

C O G N I T I O N 2 . 0

A group investigating pedagogy and cognition in Web2.0 applications

WEBLOGS:

BUILDING AN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY IN CYBERSPACE



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Weblogs: Building an Academic Family in Cyberspace

Building strong relationships with students is something that frequently explains why faculty take pleasure in the challenge of working at a small university. Not only the opportunity to get to know students as individuals, but to gain their trust and respect so that they feel comfortable coming to us for advice and with questions related to our fields. We'd like to share some ideas about using weblogs that can aid you in these endeavors.

Both authors have moved to their respective small college communities and are engaged in the liberal arts life on our campuses. We teach our classes, advise various organizations, and come back to the university in the evenings to support all of our students in their extra-curricular activities. It's a time consuming job, but well worth the effort. However, it seems that some students miss out on the opportunities to get to know us outside of the classroom. For students that are introverted in class and for students that keep nontraditional hours because of work and difficult commuting times, our weblogs make us available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Weblogs (often called blogs) are popular in many areas of the Internet. Millions of individuals use them as personal diaries (Riva, 2002). Businesses use them to quickly relay information about products and as a community meeting room inside of the company (Miller, 2003). And, a growing number in academics are using them to communicate in new and interesting ways with colleagues and students.

Blogs are more dynamic than traditional websites in that they can be updated and changed from almost any place you can find a connection to the internet (through web browsers, email, desktop applications, or in some cases a traditional phone call can be made available as an audio message). This means that students won't get bored returning to your website that never changes. The updates are posts that are typically shown in chronological order, with the latest post being at the top. Unlike traditional websites, there is not a need to delete old information in order to add new information. Once the page grows to a given size, the old information is archived automatically and can still be accessed. In addition, most blogs are structured so that readers may comment on your post and thus a dialogue begins on the community level.

Blogging as a Communication Tool and Resource

Blogs are a form of asynchronous communication that will allow for group interaction on a variety of topics. Perhaps a blogs most important advantage is that it increases faculty-student contact, one of the most important aspects of good education at the undergraduate level (Chickering & Erhmann, 1996). Unlike traditional email or snail mail interactions, a student's blog posts happen in a shared environment and other students can help answer their questions and be stimulated by their questions.

As an example, after the last class meeting but prior to a major statistics test, a student asked a very relevant question for successfully taking the examination. The question and the response were

shared with everyone via the blog, (http://www.livejournal.com/~prof_chuck/28719.html), which is also embedded on the instructors homepage and VISTA site. We can feel good that all students will have access to this information and that we are seen as responsive to students' questions. Furthermore, students can ask for clarifications, refinements, and extra information at any time.

In addition to answering questions, we use our blogs to announce test dates, assignments, speakers of interest, and to share web-based articles that are relevant to our classes. Blog posts can also be used to extend lectures beyond the traditional classroom session. We often think of relevant information and ideas after class and by posting them on the blog we don't have to wait days until the next time we are all in a room together to further the discussion (and get behind on our schedule). It is also great to see students' responses after they have had some time to process the information and come back with some creativity and relevance. (For a case in point you might read students ideas on Evolution of Explicit Memory:

http://bloggery.wlu.edu/whiting/archives/2005/10/evolution_of_explicit_memory.html#comments).

Along with establishing a dialogue between faculty and students, blogs can aid in the development of student dialogue too. We believe that it is important that students feel comfortable working as collaborative groups in a social environment, and do not feel isolated in their learning experience. This provides a forum for students to be intellectually curious as they bounce ideas off of each other and respond to each other's ideas. Often a series of posts to a topic or thread follows a developmental trajectory where the discussion starts at a more fundamental level and gradually increases in complexity.

Blogging as a Learning Tool / Blogging as an Interactive Tool

Blogs can also be used to facilitate student interactivity. As an example, we have posted debate team information on the blog, and it is a central location for students to get together and coordinate responsibilities and meeting times. Students could also use this space to share files and documents by placing hyperlinks in their comments, rather than sending them to each other as email attachments that might get deleted or filtered. This is only one way that a blog may be used as an interactive learning tool. You might also get students actively involved by having them participate in simulations or sharing new resources for research other than the local library.

If you believe in active learning then, blogging is a tool you should consider. When you strongly encourage (or make it mandatory for) students to write reflectively on topics, then you are aiding them to make the information a part of their understanding (Chickering & Erhmann, 1996). The CogBlog (<http://bloggery.wlu.edu/whiting/>) is a prime example of using a blog as a learning tool in this way. Another benefit to the blog is that when students respond to issues discussed in class, their responses are pretty brief, yet people seem to have no problems writing dissertations on the blog.

Blogging as a Writing Tool

Comments (or posts) from students are practice at writing, and given the correct structure can be formal or casual, the tone is up to you as the moderator. The fact that a student's comments and work will be in print on the World Wide Web often leads to higher quality work and a greater amount of time put into the effort (Chickering & Erhmann, 1996). Because blogs are generally available for anyone to read, posts can receive feedback (both positive and negative) from outside the classroom environment (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). On the prof_chuck blog, two alumni participate in the conversation, as well as several outside readers from across the globe.

And unlike the ability to retrieve or modify emails once they are sent, you can edit your blog posts when you later read it and discover a typo or embarrassing faux pas. As businesses (and our personal lives) continue to depend more on asynchronous, computer mediated communication, being able to speak succinctly and with clarity in blog type environments will become a valuable skill. Many students may choose to place blogging as a skill on their resume (Flatley, 2005).

Blogging as a Time Management Tool

Both the faculty member and the student can gain advantages by using a blog as a time management resource. For instance, if you'd rather not repeat yourself more than twelve times on a particular topic, make it a blog post. The prof_chuck blog (http://www.livejournal.com/~prof_chuck/) serves this purpose very well. Every assignment and change in plans is posted there for all to see. When the third or fourth student comes by with the same question, I can just tell them to read the blog and then I'll be happy to clarify. The idea behind using one blog for all classes is also an exercise in sharing what a Psychology degree entails. We see it as a form of advisement because lower level students thinking of majoring in psychology or just getting their feet wet in the major get to see what upper level students are being asked to do. In addition, upper level students can share their experiences and give advice or encouragement to their peers.

Blogging as a Tool to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

If a main goal of your program or specific class is to develop critical thinking skills, then weblogs are a tool you should be using (Oravec, 2003). We have used blog posts on several occasions to engage students, and the result is often better than a traditional classroom assignment. For instance, rather than having students bring you an essay or article on a topic to class you can post it to your blog and have the entire class share their information with each other. Other than having the additional peer pressure to do well students must engage critical thinking skills. They need to search the web for relevant information on the topic. They must then evaluate the information for appropriateness and decide to share it with the class or continue searching. Once they have found information to share, they must then tell us how and why it is relevant, and share the URL with the class. If most of the class is successful at this assignment, then the end result is a valuable resource on a topic that can be archived and shared with future classes. As an incentive not to procrastinate on a critical thinking skill assignment, we usually require students to

make unique contributions. We are also able to prompt students for more information or ask them why they thought their contribution was relevant.

In addition, critical thinking skills can be developed as an extension of traditional classroom lectures or special speakers. As an illustration, on a recent CogBlog post students were asked about the Whorfian hypothesis in the context of politics and war. Below you'll find the original post and a few of the excellent responses:

Whorfian Hypothesis Revisited:

We discussed the Whorfian hypothesis the other day -- this is the idea that the language we use influences how we think about the world. Many examples can be found during both political campaigns and times of war. Post some examples

Posted by Wythe Whiting at 09:36 AM | Comments (21)

I would think that one of the most obvious examples of an attempt to use language to influence people's thoughts on a situation such as war would be the phrase "collateral damage". The phrase itself sounds so innocent and inconsequential that it is easy to disregard its profound implications. On a side note, I wonder if euphemisms for run of the mill jobs would count as support for the Whorfian Hypothesis. For example, merchandise packaging specialist as opposed to bag-boy.

Posted by: (student name withheld) at February 28, 2005 12:26 PM

I spoke in class the other day on how the idea of politeness and social structure are hard-wired into the Japanese language. In particular, there are special verbs that are used to honor someone else or to make yourself humble. I made a quick scan out of my Japanese textbook (Nakama 2, Hatasa et al.) which demonstrates how you use different verbs to mean, "to give" depending on whether the receiver is socially superior, equal, or below you.

<http://webpages.atlanticbb.net/~crangvy/ageru.jpg> ...

As you might imagine, this is quite difficult to render on the fly to us native English speakers, who are used to having only one verb for "to give" etc.

The point I am trying to make is that Japanese speakers must constantly be aware of their social order -- who is above them, who is below them, who is equal to them. Misappropriating someone's social rank -- mistaking your boss as your equal, for example -- is a huge social taboo. Ki o tsukete! (Be careful!)

We can easily apply the Whorfian Hypothesis here to say that the Japanese language has contributed to a keen awareness of social structure of the Japanese people. Some might deride this as "conformity." But as explained above, Japanese people have been taught through everyday speech to analyze their social relationships. But whether that analysis is on a conscious or subconscious level is perhaps a discussion for a different day.....

Posted by: (student name withheld) at March 1, 2005 04:45 PM

(Retrieved from:

http://bloggery.wlu.edu/whiting/archives/2005/02/whorfian_hypothesis_revisited.html#comments.)

As you can see, some students do an excellent job analyzing these questions and responding with critical thought, as well as creativity. (To read the rest of the comments go to: http://bloggery.wlu.edu/whiting/archives/2005/02/whorfian_hypothesis_revisited.html#comments). These examples from upper level students are stimulating, but even freshmen level students make extraordinary contributions. The context of the posting makes all the difference in the quality of the responses.

I also enjoy contributions from readers outside of the classroom. In addition to our commenting in each other's class blogs, we have several acquaintances, both within and outside of academics, which follow along and contribute to the discussion from time to time. We even have former students contributing.

Conclusions

Blogs are another avenue for establishing relationships with students and for providing a 24-hour a day, seven day a week classroom. They are an alternative way for us to communicate with students and to get to know them on a variety of levels. We have also observed that these blog interactions among students translate into more active classroom discussions on non-blog topics as students begin to develop confidence in their ideas. By posting information about your discipline and yourself, you can begin to create a community of discussion and interactivity.

If you are interested in developing a blog, a good place to begin would be looking at blogs within your own discipline (simply google blog and your content area). Chuck Robertson moderates two weblogs. The prof_chuck blog is general-purpose site for communicating with all students (http://www.livejournal.com/~prof_chuck/), and strategies for college success is an active blog-site when he teaches it in the fall (http://www.livejournal.com/community/ngcsu_sfcs/). Wythe Whiting moderates the CogBlog (<http://bloggery.wlu.edu/whiting/>), its main focus is on topics in cognitive psychology.

Alternatively you might find relevant information and inspiration at any of the sites listed below:

- Bloglines | wrichard's blogs (This site is a collection of academic blogs.)

<http://bloglines.com/public/wrichard>

- Professors who blog (Another collection of academic blogs.)

http://rhetorica.net/professors_who_blog.htm

- Weblog—ed—The read/write web in the classroom

<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>

- 42/1 An amateur exploration of teaching and learning with technology

<http://radio.weblogs.com/0100115/>

- The Savvy Technologist

<http://technosavvy.org/>

- Paul Stamatiou

<http://www.paulstamatiou.com/>

- The Cognition of Web2.0

http://prof_chuck.edublogs.org/

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