



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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USING BLOGS AS WRITING JOURNALS

One of the great pleasures of teaching composition is when students recognize their voices and no longer regard the essay as the enemy, but rather as an extension of their minds. When this happens, their writing tends to improve dramatically. They might still struggle with mechanical issues, or stumble with organizational bumps, but overall they tend to gain confidence and a sense of accomplishment, and begin to communicate.

Our task as instructors, especially in developmental or remedial courses, is to help our students get to that level of writing. We want them to understand that their opinions and insights are valuable. If they can share them over a cup of coffee with their friends, then they can do the same on paper.

How do we impart this to our students? Telling and showing them sometimes get results, but we must have them participate in the process. If you have looked out at a classroom full of novice writers and watched all their angst bubble to the surface as they stare at papers, play with pens or pencils, make false starts, and crumple papers, you see signs that they just cannot get started.

Free writing—sometimes called journaling—inspires the students to write without the stress of producing a polished piece. These free-writing experiences introduce students to writing for extended periods of time to help them use stream of consciousness as a tool for putting words on paper. Most of my students are afraid to put words down on paper. I am challenged by motivating them to write—to write anything at all as long as it is typed on a computer or handwritten.

At the same time, I see those very students text-messaging on their phones and checking their email in computer labs (sometimes, when they are supposed to be writing for me). If I point out that they are writing, I usually get a blank stare before they smile and acknowledge that they are writing, after all.

I decided to bring that technology into the classroom and meet the students at a place with which they are familiar and have skills that they use regularly. I took the idea of Internet-based communication and married

it to practical journaling by having students participate in a public journal through Web Logs, popularly called Blogs.

Blogs are public journals maintained on the Internet and available for reading and commentary by the worldwide audience of Internet users. The concept was originally used by a select group of people, but its popularity has grown. Today there are numerous free sources of hosting for these personal journals.

I use one of these free sources to maintain a class blog. I post a weekly question that asks students to consider either a current event, or an aspect of a topic raised in class, and they are expected to post their responses in the comment section of the blog. They are encouraged to respond to my prompt, read their peers' responses, and comment on those, too.

Most students jump right in and start posting immediately, but other students are shy and uncomfortable with the technology. Nevertheless, we continue to post. The idea starts catching on, especially when I model posting responses to others' posts. After a couple of weeks, students get reinforcement for their ideas. They are happy to have others validate their posts. Because the weekly questions are archived on the site, students can go back to earlier posts and get ideas, or make additional comments as confidence in their writing grows. On more than a few occasions, students have come to class and complained that I have not uploaded a new question yet.

It becomes a true writing forum where, if the instructor introduces writing topics, the students naturally brainstorm, add their thoughts, and refine those thoughts. Somehow, students feel free to respond to the public nature of the class blog. It mimics some of the current trends for youth such as Facebook or MySpace, so it is a format that is familiar to many students.

There are many options for instructors. The first step is to set up the blog site. I use Blogger.com, powered by Google; however, there are other free sites that are popular with youth, such as livejournal.com or xanga.com. These blogging sites offer templates that are ready to go, so the instructor does not need to write code, just choose a format that is pleasing.



As the blog administrator, the instructor also has control over the content. I have never had to delete an inappropriate post, but I have the security of knowing that I can if the need arises. During the process of introducing the blog to the class, however, I have had to delete duplicate posts or abandoned posts because students exited the site without logging out properly. As administrator, it gives me the flexibility to clean up while students learn to maneuver within the site. It also allows me to limit the access to the site so that I can keep it relatively private (by sharing the web address only with the class).

I cannot imagine teaching an introductory writing class without this tool. Students come to love it because the class blog validates their voices. While it does not solve their writing challenges, it gives them the *confidence* to write, and that is what we want to achieve in entry-level courses.

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TOOTING OUR HORNS

As with most admissions offices, things get really hectic around the beginning of each semester—thank goodness! Without applicants, there would not be a need for Admission Office personnel. Applicants become students. Most students are eligible for some type of financial aid. Without students, there would be no need for financial aid personnel. Students pay a student activity fee; without students there would be no need for student services personnel. Without students, we would not need faculty. Faculty help students become empowered adults who, hopefully, will leave our institution and give back to society.

Students are not a burden. They are customers who help keep our business open. It is our responsibility as facilitators of an educational system to ensure that they are treated fairly and with respect.

At Bainbridge College, the admissions office personnel live by this code. Each applicant who walks in our door is greeted with a friendly smile in a warm atmosphere. Doors to all offices in our department are always open—no matter how busy we are. Daily, I am told by someone—another staff, student, or faculty—how much he/she appreciates the kindness and support of the fine folks in admissions. As Director of Admissions and Registrar, I am proud of my staff and their attitude toward students, staff, and faculty. So proud, in fact, that I not only “toot their horn,” but I let them “toot their own horns.”

I purchased horns for all the staff members in my office, and every time they assist someone, they are to “blow their horn.” If I notice something warrants horn blowing, I toot my own horn! Now, the horns are tooting all the time. Not only does that give the staff a laugh, but it brings smiles to those they help. It also reminds the other staff that if they have not blown their horn in the last 30 minutes, a smile is missing.

Thank you all for being who you are and for what you do for students! I have extra horns if you need to toot someone.

Connie B. Snyder, *Director of Admissions and Records*

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