Blogging for Beginners: Recording a Semester of Teaching Online

In creating a daily digital diary, I documented what it was like to teach a fully online teaching load. I blogged for 116 days during the 16-week spring 2016 semester, recording the challenges, successes, and unpredictable events that occur while teaching in a virtual environment. The blog captured anecdotes regarding a variety of technology-related topics, including college policy, student access, and course design.

I was the first English faculty member our department had assigned a completely online teaching load. While I wasn't required to produce a blog about my online teaching experience, choosing to archive each day was a way to explore and extend professional discourse within our discipline. So, I dove head first into blogging and the content flowed.

This blogging project grew out of an article I published in 2015, entitled *Using a Blog Throughout a Research Writing Course*, for Online Writing Instruction (OWI) Open Resource, in which I documented having a course blog for my students to collect and reflect on research material throughout the course. The blog acted in the way a physical research portfolio might, but offered the digital equivalent, which was ideal for use in an entirely online class setting. However, the most remarkable use of the blog was that it opened the lines of communication and reinforced my commitment to encourage group interaction within the class.

After successfully establishing a course blog, I developed my own blog to connect a professional writing initiative with a personal self-reflection of my teaching philosophy. There are many blogging sites available, including Weebly, Blogger, Penzu, Wix, and more, but I taught myself how to use WordPress—a free blogging site with intuitive customizable features—to create and format a self-hosted blog. I chose the blog name *Teaching Writing Online* to expand my audience to faculty, students, and staff. The blog was a behind-the-scenes look at teaching online, while also carrying out a rigorous daily blog publishing schedule. My mantra was, "Every day another line." Or, as Anne Lamott said in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, "Don't look at your feet to see if you are doing it right. Just dance."

My blogging framework was informed by Karen Swan's constructivist approach to online learning, but one particular influence was the essayist and screenwriter Nora Ephron, who used to say to her family and friends, "Everything is copy." I was also inspired by Kirin Narayan's *Alive in the Writing*, in which she refers to ethnography as consciously spending time to explore oneself. Narayan does this by producing one handwritten page each morning:

> *This page could be about anything at all, and is above all a way to be with myself. I find that this solitary, inward-turning writing practice helps me sort through thoughts, images, feelings, stories. Finding words for the fluctuating welter of each day's inner themes can grant me a more limber and confident voice for writing that faces outward, as a performance for others. (88)*

I found that my daily blog served the same function. My blog invited perspective and analysis of how and why we teach, and I had a lot to say every day I logged on. I captured some of the nuances of teaching online and began to find patterns as my ideas emerged. In my daily posts, I examined student-teacher interaction online, classroom community online, motivation online, and frustration online. How was this behavior different than what we experience in a traditional face-to-face classroom? Were there notable differences? How could we identify those differences and create a successful environment for learning and teaching online?

Facilitating Dialog Online

Although I had much to say in my blog, launching a public web presence was daunting and required a learning curve. I discovered the traditional rules of composition did not apply in blogging. Blog posts generally include short paragraphs with little regard to grammar or mechanics—bullet points, graphics, and lists are common and encouraged. Because blogs appear on screen, many readers are likely to skim information, absorbing points of reference in a short amount of time. But many of my blog posts were lengthy; I had to adapt to a completely different approach to writing, thinking in chunks of 700-1,000 words. It took time to find a rhythm; in daily blogging I had to be consistent, not sporadic. I committed to writing the blog and embraced the discipline of writing every day. Balancing the pace of blogging in recording online teaching life was a productive, innovative activity that I highly recommend. It is a unique systematic practice of tuning into teaching responsibilities and making it a permanent record online.

Engaging in this digital diary reminded me of the Verizon cell phone company commercials that tout the catchphrase, "Can you hear me now?" When I first published the blog on WordPress, I wondered what

impact it would have. I posted each day, illustrating examples of teaching online. I wanted the blog to be a useful resource for faculty and students. My goal was to create and compile a digital archive—to distill the mass information about technology into a tailored version for our community college.

The results of maintaining a daily blog soon became clear. This blog provided a forum for the multiplicity of voices discussing how and why we use computer technology to benefit the teaching and learning process. Tracking the number of views and broadening the blog platform to social media like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter can invite more voices to participate. I found that blogging was a way to release what we do on our virtual journey and discover how it resonates with others. For example, my post for Day 43, "Excuses, Excuses," struck a chord with many viewers. I blogged about gathering a list of eclectic excuses for students missing deadlines or not submitting online assignments throughout the semester. The blog was re-posted on our faculty's Facebook group page, and I received a positive response in sharing anonymous student excuses. My colleagues stopped me in the hallway after reading my blog and we brainstormed ways to possibly curb excuses in the future by modifying our assignments and revisiting deadlines. We agreed on yielding to students with a combination of guidelines and grace. Additionally, Day 71's "Standardized Tests" blog post stirred up dialog at my institution, the College of DuPage. Our college had adopted a new online placement test, Accuplacer, and faculty were in the beginning stages of analyzing new cut scores, finding test practice websites for our students, and closely looking at how this test could possibly align with our curriculum. Once again, the blog sparked a virtual roundtable of opinions and actively moved the conversation.

Finding a Virtual Voice

One of the biggest challenges I faced when creating the blog was finding my voice. I was inspired by Scot Warnock's blog, *Online Writing Teacher*, in which he struggled with the kind of persona he wanted to project as an online teacher. He echoed Peter Elbow who once said that real voice has the power to make you pay attention and understand. Blogging every day created a raw sense of vulnerability and openness to the public eye. Who would read my blog? Why would they read my blog? Would we share similar interests in seeking innovation in online instruction? These questions informed my teaching of the writing process. I looked at word choice, crafting sentences, and developing paragraphs with new eyes. I told my students about struggling to play with words on the screen. They especially liked that I admitted that we were the same in that way—we all work to gather ideas and put them out into the world.

I discovered that my blog was categorized into two voices: my academic voice and my personal voice. During the first 30 days of blogging, my academic voice was front and center. I wrote from a buttoned-up-tweed-suit style, logging class roster information and college online policies. Eventually, I developed a unique message to share. In fact, on Day 44, in a blog titled "Control, Alt, Delete: Reset is Best," my following and number of views spiked. I received my first comment on my blog: it was about creating a blank slate and starting over.

Conclusion

By creating this blog, I feel more confident in sharing my experience with students about the writing process, the challenges and successes in using technology, and the educational journey we take together. Each day I wrote the blog, my voice was amplified. I broke into the 100th day's blog post with a renewed energy for creating a deep and meaningful learning experience.

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