

# Reflecting, Writing, and Responding: Reasons Students Blog

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## **Abstract**

Faculty and students are recognizing blogging's learning potential, including the chance to practice writing, reflect on others' thinking, and respond to critical analyses of one's own work. In this paper, a graduate student explores the campus "blogosphere" to discover who is blogging and what they are posting, as well as how faculty are using blogs in their courses and the results they are seeing.

## Reasons Students Blog

I pause, my fingers resting on the keys, and reread what I just typed. *It's become clear in the last week or so that the "Irish problem," as my politics professor calls it, could be summed up in one word....* I bite my lip and sink back into my chair in the library computer lab at the University of Ulster. Behind me, six rows of students click away at their keyboards, writing papers, checking MySpace, and chatting with friends. The cursor on my screen blinks impatiently, waiting for me to continue. Surely my fellow students aren't peering over my shoulder, curious to see what the American—arrived just a few weeks earlier in their country—has to say in her graduate school blog about Irish history. But what if they are? Or worse, what if one of my professors stumbles across my rudimentary analysis, posted exactly three weeks—six class sessions—into my master's program?

As the scenarios race through my mind, my anxieties grow, and I click "Save" on the my blog's dashboard. I promise myself that one day soon I will feel comfortable enough to hit "Update" instead, sharing my post with anyone who read my blog.

My nervousness and hesitation reveal something that professors—and students—at colleges and universities around the world are discovering: posting information online makes the author think twice about its content and perception. What would my Irish classmates make of my musings? What if a knowledgeable reader came across my blog and pointed out my amateurish assumptions? Could I really be sure of any of the assertions I was about to make?

Despite frequent trips to the library and the time spent deliberating over the briefest phrase or simplest piece of diction, I was hooked on blogging the moment I set mine up. I can't remember the first time I stumbled across a blog, and I doubt I would have recognized it as such if I found my way there from a search engine, but I first considered starting a blog when I left for a year of graduate school in Northern Ireland. As I sat down to send my first e-mail with an Irish IP address, a striking Web page on my roommate's computer caught my eye.

"What's that?" I asked as he typed away.

"It's a blog," he said, gesturing to various features of the page. "I set it up for my family to keep up with my trip. And it's free."

With his help, I set up my own page ([cariewindham.blogspot.com](http://cariewindham.blogspot.com)) and typed my first message to friends and family. Over the succeeding weeks, my blog became my journal, my family newsletter, my therapy session, my creative release, and my photo album. I posted funny stories, pictures from my travels, and any rambling that my studies or my life in Ireland might inspire. Anything I might otherwise have sent as an e-mail seemed perfectly acceptable as a blog post. While I couldn't be sure how many people read it, I was delighted to learn that my family, their friends, and even friends' co-workers had subscribed to my blog. For them, it was a window into my life, a chance to escape their worlds and take a journey into mine. For me, it was a chance to flex my writing muscles and examine the events happening around me. Each time I wrote, I took a moment to process what had happened that day and reflect on the people I had met or the sights I had seen. Some days, I sat down to bang out a strong rebuke of someone who had done something I found inappropriate, but by the time I began typing, I found myself instead trying to understand that person's actions and learn some lesson from the experience.

Not surprisingly, personal blogs, those that resemble online journals, dominated a recent survey of blogging by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (<http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf>). Based on the telephone survey, Pew estimated that about 8 percent of Americans keep a

blog, while nearly 40 percent regularly read blogs. The majority of those blogging their lives or their views are not published authors or even accomplished writers. Instead, the “blogosphere” is opening up a new group of writers and creators. In the Pew survey, more than half of bloggers (54 percent) were between the ages of 18 and 29. In a 2006 study of undergraduate students by the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERS0607/ERS06074.pdf>), more than a quarter of respondents reported that they blogged, though less than 10 percent reported using blogs in an academic setting.

With my blog analysis of Irish history on hold, I delve into the campus blogosphere to find out who *is* blogging on campus and what they’re posting. More important, I want to know how faculty are using blogs in the classroom and what results, if any, they are starting to see.

### Bloggling “Just Because”: Social Experiments and Campus Rivalries

North Carolina State University student Bernard Thomas was crossing the campus “Brickyard” when a red-and-white banner hanging from the library stairs caught his attention: Wolfblogs: [blogs.lib.ncsu.edu](http://blogs.lib.ncsu.edu). Thomas admits that keeping a blog never really crossed his mind. But when he read the banner, he remembered hearing that people sometimes kept blogs as personal journals. A rabid Wolfpack fan, he thought that blogging might be a fun way to talk about ACC football and other sports.

Since creating his blog, called For the Life of Me: Life on the Fence, Thomas confesses that things haven’t really progressed like he thought they would. These days, anything—and anyone—is fair game as a blog topic, from football rivals to a columnist in the student newspaper. Sometimes his page reports more than 100 hits, and he has no clue where all of them come from (although he admits that he sometimes clicks on his blog 10 times a day to up the count).

Thomas is a blogger “just because.” Taking advantage of a campus-wide infrastructure called Wolfblogs that allows students to maintain their personal blogs on university Web space, he keeps posting because a blog gives him a place to share stories, entertain his friends, or get feedback from readers. In a month, he might blog about Broomball, Jessica Rabbit, campus politics, or the Masters Golf Tournament. And he’s not beyond calling out someone who comments on one of his blog posts.

“I’m always trying to get people to say something and interact,” he says.

Students at campuses nationwide are interacting in the same ways. Like Wolfblogs at NC State, the University of Minnesota hosts UThink, and Case Western University hosts Blogs@Case. In each case, the university site offers tours of blogging features, tips for blogging, and ideas for integrating other platforms, such as tagging with [del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us) or photo sharing with Flickr. The university-hosted blogging system drew Thomas into the process, but for students already interested in blogging, signing on to university Web space addresses some of the fears associated with registering with an off-site host. University sites seem safe, free from hidden fees or online scams. Topher McCulloch took advantage of UThink to replace e-mail club announcements about the Honors Student Association with blog posts. “When you look at all the e-mails that are sent out these days, it gets really annoying. You just start deleting them,” McCulloch says. Members now log in to a central blog to read announcements, respond to requests for information, and vote on items such as a club motto or a logo.

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Student newspapers were some of the early blog pioneers on campus, reflecting an industry shift toward more online content. *The Orion* at California State University, Chico, began blogging three years ago, leading the pack for college journalists. These days, blogs are managed by Zuri Berry, the newspaper's online editor. In the blogs, campus journalists write about news that might not be included in the printed version. Or they might share behind-the-scenes stories from campus events or athletic games. The sky is the limit, Berry says, as long as students respect copyright laws and keep their entries clean and free of libel.

Berry blogged from the NCAA women's basketball tournament last year when Chico went to the Elite Eight. Besides game coverage, he tried to capture the pulse of the city, and for a few days, editors allowed him to dominate the blog. The blog gave readers a chance to read more than what they might see on the printed page. "Blogging is definitely 'citizen journalism,'" Berry says. "It gives a wider array of material for our readers to give feedback to. They can post comments or get commented on. It's a very rewarding thing in itself."

One of his most popular postings, about the 49ers leaving San Francisco, garnered 14 comments. Because of the blog, he could write about the news as it happened instead of waiting for the print edition days later. But he says that he and other writers also like the fact that blogging gives them a chance to move outside the news and just use their opinions to write about their interests. "To have that outlet—as a writer, there's nothing better," he says.

For aspiring writers, blogging offers a free and accessible platform for sharing their writing and their voice. Marie Cannizzaro started *StanfordSingle.com* when she wanted to practice her writing skills. That, and—suddenly single herself—she wanted to connect with classmates to dish about life as a single girl on the California campus. "I wanted to find people who were interested in talking about dating and why it doesn't exist at Stanford," Cannizzaro says. The conversation grew when the *Stanford Daily* picked up her blog as a regular column. Using *Sex and the City*-esque wit and charm, she blogged about pickup lines, marriage proposals (not her own), dates gone disastrously wrong, and the strange culture of nondating that existed at Stanford. One of her proudest moments occurred when she walked into a party and a guest identified her as "Stanford Single."

After graduating, the blog's success helped her decide to ditch her background in biotechnology in favor of a writing career. The blog led to a freelance assignment and an internship with the campus alumni magazine and then a career as a freelance journalist. "I'm still amazed at how many people Google my name and read the blog," she says. It's a risk for any job applicant, but, Cannizzaro says, as a writer it paid off.

Jessica Rabbit, botched pickup lines, women's basketball, and Honors Student Association news have one thing in common: they found their outlet in blogging. For students who blog "just because," the medium provides a forum for interaction with other students, an outlet for creative expression, and a way to reach beyond their normal network or their usual audience.

## Creating E-Community: Blogs as a Class Forum

In Bill Endres's freshman composition class at the University of Arizona, students learn about literary devices each day in class. Afterward, he requires that students post a paragraph response to the class blog, perhaps using the device or just responding to a class debate. Veronica Proctor confesses that she rolled her eyes when she heard about the blogging component of the course. She's not a big fan of writing or English, and the thought of having to write a post each week was not exactly enticing.

To her surprise, Proctor discovered that the paragraph-long responses weren't much different from the mile-a-minute typing she did each day communicating with her friends using e-mail and instant messaging. The blog posts didn't take very long, calming her worry that the exercises would be boring and monotonous. Proctor found that she actually liked the class blog. "It was so easy, it took me two seconds," she says. "We could also read other people's stuff, and that was cool. The views were really different. It was interesting to see the spectrum of the class and how other people interpreted things."

Enabling class interaction has spawned many classroom blogs as forums for learning. Students might log into a "mother blog" for class announcements or postings from the professor about assignments. Or, as in Proctor's class, they might be required to post assignments on the blog so they can read and comment on their classmates' work. The benefits, according to students and faculty, are the openness and the chance to interact with their peers. It's also nice to have class discussions and assignments saved in a central location so that students can return to the blog when exams or final papers loom.

Tom Nelson, a graduate student instructor at the University of Texas, added class blogs to his courses in 2003 and has used them in a variety of formats. Initially, the site was a class forum—a place to post course announcements and summaries of his lectures from class. He would also post prompts so that students could respond. Sometimes, he posted follow-ups to discussion in class. As an instructor, Nelson says that the blog helps him stay engaged with the course. He has to post each day, and it helps maintain a record of where the class is headed. Occasionally, students will dispute his own recaps, stating that they got something different out of the class that day. "For me, that's been the big benefit."

The most important thing, he says, is to create a link between the class and the blog. He makes a point to bring up the blog during face-to-face time and to reference specific postings. "You've got to keep up with what people are posting," he says. "I wouldn't have it just be something you announce and go over and then don't mention again for several weeks."

## A Journal for All to See: Letting Students Blog Their Personal Experiences

In her first posting to her blog "Cyberia," Elizabeth Geballe, a student at Middlebury College in Vermont, wrote about her upcoming self-imposed exile:

Already, I am ready. When I plan my year in Siberia, I plan my conception as an artist. After all, artists suffer. So do Russians. Artists are misunderstood and alone. As I will be. Forced to live off myself in self-imposed exile. A la James Joyce. How can I explain that I want to suffer? That I want to walk the streets, enshrouded in the sky's cold blanket, crying to myself? In the streets, people will be severe. They won't smile reassuringly as I pass, acknowledging my right to happiness. And what kind of a pursuit is that? Happiness? I have to punish myself. But it will be sadly beautiful to walk wet streets, damp and vulnerable.

Her outlet to the English-speaking world was a personal blog, part of a campus-wide Blogging the World project led by Barbara Ganley. After a 40-minute bus ride to the nearest Internet café, Geballe could read her professor's blog, browse the blogs of other students abroad, and post her own entries about her adjustment to life in Siberia. In an early entry, she writes about her frustrations learning and using Russian:

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I've clung to my moments in the study abroad office, the college bookstore, and at my computer reading e-mails. Do you know how much we take mother tongues for granted? Every time I speak, I'm backed into a corner. Every time I open my mouth to tell a joke, a story, ask a question, utter one comment, I'm short a word. Or more. I haven't found a new identity, it's just that my old one's being compressed into a smallish box of clichés and childlike reactions. Hand clapping, thumbs up or down, pointer fingers and middle fingers are all a welcome relief. And I won't begin describing phone calls.

Her entries are lyrical and reflective. She didn't want them to be recitations of the day's events—mere descriptions of the things she did and the people she saw. Instead, she processes the community around her. "I think having a blogs makes you much more aware," she says. "Like little conversations on the street. You think about them, reflect upon them, and write about them." As she wrote, Geballe says she was always aware of her audience and the fact that others would be reading her work. "It gave me a sense of authority that you don't get writing in a journal."

For students abroad or engaged in out-of-classroom experiences, blogs are an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to process their interactions. Students say that the public nature of the Internet makes them think carefully about what they might be posting before committing it to the Web. That accountability is one of the things that impresses Laurie Morrison, a PhD candidate in English at the University of Arizona who works as a writing coordinator for the Office of Minority Affairs in the College of Medicine. This semester, she's working with Fostering and Achieving Cultural Equity and Sensitivity (FACES), an elite internship program for health sciences students. The students had access to controversial speakers and were having transformative experiences in their clinics, and Morrison wanted to make reflection an integral part of the course. The backbone of the course is a personal journal that students are asked to keep. Traditionally, the students maintained paper journals and turned them in to the professor to read.

Morrison decided to try blogging to reduce the time spent reading the journals and to encourage the students to read and comment on their classmates' experiences. To get things started, the class went to the computer lab and learned the basics for posting and responding to a blog entry. This semester, students were required to post two entries each week—one following their clinical work and another following the speaker—and to respond to their classmates' blogs five times throughout the semester. Even so, one student still turned her assignment in as a hard copy for the first week.

Britni Mollihan admits that she wasn't sure how she felt about the blogs when the class began. She's a math and science student, she says, not a writer, and she wasn't entirely comfortable having her classmates read her writing. As the class progressed, however, she discovered that rather than increasing the pressure, blogging relieved it. "With [a blog], you get feedback from your fellow classmates, and you can look at what's going on in their world," she says. "It has more of a creative feel. I don't feel as pressured to make a perfect paper." She really likes reading her classmates' blogs to hear about what they are seeing or what they think about a particular speaker. And it helps, she says, that Morrison doesn't interfere too much. Morrison might encourage someone to explain a situation or use concrete examples, but overall, she lets the students express themselves on their own.

As an instructor, Morrison has been "blown away." She continues, "Their entries have a lot of personality. Some students just go so far above the requirements. I told them that each blog

should be the equivalent of one double-spaced page, but some of them just write and write every week.”

Whether it’s reaching out from a semester abroad or sharing a day in the emergency room, personal blogs enable students to share their experiences with classmates while encouraging bloggers to reflect on their writing before making it public.

## Learning Through Doing: Using Blogs to Practice Language and Composition

When Evie Levine returned to classes at Oberlin College after a semester abroad in Mexico, she knew that her Spanish speaking skills would start slipping away if she didn’t find a way to immerse herself in the language. She signed up for a Spanish Communications class to keep her skills alive. In the course, students were required to post their assignments and comments—entirely in Spanish—to a mother blog and to maintain their own Spanish-language blogs as part of a final assignment. Inspired by her time in Mexico, Levine explored the femicides, the murder of more than 400 women in Mexico over a 10-year period. Using interviews and research, she routinely posted her findings and thoughts. Writing about the femicides required vocabulary not routinely found on the pages of a Spanish textbook. “I had to teach myself and learn vocabulary that I would never have to know otherwise,” she says.

By the end, she wasn’t just running Spanish drills in her notebook. She was interacting with Spanish-speaking people from Mexico to Argentina, routinely responding to her classmates in Spanish, and even chatting with Spanish speakers abroad over Skype. One of the biggest advantages was the way that the blog allowed her to use her Spanish to interact with people outside her class. After she finished blogging, the mother of a femicide victim wrote to her asking for help. A human rights publication asked to use her photos, and readers frequently asked where they could learn more or simply, How did this happen? The experience made her language studies jump off the page. “In a textbook, you flip and read something about Argentine culture. We had the opportunity to talk to students our age about anything we wanted,” she says.

It helped that students had to use particular dialects and tenses. The professor frequently commented about their use of Spanish grammar to keep them on their toes. Besides maintaining their own blogs, students were required to read and respond to their classmates’ posting on the mother blog. Although it was time-consuming, Levine says the experience was valuable: “It was worth it so that I could maintain my Spanish skills.”

Maite Correa, a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona, uses blogs so that students in her 300-level Spanish course can get extra practice using Spanish informally. She posts a topic or two each week, and the students are required to comment once a week. Correa likes the fact that the blog emphasizes that language can be used differently in different settings. “I think it helps them just to realize you have one register depending on what you do,” she says. “If you’re talking to your friends, you use informal because if you use formal, they’re going to laugh at you.”

It’s not just foreign languages, either. David Blakesley, an English professor at Purdue University in Indiana, integrates blogs into his classes so that students can get practical experience communicating and writing. “They get a lot of experience with it. They learn how to keep discussions going, how to document sources,” he says. “There’s a tendency to think that you don’t have to cite sources when you’re doing an informal blog thread.”

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At the start of the semester, the classes discuss rules for interaction. An excerpt from the page on Responding in Networked Communications advises:

- Read through all the messages in a particular thread before posting a response.
- Provide enough context in your message (by quoting from a previous post, for example) so that all readers understand what you're responding to or what you're proposing.
- Return frequently to the board or forum to see how others have responded to your post or how the thread has continued.

The idea, he says, is to give students practice writing and responding. The more they write, the more comfortable they become. By the end of the semester, students have logged pages of text and, he hopes, critically considered how to communicate in an online forum.

## If I Were in Charge: Tips for Faculty

- **Think about privacy—students might not:** NC State's Thomas laughs when he says that he won't be telling his mom about his blog anytime soon. When it comes to posting to his personal site, he says that privacy isn't really a concern. He did try to shield his friends' identities in the early days by assigning fake names, but these days he keeps it up only because they like the pseudonyms. For the many students who routinely post their whereabouts on IM away messages and update their relationship status on their Facebook profiles, the public nature of a blog may not trigger questions about privacy and public persona. It's important to discuss how students might want to guard their online identity—in class and in their personal lives.
- **Create rules:** Students might blog on their Facebook pages or post their daily musings, but few stop to think about what or how they should post. Purdue's Blakesley lets his students make their own guidelines and regulations at the start of the course. They start a conversation about format and style, and they talk about common courtesy and Web etiquette. "For example, how do you kill a discussion?" Blakesley says. "They don't do it on purpose. This is a whole new dynamic for them." There are no universal rules to blog posting, Blakesley says, so it's an important exercise for the students to take time to consider the format and what rules should apply. By stating the guidelines at the start, they can return to those discussions as the course requires it.
- **Don't assume:** McColluch warns that "the computer literacy of students isn't as high as some professors might expect." Besides maintaining a blog for the Honors Student Association at the University of Minnesota, he has used blogs in a graphic design course. "Some people had never made a link before, and that seemed surprising," he says. Students would get frustrated when postings didn't work or when the process was difficult. Professors reported the most success when students were required to sit through a session in the computer lab to learn how to post. Don't expect students to fess up if they're feeling lost. It's better to start everyone on the same level and keep FAQs or online tutorials handy if they get off track sitting at their own computers.
- **Be realistic:** It might be tempting to require long postings every day or to ask students to comment on every class blog, but it's better to think realistically about what students can—and want to—handle. "Know that students might not necessarily be interested in reading all these posts," says McColluch. "They probably see it as homework and not some new thing." For her FACES internship students, Morrison required that they post to their classmates' blogs at least five times during the semester, allowing students to post when an entry sparked their interest or when their other course load was light.

- **Beware the grammar wars:** Students are split when it comes to grammar and blogging. Mollihan argues that faculty should grade on content and reflection, not format or grammar. “I wouldn’t try to make it like an essay,” she says. “I would keep it more lax and up to the student’s creativity level.” But Levine believes that faculty should not lose sight of correct grammar. The difference may be the types of blogs. For Levine, blogging was a way to demonstrate and use Spanish skills, making professor feedback on grammar a central component of the blog. The bottom line is to be clear about expectations for format and grammar. Make class rules, and discuss how writing for the Web might be different from other media.
- **Establish comment rules:** Should faculty be involved? Opinions differ among students, but they agree that if faculty are involved, it shouldn’t be in a way that inhibits student expression. Geballe liked the fact that her creative writing professor stayed away from the class blog. The professor told students that if she commented on a student’s writing, the rest of the students would be more likely to accept her opinion and not form their own. Geballe said she always knew the professor was following the blog, but it was nice that the students were in charge. Likewise, Mollihan appreciated that instead of saying whether students were right or wrong, her professor would ask for more details. When Mollihan wrote that a campus speaker made her uncomfortable, the instructor asked her to give examples of what made her uncomfortable. Getting that kind of feedback was great, Mollihan says.
- **Make it relevant:** Asking students simply to post to their blogs when they feel inspired won’t cut it, says Morrison. “If it’s going to [encourage interaction and critical thinking], it has to be a required, consistent element,” she says. For class blogs, students will stop accessing the mother blog if new information is not posted regularly. If the blog isn’t mentioned in class, students put less emphasis on its worth and may stop posting. It’s important to make expectations clear and to encourage interaction and participation by linking the blog to course goals or mentioning it in class.
- **Connect the dots:** Proctor appreciated her professor’s reading of blog entries in class to encourage discussion. The simple act created a bridge between the online environment and the face-to-face course. Students knew that someone was reading their work and that it mattered in the overall course design.
- **Find the secrets to participation:** Students agree that they aren’t likely to commit to blog posting if there’s nothing in it for them. When Nelson added a blog to his composition class, he quickly learned that some students might post early in the semester, but, if no one else does, they think that it’s uncool and stop posting. “If you require it, you get more participation, but it’s never quite as interesting,” he says. He tried different iterations of the blog to see which might encourage the most interaction. The best response came, he says, when he created small groups of students and asked them to maintain a group blog around topics of interest. It might be sports, food, or entertainment. “It’s not related to boring old stuff,” he said. “It’s stuff you’re interested in.” Most agree that requiring posting is important for success, but faculty should consider how to tailor blogs to student interests so that commenting moves beyond homework.
- **Let things evolve:** When Nelson experimented with group blogs, he set aside a class period in the middle of the course so the students could come together and discuss the blogs’ success. Afterward, he says he got much better participation from the students. “They care to have their own role in defining what it is and what it’s for,” he says.

### Conclusions

Students aren't only vocal within the comfort of their own blogs—most are also more than willing to point out what works and what doesn't work when it comes to class integration. A lack of blogging experience does not keep students from jumping on board, but the proliferation of blogs on the Web also won't guarantee adoption and pedagogical success. Professors report that it is sometimes difficult to get meaningful interaction, and students admit they sometimes find blogs time-consuming. Those that succeed appear to rely on the idea that blogging is not a perfected art. Students and faculty alike should continue to discuss its pedagogical use so the blog can evolve to enhance course goals.

For students, the benefits to blogging are clear:

- The chance to practice writing, whether in English or a foreign language
- The opportunity to see what their classmates are posting and to respond to their work
- The ability to access and turn in assignments, no matter the hour or location
- The chance to creatively control their own blog or blog postings in an informal setting
- The opportunity to interact with other students through comment mechanisms

In terms of teaching and learning, a number of concrete benefits of blogging are evident. Blogs allow students to review the evolution of a course by scrolling through past blog posts. Blogs also teach students how to interact in an online environment, including rules for posting and commenting and the basic skills necessary to maintain a discussion. The public nature of the blog encourages deeper reflection before posting. Blog postings often spark debate online and in class, encouraging more class discussion, and students can use blogs to showcase their experiences and opinions to the outside world, expanding the classroom to other members of the community.

In the end, most students, even eye-rolling Veronica Proctor, find blogs to be a useful part of the curriculum. Satisfaction is mainly based on the time required compared to the benefits gained, and blogs that allow students to explore their own interests or harness their creativity are generally more widely embraced. The bottom line, students say, is to harness blogs to encourage more interaction. As Geballe says, "Blogs are definitely an opportunity to open the windows of communication."