

Weblogs: Learning in Public

Jill Walker, Dept of Humanistic Informatics, University of Bergen, Norway.

Abstract

Students' work is usually only read by their teachers, making their education a system to be gamed. This may cause a lack of motivation, a lack of confidence in the worth of their own work and may be a root cause of the current rash of plagiarism among students. Weblogs provide a chance for students to experience writing in a public space where their work can have real value both for their classmates and for a wider community. This prepares students for a networked world where communication is essential and often social and where writing can have consequences.

Keywords

Weblogs, blogs, writing, web design, network literacy

By March, my students had been writing weblogs for several weeks. They knew that the weblogs were publicly accessible on the web, but didn't seem to believe that anyone would actually read their writing. Their teacher required it of them, so they would do it, some enthusiastically, some with trepidation or diligence and some with barely veiled disgust. Adding new rules to the game? Give a student a blog and you'll hear all about it:

Setting up this blog is one of the most boring things I've ever done. And my site looks incredibly ugly! I can't see why anyone would bother to read this. Far less how it'll do me any good to write my ideas about the course here. Except that I have to have 1500 words here before they'll let me take the exam. (Kristine, Jan 30)ⁱ

Studying is a complicated game. Some of the rules are explicit, others you figure out as you go, but everyone knows that it's not real life. Nobody except your professor will read the papers you write. Once you graduate, only your grades – your winnings – will count. This is one of the challenges of teaching: only exceptional students will do work for the joy of learning and not simply because it's required.

What happens then if we make the game more real? What if we connect the day to day work of studying to the world outside of the university?

Becoming visible

After those first weeks of the semester, some students had taken to blogging like ducks to water, writing with great enthusiasm and adapting the templates almost daily to reflect new skills and new inspirations. Some of the students absolutely hated being forced to blog. Sometimes this led to great creativity, as when one young woman not only christened her site Furyblog and developed a furious writing style that swept from post to post, but also spent hours changing the standard template into an inferno of black and red, complete with a manipulated image of herself snarling at the reader. Other students simply wrote as rarely and with as little investment as they could get

away with, leaving their weblogs to fend for themselves when their writers weren't forced to post in class.

The majority of students, however, embarked upon their weblogging careers without expressing any particular enthusiasm or distaste. They did what I asked them to do, more or less. They listened to my lectures on the network and the new literacies that it requires without questions. I explained the concept of trackbacks, in which links become bi-directional so that readers of a post in a weblog can see when other bloggers have written about and linked to that post, allowing readers to follow links back and forwards exploring a networked discussion. I talked about how Ted Nelson, who coined the term hypertext in 1965, proposed a global, hypertextual network that would have been far more sophisticated, in some ways, than the web is today, and how a foundation of Nelson's dream was bi-directional links, which are very different from the standard one-way links of the web (Nelson 1987). I offered that Steven Johnson's suggestion that the web cannot be self-organising or truly emergent because you *can't* easily see who links to a site may be surpassed by trackbacks and networks of bloggers. Organisation in a network without hierarchical control requires visibility and feedback, Johnson writes:

Relationships in these systems are mutual: you influence your neighbors, and your neighbors influence you. All emergent systems are built out of this kind of feedback, the two-way connections that foster higher learning. (2002: 120).

That's what blogging is about, I said. It's about taking control of your own learning, finding your own voice, and expressing your own opinions. It's about responding to the world around you and listening to the responses you get in return. The class was silent, patiently waiting for the break.

Mental workouts

My use of blogs in the classroom was based on my own experience in blogging while I was working through researching a PhD (Mortensen and Walker, 2002). I started my blog on a whim, just to see what this "blog" thing was. I rapidly found that the daily writing was helping me become more confident about my research, and that I was developing a clearer voice of my own that carried through into my dissertation writing. As colleagues began to blog, I developed a research network at least as important to me in my everyday research as my local colleagues were.

Many webloggers have had similar experiences. Part of the advantage of weblogs is the same as can be found in the conventional journal or learning log. Rebecca Blood was one of the first and most prolific bloggers. In her oft-cited essay 'Weblogs: a history and perspective, she writes:

Shortly after I began producing Rebecca's Pocket I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own

opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.

Although Blood doesn't mention the importance of having an audience, it seems likely that her "careful consideration" is influenced by the awareness of having a readership. In my own blogging it became clear to me at an early point that writing for readers, however few, meant that I took far greater care in my writing than I did when scribbling notes in a notebook for my own eyes only.

When you blog, you know that others will read what you have written. That means that you write with an awareness of the possibility that others may disagree with what you have written. Steven Johnson is an author of books on science. In 2003, after keeping a weblog for some months, he wrote an end-of-year post about his experiences so far as a blogger. His first point is similar to Blood's: blogging is a good way of practicing writing and expressing your opinions. His second point deals with writing as debate:

[Blogging has] been a great stimulus for me, working out new ideas in this public space – I've actually been about twice as productive as normal since I started maintaining the blog. The more I keep at it, the more it seems to me like a kind of intellectual version of going to the gym: having to post responses and ideas on a semi-regular basis, and having those ideas sharpened or shot down by such smart people, flexes the thinking/writing muscles in a great way.

This is similar to a recent post by graduate student Austin Lingerfelt, who after writing an excellent essay giving, among other things, a useful overview of research on blogs and teaching (Lingerfelt 2004), wrote the following reflection on how his own weblogging had impacted his research:

I blogged to write and, as I did, I was constantly aware that many of you who know more than I do would read this work. Your responses also helped me to revise. While I would have revised based on in-class feedback and response, online response offered me further opportunities for revision and the development of my thinking about this topic. (December 12, 2004)

If weblogs are so valuable for these writers, students and researchers, I thought, surely this "intellectual version of going to the gym" can be harnessed and used with students.

"I didn't imagine anyone would care what I wrote!"

During the class where I talked about trackbacks and bidirectional links, I had also shown the students some online diaries. The students were shocked at the openness of the diarists. Why on earth would people make this public, they asked, wide awake. I suggested they read some personal weblogs and write a post in their own blogs about what they found and what reasons people seemed to have for writing in public. "Inga" did. She found a diary written by a young man who was going to Oslo to visit his ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend, and who wrote with great honesty about his grief at having lost her and his anxiety about meeting her again. Inga wrote a brief post about

his blog in her own blog, immediately following her first post with a more reflective post characterizing personal weblogs as egotistical.

The next morning, Inga was astounded to find that she her blog had new comments and a trackback pointing to it. The diarist she had written about had written back! He'd responded to her post on his own weblog. Because he had linked to what Inga had written, his readers also found Inga's weblog, and several of them had written comments to her post.

Inga wrote me an email: "But how did he know I'd written about him? I didn't imagine anyone would care what *I* wrote!"

The next time the class met, we talked about Inga's experience. I showed the students some of the many ways in which you can find out who links to your website and what kinds of readers visit you. Still, the amazement in the classroom was palpable. Strangers might read what they wrote! People outside of their classroom might seriously engage with what they write in class! Their work might *matter*, beyond simply getting a grade and being one step closer to having a degree.

How to get them to write

In my experience, most students don't "get" blogging on their own, without considerable assistance from teachers. In an essay about a blogging course that went wrong, Steven Krause admitted: "I was disappointed that my students didn't 'just write,' if given the opportunity." (Krause 2004) His students were graduate students, and I understand his disappointment. Like him, I had expected my students to take to blogging instantly, but I found that most of them needed not just coaxing, but practice before they understood how to use this new medium.

When I started using blogs with students I assumed that the writing would happen outside of the classroom. That turned out to work well with a few students, the students who took easily to blogging, but most students didn't write enough on their own to learn *how* to use weblogs. There were technical difficulties, of course, because I insisted that the students work on changing the way their blogs *looked* throughout the semester, which meant that they not only had to learn the HTML they'd signed up for (this was a course in web design and communication online, after all), they also had to deal with the proprietary tags you need to customize the look and functionality of a blog that uses MovableType, the blogging software we were using. After two weeks of struggling to make his blog look the way he wanted, "Lars" almost gave up:

I've come to hate my blog: he looks like hell, he's lousy company, he's difficult and cryptical, communicates in riddles, makes me mad, tired and miserable whether I spend time with him. "Why do you hang out with him then?", some may ask, well, because my teacher says I have to play with him.

On the bright side at least I can say he doesn't smell bad, and since my relationship with him is completely superficial so far it's possible he'll turn out to be decent enough after all, if we get better acquainted. So far I must confess I don't understand him at all and I've rarely come across such a

capricious character, I wish I'd never been introduced to such a boring and static A4 creature as [title of student's blog] (February 4, 2003)

Yet Lars and the other students kept going. Finding that most students were not writing at home, I began to give them very explicit exercises in class. When we were in a computer lab, I sometimes gave them the last ten minutes of class to write a blog post about the points in today's discussion that interested them most. Other times I would give them a few minutes to google a term we were discussing, and to post a link in their blog to the best site about the topic that they could find. A few times I asked them, in class, to read another student's most recent posts and leave at least one comment. On other occasions I asked them to write a post in their own blog that continued a discussion started by another student. Often I would ask them to discuss questions assignments in groups and then write brief posts about their thoughts in their weblogs, as a step towards writing more carefully edited responses, which might become part of their portfolio at the end of the semester.

I also tried to model the kind of weblogging I wanted to encourage in the blog I wrote for the class. I drew connections between posts students had written, helping them to see how discussions were growing forth between them. I linked to particularly well-written or unusual posts, like Lars's, which had a musicality in the original Norwegian that doesn't come through in my translation, and I also showed the class interesting posts in class.

Students are used to a learning environment where nobody will see their work apart from the examiners. As my blogging students realised that their writing was actually being read by other students and even by people outside the university, their writing changed. I was most impressed by the way in which they began teaching each other. For instance, a color blind student wrote a post carefully explaining to other students and readers how to design sites that can be read by color blind people – an important point when designing websites, since you'll have more color blind readers than readers using Opera or Netscape or needing websafe colors or any of those other elements of web design that we fret about. Other students explained technical skills they themselves had just mastered: how to make skins for your blog, how to use php to join up separate html files. Students continued to sometimes receive comments from outsiders. In addition, they increasingly wrote for each other.

These posts turned out to be very popular among the other students. Students linked to each other's how-to posts, and leave comments asking for more assistance, or suggesting alternative ways of doing things. There was a certain pride evident as students mastered a topic and shared it with their friends, and a pleasure in sharing that was contagious and seemed to encourage the others to write more as well. This is a kind of writing that is experienced as valuable, and not simply because the teacher requires it. As Charles Lowe and Terra Williams note in their article on educational uses of weblogging, "With the teacher no longer the overly predominant active reader and responder of student texts, students, as a community, take more ownership of their writing." (Lowe and Williams, 2004).

Harnessing the walkthrough

Elsewhere in this issue of *On the Horizon*, Mia Consalvo writes about how videogame players find walkthroughs and hints and cheat codes when they're stuck in

a game. Watching my students write tutorials for each other – or walkthroughs, if you like – it occurred to me that this is a kind of learning that embraces the collaborative possibilities of the internet. Instead of struggling to understand the details and rigors of traditional academic citation practices, or copying and pasting with blind abandon, or worse, buying their papers, these students were sharing freely and generously. They were creating content and learning the pleasures of a gift economy where writing a careful tutorial that is useful for others earns you goodwill, recognition and a good chance of others returning the favor.

We need students to learn traditional ways of writing, certainly, but we also need to help them discover new ways of writing, and especially of writing online. I am surprised at the beginning of every semester how few students have really explored writing and debating online. Almost all of them download music from peer to peer networks, circumventing the music industry, and studies have shown that most young people don't think there's anything wrong in that, despite the threats of the music industry. What if it is the same ethics that is at the root of the increasing problems with plagiarism? Like the music industry, with their clumsy attempts at locking the system by imposing technical and legal limitations on copying music, we teachers have generally attempted to fix the problem by increasing punishments, setting up technical barriers (like turnitin.com) and insisting on students using traditional citation techniques to cite web sources. While I certainly don't condone plagiarism, it does seem to me that we might *also* explore the possibility that there might be some merit in this promiscuous sharing of content.

One advantage of using weblogs is that they come with a built in code of conduct that has grown from this very collaborative spirit. You read a lot when you blog, and you use other peoples' words all the time, and instead of writing out a citation in a form that many students find very complex, you link to the website where you found the words. This is a writing environment that can help students learn how to connect to the ideas of others while being explicit about the connections they are making. At the same time, it is important to help blogging students to understand that while the links they are making in their weblogs constitute a good citation practice in this genre, in other genres, such as the conventional term paper, the explicit connections must be made in other ways, not by linking, but by using conventional citation techniques.

Students researching in public

The second semester I ran the weblogging class, I asked each student to write a review of another blog. This assignment open up a can of ethically problematic worms that I had not at all expected, because not all of the bloggers whose blogs were reviewed reacted as cheerfully as the diarist Inga wrote about.

I had taken the inspiration for this assignment from Scott Rettberg's new media studies class the previous semester. While Professor Rettberg had pre-selected a list of blogs and allowed his students to choose one from the list to review, I wanted my students to explore the web themselves, and so I allowed them to make their choice completely freely. Perhaps I should say "required" rather than "allowed", because many of the students complained bitterly at having to seek out their own blog to discuss.

The students clearly learnt a lot from this assignment. They learnt something about how to write a review, and they also had to figure out which qualities of a blog were most important to them. They learnt how to find weblogs on topics that interest them. They also learnt that bloggers have real feelings, even the ones you've never met. Writing a review of a weblog is not at all like writing a review of a movie or a novel. If you review a novel in the student newspaper, you tend to assume that the author will never read what you wrote. The likelihood of the author actually responding to your review is minute. It is considered unseemly for an author to protest a review, and there is little space anyway for newspapers to print such responses. The reviewer of a novel is generally in no immediate danger of having to confront the author of the novel.

If you review a blog, however, the blogger is very likely to respond – especially if you publish your review in a blog and link to the blog you're writing about. You're writing in the same space as the writer of the text you're reviewing. You're at the same level. Unless you review one of the superstars of the blogosphere, the kind of blog that has thousands of readers, chances are the blogger will see that you've linked to his or her site, and will read what you've written.

Sometimes this is wonderful, as when Inga's comment about the personal diarist's site got reasoned responses from him and his readers allowing her to rethink her understanding of blogging. There were several examples of this in the blog reviews my students wrote. One student wrote in Norwegian about the English-language blog Stupidevilbastard.com, a popular blog, yet too popular for the blogger to notice and comment on other blogs that link to his site. The writer of [Stupidevilbastard](http://Stupidevilbastard.com) wrote a post wondering what the review meant (April 2, 2004), and after someone posted a very bad autotranslation, a reader who actually had some knowledge of Norwegian wrote a translation in summary in English, and the blogger and his readers discussed the review as thoughtful and interesting. A day later, the student who had written the review emailed me in excitement: "Look!" I have rarely seen a student so happy with the reception of a paper.

A less fortunate response came from a local blogger whose blog was reviewed by another student, Karina. Karina had selected a blog written by a man living just a few suburbs away who appeared to write about his depression and unemployment with very few filters. He also gave his full name in his profile. A few days after Kristina posted her review of his blog, this man wrote an anxious blogpost titled "Help, I'm under surveillance and being analysed!" where he explains that he came across her review of his blog and is horrified at the idea of strangers not only reading what he writes but dissecting it. "Maybe I should stop blogging? I don't know. I liked emptying my thoughts onto the net, but I never dreamed it would go this far."

This is not a game. Performing in public means performing with real people, who have real feelings and real lives. Students' writing means something outside of grades and credits. This can lead to exceptional learning opportunities and great empowerment, but it also requires caution.

I had approached student writing about weblogs as a humanist, not a social scientist. I had considered what it would mean to my students to work in public, but it hadn't occurred to me that other people would become involved or that other people could

feel hurt. I approached weblogs as deliberate publications and as texts, much as I would a short story or a movie or the letters to the newspaper we were sometimes asked to analyse in high school. Writing a review of a blog was as natural to me as writing a close reading of a poem. But while this is a perfectly legitimate assumption, it's clear that not all bloggers understand that their writing is, in fact, published, openly accessible and that it will be archived. Though my students knew that their work was publically accessible, the extremity of the dialogue was not clear to all of them. Their work wasn't just going to be read by their teacher and their classmates and random strangers – the people whose work they discuss are going to be reading them. Vegard Johnansen, a Norwegian blogger whose blog was amonged those reviewed by my students, was comfortable with having his work reviewed, but argued that out of consideration for the individual writing the blog, you should avoid reviewing blogs about which you can't write a positive review:

When you review a blog or a personal website there's always an individual who wrote it, so you should write a positive review of a site you enjoy rather than a lukewarm review of a site you dislike or aren't interested in. (Johansen 2004)

To what degree should we protect students from the world? If their weblogs had not been publicly accessible, the people whose blogs they wrote about would never have known and they would not have responded. One blogger would not have had his feelings hurt, but then again, he would have mistakenly continued to think that his writing on the web was somehow private. My students would not have experienced that writing online requires you to think about your entire audience, which will likely include the people you're writing about.

Is it ethical *not* to provide students with opportunities to perform in public? My eight year old has been learning to play the violin for just over a year, and has already played at five public concerts. Why should learning writing or thinking be different?

By the end of the semester, most of my students said they enjoyed blogging and had found it valuable. There were still some who hated it, and most of the students stopped blogging when the semester was over, but about 20% continued. They post about the new courses they're taking, about politics, about books they're reading, about partying after exams and going to Spain or Asia for a summer or a semester. These students have learnt a way of supporting their own learning. They've learned about a new tool for thought. Probably weblogs aren't the ideal way of "flexing intellectual muscles" for everyone, just as not everybody enjoys playing football or attending aerobics classes. I think that it's important to expose students to a broad variety of methods for thinking and learning so that they can adopt the methods that suit them the best.

Most important, though, is the need to teach our students is network literacy. We need to work out how we can teach writing in a distributed, collaborative environment, because this is the environment our students are going to live in. Network literacy means linking to what other people have written and inviting comments from others, it means understanding a kind of writing that is a social, collaborative process rather than an act of an individual in solitary. It means learning how to write in a way that

anyone can read it: your mother, a future employer or the person whose work you're writing about. Yes, it's difficult. The internet is not a game.

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ⁱ Student weblogs were written in Norwegian. Translations are all mine.