-blog topics. At the beginning of the semester, students generated a list of topics they were interested in posting and developed a blog schedule as a group. The class also generated a list of people they could interview for the video blogs.

Other class sessions at the beginning of the semester were dedicated to negotiating the format and design of the blog and to learning about Fair Use and Creative Commons guidelines for adding pictures to the blogs as well as music or external video clips to the video blogs. Fair Use and Creative Commons guidelines can be complex and confusing, but several good resources are available to interpret them (see EDUCAUSE, 2007; Jones; U.S. Copyright Office).

GENERATING BLOG AND VIDEO BLOG CONTENT

Twenty blogs were posted throughout the semester:

Places to study	Finding your niche
Communicating with professors	Procrastination
Getting around Gainesville	Local attractions
On-campus housing: area governments	Staying involved off campus
Gator traditions	Following through on goals
Finding mentors	Being a competitive pre-med student
Time management	Adding majors and minors
Resumés	Cover letters
Becoming an active learner	Life outside of class

Students used a combination of personal experiences, references, and resources to generate the content of their blog posts. One student commented:

> For the resumé blog, I mainly used information I could find online about resumés and my own personal experience of writing, editing, and having my resumé edited by others.

Another student cited different sources:

> For the pre-med post, I integrated personal experience, knowledge from older friends and advisors, and information provided by UF (through the pre-health advising department, including the website and information sessions I have attended).

Ten video blogs were also posted throughout the semester:

Preparing for the career fair	Student Activities
Study Abroad Fair	Center for Leadership and Service
Tutoring	Academic Advising
Undergraduate Advising	Honors Program
Career Resource Center	Campus Wellness Services

For the video blogs, students used a variety of equipment and software to create and edit their videos. No one had to purchase any special equipment since they used only equipment and software that they already owned. To shoot the video, they used either their personal digital cameras or a webcam on their laptop. To edit the video, most students used Windows Movie Maker, readily available on PCs, or iMovie, available on Macs. One student used VideoPad, a freeware program.

To generate content for the videos, students scheduled interviews with professional staff and student contacts across campus. They also visited campus events to film footage and interviewed people on the spot. One students commented:

> For the first video, we first brainstormed what kinds of things we thought people (freshmen in particular) would want to know about advising, and turned those into questions we wanted to have answered in our video.

Another wrote:

> We visited the Study Abroad Fair and interviewed study abroad peer leaders. I used pictures and videos taken from the fair, as well as information from the UF International Center website.

Neither the blog posts nor the video blog posts were moderated by the instructor. A disclaimer was posted on the blog, stating that ". . . the students' viewpoints are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Florida Honors Program." The instructor's contact information was posted on the blog in case anyone had a question or comment about the blog's content although no comments about the content were received.

BLOG READERSHIP AND IMPACT

The Swamp Survival blog was publicized on the Honors Daily Opportunities List, a daily e-newsletter sent to all UF honors students via email by the honors office. A brief description and a link to the blog were posted several times throughout the semester on the Daily. Individual blog and video blog posts also were linked to the UF Honors Program and Honors Professional Development pages on Facebook. The blog was linked on the course website for Introduction to Honors Professional Development, and the instructor distributed links to individual blog postings on Twitter. The instructor also presented on the blog during the Developing in Honors extended session on technology at the 2010 National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference. Finally, a reporter for *The Independent Florida Alligator* published an article on the blog, which led to increased campus-wide exposure (Peters).

The blog was set up on Wordpress, which provides an in-depth analysis of site statistics. From September 12 (first post on the blog) through December 31, 2010, there were 1,771 views of the blog. The most active day was September 29, 2010, the day the article was published in the *Alligator*, with 226 views. The average number of views per day was 15. Aside from the main blog page, the following individual posts received the most views, with the most viewed listed first: how to be a competitive pre-med student, places to study, getting around Gainesville, UF traditions, and procrastination. The top referrers to the blog were the *Alligator* website, Facebook, Twitter, the course website for Introduction to Honors Professional Development, and the Honors Daily email.

Data on numbers of views are available directly from YouTube. The Swamp Survival YouTube channel itself had sixty views while individual videos were viewed a total of 417 times. The top-viewed videos in order of most viewed were: undergraduate research, preparing for the career fair, and student activities.

At the end of the semester, students in the course were asked to reflect on how they thought honors students might have benefited from the content on the Swamp Survival Blog. They all commented that they hoped their readers had learned from their unique perspectives and experiences as peers. They also believed they had provided content about resources first-year students might not have heard about otherwise. As one student noted, "One thing that I thought was super awesome about the blog is that it's so much helpful information in one convenient place. Not only that, but this information is peer-to-peer." Another student reflected that "since our first-year experience was so recent, we were able to think about what questions we encountered and what information we would have found useful throughout our first year."

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In addition to helping first-year honors students through the blog, the students in the course learned from the project. In their end-of-course reflections, students said they gained experience in researching and planning, in-depth knowledge about campus resources, and awareness of how much information they had learned and retained throughout their first year in college:

> By participating in this project I discovered how much I had learned in my first year of college. I did not have an older sibling or friend to guide me, and I was able to see how the blogs written could have helped me the year before.
>
> I learned from everyone else's blogs, too. Some blogs are inspirational, some are informative, and some are a mix. I learned about the wellness center and how to be a competitive pre-med student, etc. But overall, I learned more about how to make my experience here, at UF, more enjoyable and fulfilling.
>
> The project not only taught me the basics of running an appealing and informative blog, but also gave me an expressive platform to use my writing and video editing skills. The information provided by my classmates made me more aware of resources on campus. Overall, it was a good learning experience, teaching us skills relevant to today's methods of disseminating information.

Given the success of the project, the group plans to continue the Swamp Survival Blog for the foreseeable future. The current students will continue working on the blog during their fourth-semester Professional Development Capstone course, and then the blog will transfer over to the next cohort of the

Community Outreach/Capstone class the following year. Many topics remain to be covered for future blog posts, and students can revisit former topics as appropriate. The upcoming priority will be to increase readership/viewership of the blog and videos, as well as to make the blog more interactive by encouraging readers to leave comments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHERS

Creating a blog is a relatively simple task since several free blogging platforms are available and no knowledge of HTML is needed to post content. Other honors programs or colleges interested in starting blogs similar to the Swamp Survival Blog need to consider several factors in advance:

- Who is the audience?—We focused on first-year honors students, but others could focus on prospective students, all current students, the general campus community, and/or parents and alumni.
- What is the focus of the blog?—Ours was student success. Others could highlight honors courses, faculty, or various opportunities within the program/college.
- Who will contribute content to the blog?—We used students taking a professional development course. Others might use their honors ambassadors or honors student council members, student employees, or students taking a particular honors course. We recommend allowing students to take ownership of the blog, with a faculty or staff member simply overseeing the project.
- How often will content be posted?—We posted content three times a week on a consistent schedule. The consistency allowed readers to know exactly when they could expect to see new content on the blog. Others might want to limit content to once a week, but we would not recommend posting less frequently.
- How will the blog be marketed?—The blog content will not be helpful unless someone is reading it. A plan needs to be developed to advertise the blog to the intended audience.

The use of blogs by honors programs and colleges has a lot of potential, and a national honors blog might be a future development. The Swamp Survival Blog allowed students in the course to learn more about themselves and campus resources while creating content to help other honors students.

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