

*See blogging from the student perspective in this section of the guide. In "Reflecting, Writing, and Responding: Reasons Students Blog," graduate student Carie Windham discusses her own involvement with blogging and the views of other students. In addition, Justin Crawford talks about the launch of a student-run campus news blog in "The Campus Press Blogs."*

## Reflecting, Writing, and Responding: Reasons Students Blog

**By Carie Windham, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland**

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."

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*This section is part of the **EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Discovery Tool: Guide to Blogging**. The guide is designed to help you explore blogging's potential and limitations, where it fits in the broader context of teaching and learning in higher education, and how you might approach implementation. Each section can be used independently to accomplish specific goals, or all units can be used together for a comprehensive process guide. Find the complete Guide to Blogging at [www.educause.edu/GuideToBlogging](http://www.educause.edu/GuideToBlogging).*

**ELI Discovery Tools** are practical resources designed to support the development and implementation of teaching, learning, and technology projects on campus. They are available to ELI members only.

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With his help, I set up my own page (<http://cariwindham.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 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.

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:

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.”

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

## What do students think?

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.”

## The Campus Press Blogs

By Justin Crawford, University of Colorado, Boulder

Blogs. Lately, this overloaded term seems to be on the tip of every tongue. Media professionals wonder how blogs will affect the bottom line. Politicians wonder how blogs will alter their communication strategies. Educators wonder how blogs will change campus life. And students? Well, students are already blogging, reading blogs, and assimilating the cultural changes wrought by blog technology. At the University of Colorado, Boulder, we recently dived headlong into this phenomenon with an experiment at our student newspaper, *The Campus Press*.

*The Campus Press Blogs* started as my professional project, the final test required of a Master's candidate in CU's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. I proposed that I would become a publisher and product manager, adding blogs to the Web site of the student newspaper, which was itself transitioning from a weekly print paper to an online daily. I would invite all members of the university community to apply to be bloggers and contribute their original content to the site. I would write a paper about it, and, if they deemed this project worthy, my advisers would award me a degree.

I never expected the blogs to draw more audience than the paper itself, and I certainly never expected an order from the dean to halt publication. But the blogs surprised us all.

Before I go too far, I should explain some context and terminology. *To blog* generally means to write content in a personal, conversational tone and to publish it online immediately in reverse-chronological order. Gawker Media, a company that produces several commercially successful blogs, adds some cultural context to that bare-bones definition. Gawker's Frequently Asked Questions section says, "We have no pretensions to objectivity—no editorial board, no assigning editor, and no delays. We publish in real time. Weblogs are biased, personal, and funky."

Blogs are part of a digital publication phenomenon best described by the term *social media*. This is the popular embodiment of the worldwide conversation that was hyped during the 1990s Internet boom. A decade later, thanks to free, open source technology, almost anyone with a personal computer and an Internet connection can instantly be a thought leader, a publisher, a contributor, a teacher, or a critic. Social media describes a many-to-many, conversational, indexable, archived library of online content that is growing every day through the contributions of countless individuals, including tens of millions of bloggers. Clearly, the technology enabling social media changes the way we receive content. But it also changes who produces, directs, and owns content and how that content is used. Therefore, social media and associated technologies have the potential to impact any field whose primary product is information.

The media business was at the front of my mind when I started this project, but, viewing it in retrospect, I think the project's outcomes are every bit as relevant to educators. After all, universities are in the business of disseminating valuable information, and the revolution that is transforming our communication mechanisms will certainly leave an imprint on higher education.

But last December I had more immediate concerns, such as getting the proverbial ball rolling on this blog project.

I made contact with key individuals at the journalism school, including Colin Lingle and Daniel Schaefer, graduate students with similar interests, and Michelle Fulcher, faculty adviser for *The Campus Press*. Together we formed a new media working group that would meet and discuss the blogs and other new media subjects throughout the semester. With their help, I secured the enthusiastic support of Andrew Villegas, executive editor of *The Campus Press*.



The holiday season came and went. In January, I prepared a detailed budget and applied for a grant to cover our expenses for software and promotion. I also sent the budget to Paul Voakes,

dean of the journalism school, and he agreed to help with expenses beyond the grant. In the end, this support was vital because the grant did not come through.

I started investigating blog technologies. There are hundreds available, but only a handful met my criteria. I wanted an inexpensive, customizable, well-supported, and well-documented tool with multi-blogger and commenter capabilities. I soon settled on Drupal (<http://drupal.org/>), a general-purpose, open-source, free content management system written in a programming language called PHP. Drupal is a popular, industrial-strength framework for building content-heavy interactive applications.

In early February, I stood up at the weekly meeting of the editors of *The Campus Press* and asked them to lend me their brand, give me space on their servers, and allow me to publish a new kind of content under their name. I also asked for volunteers to help me manage the product. This was a critical moment. Although *The Campus Press* is funded in part by the school, its undergraduate staff retain full editorial control of content. In other words, there would be no blogs if the editors did not want them.

But they did. Two editors—Whitney Levine and Debra Thiegs—volunteered to help manage the blogs. The other editors were skeptical but intrigued. I was ecstatic.

Next, with help from the working group, I got a copy of Drupal running and began modifying it to suit my requirements and vision:

- I made substantial changes to the software's configuration. For example, I created roles such as "editor," "admin," "blogger," and "recruit" and specified precisely what each role could do in the system.
- I customized the publishing layout. For example, I designed a new logo and several custom "skins" that bloggers could choose from.
- I wrote custom code. For example, I created a function to display the name of every blog in a list at the top left of every page. Later I enhanced this code to remove "stale" blogs, float prolific bloggers to the top of the list, and indicate which blogs had new content.
- I created custom tools. For example, I made a Web form that potential bloggers could fill out; the form included questions designed to ascertain the applicant's interests and writing abilities.
- I wrote policies and procedures. For example, I drafted a publishing policy explaining the reasons content might be removed or a user banned.

During this phase I realized how essential the working group's contributions would be. They helped me understand the baseline expectations of savvy blog audiences, managed my

relationship with the newsroom, kept the technology humming, and critiqued my design and copy. I could not have completed the project without them.

Much of the initial work was totally novel to us. Take the policy document: This document said (in many more words) that a blog entry or comment could be taken down, and its author could be banned, if posted content included personal attacks, hate speech, or anything likely to cause a lawsuit. I consulted Phil Cauthon, the editor of Lawrence.com, an online publication of the *Lawrence [Kansas] Journal-World*, about the policy document. I ran it by Dan Pacheco, a product manager for Bakotopia.com, an online community provided by *The Bakersfield Californian*. I e-mailed it to Steve Outing, a new media columnist for Poynter.org, the online publication of The Poynter Institute, a journalism research and training institute. I contacted Doug Connaroe, an instructor at CU and the blogs editor for the Denver Post's Bloghouse (<http://www.denverpostbloghouse.com/>). And I spent hours going over the document with the working group.

Everyone thought the policies sounded reasonable. But we agreed *The Campus Press's* relationship with the university required extraordinary diligence, beyond what would be required of a truly independent publication. And we found no precedent to guide us. Ultimately, at the urging of Bob Trager, a CU law professor, we submitted our policies to Dean Voakes, who submitted them to the university's team of lawyers, and we all waited. And waited.

Meanwhile, the working group and I devised a plan to recruit bloggers. We thought the best bloggers would be active, engaged students—the kind of people who join student groups, such as the Black Student Alliance, the 4-Wheelin' Club, and the Philosophy Club. So I found contact information for about 60 student group leaders. Lingle and I called or e-mailed every one. We invited them to become campus celebrities, to lead discussions about their missions or interests. Unfortunately, this strategy yielded meager results. I do not think any of our bloggers came from this first round of recruiting. However, I am convinced that students who are already engaged in a student group have great potential as bloggers.

Next, we paid about \$50 to send four campus-wide notices—two to students, two to faculty and staff. The first went out to students on March 7:

### BE A CAMPUS PRESS BLOGGER!

Become a campus celebrity! CU students who want to be bloggers for *The Campus Press* can sign up now. No experience necessary, just a point of view and a desire to be heard. Blogs will be linked from *The Campus Press Online* and the best posts each week could make the front page! Application, FAQ, and more at <http://www.thecampuspress.com/cpblogs>. Tell CU what's on your mind!

Applications began appearing almost immediately, and we had more than a dozen by March 15. Students, it seemed, wanted to see their work in print. We promised to make it easy and, furthermore, to stamp their content with *The Campus Press* brand. A hitherto-unrecognized demand—namely, the community's yearning to speak, to participate, to lead conversations—found in us a willing supplier. We were inches from publication.

Meanwhile, Outing had applied a little more heat to the project by mentioning us in his column on Poynter.org. The resulting spike in traffic came before we went live, and we knew we had to move quickly to keep up. Plus, we had a tight deadline: Spring break would start

on March 26, and scarcely a month after that, final exams. It was imperative that we open our blogs immediately.

The dean finally coaxed a reply from university attorneys, who signed off on our policy document. They merely required us to add a disclaimer to the bottom of every page. At 6:00 a.m. on March 21, I slapped the disclaimer into place and gave our first four applicants their very own blogs. *The Campus Press Blogs* were alive.

The first day's activity was far more than we had hoped for. At the end of it, we had 11 posts and 11 comments. The posts were unique, some funny and some informative. We were thrilled. That afternoon, a blogger calling himself "Do Not Read" (which I will abbreviate to "DNR") published a post including the words "faggot" and "queer." In some contexts, such words would clearly violate our policy against hate speech. This sparked a discussion among the working group, the newsroom, and me. We agreed the words were not intended as slurs, and the post remained online.

Two days later, a blogger calling himself "Bĭspənġņġ" implied in a flippant post that Villegas, the executive editor of *The Campus Press*, was fabricating a girlfriend and hiding a secret gender identity. Villegas, who had never met Bĭspənġņġ, responded with an offer to punch him in the nose. Others in the community condemned the original post, too.

Bĭspənġņġ quickly followed up with an intelligent piece about homophobia and *The Laramie Project*, a play about the murder of a gay man in Wyoming:

Many of my colleagues and close friends are homosexuals, but an anti-homosexual remark still appeared in my blog, and I wrote it. It was a light joke, but I strongly believe the culture of homophobia leads to hate and hate crimes. Understanding and discussion leads to acceptance and tolerance. I am glad this was brought to my attention. Let's discuss *The Laramie Project*.

Could it be that the community's disapproval of Bĭspənġņġ's original piece caused him to correct his behavior? I thought so. I was excited to see this mechanism—so crucial to a functioning community—at work on the third day of publication.

During that first week, the blogs accounted for an amazing 45 percent of the audience traffic on *The Campus Press's* Web site. The second week was spring break, so nobody read the paper or the blogs. In the third week, the blogs accounted for 31 percent of audience traffic.

And then, in the blogs' fourth week, tragedy struck the campus. Jesse Gomez, a CU freshman, was found dead in his dorm room on Sunday, April 9. He died early that morning after attending a fraternity party. It was the first major campus news event to engage our bloggers.

Bĭspənġņġ posted "Boo The Greeks" on April 11, in which he blamed CU's fraternities for Gomez's death. "Every time you see a known greek, by reputation or paraphernalia, boo them!" he wrote. "In the UMC. On the quad. In class. On the street. At the bar. At their houses!!!"

A link to the entry immediately rose to the top of the "Today's Most Popular Posts" list we had recently added to the front page of the online newspaper. It was a prominent position for a provocative headline. The post drew 17 comments over the next day, more than any other post that semester. On April 12, the post was quoted and linked in the comments section of a

story about Gomez in the Boulder paper, the *Daily Camera*—someone in the *Camera*'s audience had read Bispənǵnǵ's piece, and they added it to the debate on the paper's site. Soon after, commenter "ctheath" posted a response to Bispənǵnǵ's post on *The Campus Press Blogs*, in which he said,

But to speculate (because your argument is PURELY speculation until the autopsy comes out) that this is automatically the fraternities fault in Jesse's death is completely immature and unprofessional. As long as we are speculating, i have heard from several people close to him that he often did Oxycontin and other pain killers...If this 'speculation' is true and he indeed also had a couple of key lights at Theta Xi (which p.s. isn't a very 'hardcore' organization) is it still the greek systems fault???

I thought ctheath's comment was legally and ethically troublesome. I said as much in an e-mail to the working group and the editors, and most of us agreed that the comment should come down. But Villegas was silent on the issue. After three hours, I took down the comment.

When Villegas finally replied, he took an unexpected stance on the issue. First, he said, Gomez had mentioned painkillers on his Facebook.com profile, and this was common knowledge among undergraduates. Second, Villegas said, "*The Campus Press* is controlled editorially by the students (totally undergrad) and we will work independently of graduate student, TA, faculty or adviser influence."

Wow! Suddenly, we had unvarnished information—information that everyone below a certain age was already talking about—appearing first on the blogs. And suddenly, the editors of *The Campus Press* considered the blogs valuable enough to claim them. I saw this development as a significant milestone. Only three weeks after going live, the blogs were becoming a newsroom fixture. Still, my satisfaction mingled with reluctance; I didn't want to give up my administrative and editorial omnipotence within the system. Villegas pulled rank, though. I republished the comment. Little did we know the Gomez saga was just beginning.

On April 15, blogger DNR published, but did not substantiate, an assertion that Gomez was under the influence of painkillers the night he died and that the painkillers were the reason he died. While ctheath's speculative comment had fallen just within our rules, DNR's assertive post crossed the line. The newsroom and the working group reached a consensus via e-mail. The executive editor pulled the post and issued a warning to DNR.

DNR was back a few days later with "Jehovah's Witnesses Didn't Witness Me :( ." This humorous submission was the most popular post of the entire semester, quadrupling the blogs' normal traffic. Dozens of new users signed up to comment. Many of them came straight from Watchtower.org, the official Web site of Jehovah's Witnesses, where an automated news search scans the Web for Jehovah's Witness references.

*The Campus Press Blogs* attracted more visitors than the online newspaper for the first time during the week of April 16. But the blogs' rising popularity did not diminish the paper's audience. *The Campus Press* drew the same amount of traffic as usual during this time—around 300 views per day.

On April 20, thousands of CU students climbed over "No Trespassing" signs to participate in a marijuana party protest on Farrand Field. CU police photographed hundreds of people holding pot paraphernalia and blowing smoke rings and posted those pictures on the department Web site. Police offered \$50 for information leading to the arrest and conviction

of any person pictured. This unique enforcement strategy made national news. Villegas published a controversial post berating police for not issuing tickets on the spot, and CNN.com later linked to that post.

Blogger DNR couldn't resist having his say. He claimed in a post on May 1 that he was guilty of trespassing on Folsom and smoking marijuana; he said he was identified and called into the police department but escaped conviction with a good haircut and a fake alibi. The *Daily Camera* found his post and wrote an entire article about it, quoting directly from his blog. DNR's blog post was the news. I never expected this.

The blogs' popularity was increasing in exponential fits. Many of our visitors came from Google searches (searches for "immigration" and "4/20" were among the most common). Public Radio International interviewed me (off-air) for a broadcast called "The Death of the Newspaper." CNN.com invited CU's chief of police and Villegas on air (which later fell through). E-mails and comments from Canada and New Zealand reflected the worldwide scope of our publication.

Then came finals week. The site's traffic dropped to almost nothing as our bloggers and primary audience hit the books. It was a good thing, too. That week, DNR claimed in a blog entry to have special knowledge relating to the death of Jesse Gomez. He said he knew the person who sold drugs that he said killed Gomez. He called that person a murderer. And he promised to withhold crucial bits of this information from police. There was no question—this post violated our policy. It threatened a very expensive lawsuit. I immediately e-mailed the working group and the editors. With their permission, I took the post down less than an hour after discovering it. I sighed with relief after verifying that Google had not yet indexed the post. Next, after substantial debate, we revoked DNR's blogging privileges. But it wasn't enough. DNR had put the fear into us.

With summer approaching, most news staff would leave town. The paper would stop reporting daily news. Most faculty would work from home. And Dean Voakes saw the potential for negligence if the blogs kept operating. "Once everyone scattered to the four winds," Voakes later explained, "nobody would be obligated to monitor the blogs." So he asked us to "pause" the blogs for the summer.

Editors of the paper questioned the plan. "Let's not punish our bloggers, and stop our momentum along the way, because of a bad apple," Villegas wrote in an e-mail to the group. I also objected to the dean's plan, for two reasons. First, I thought the pause would set a bad example. "I think [the pause] disregards *The Campus Press*' audience and community," I said in an e-mail, "and I think it teaches journalism students that disregard for the audience and community is acceptable."

Second, I worried that the dean's plan underscored an institutional resistance to change, which I believe threatens the viability of traditional media operations and journalism schools alike. When I asked him about this, Voakes said the school does include "pockets of resistance" to technological change, but he assured me that his sole motivation was to prevent negligence in the platform. Still, he rejected my proposal to hire a student editor to monitor the blogs for the summer. We halted publication on May 23. The blogs had popped and fizzled. Their audience and community disappeared with a few mouse clicks.



Many of us were quite disappointed at the time, but today I think it was the right decision. Sponsoring blogs on autopilot truly would put the university at risk. Furthermore, I consider the pause to be a measure of the blogs' success: their calamitous conclusion signaled the extent and force of their impact. During 67 days of publication, *The Campus Press Blogs* became a crucial component of *The Campus Press's* online product. The blogs' traffic steadily increased from their explosive first week until finals. By the end of the semester, the blogs were drawing more than twice as many visitors as the rest of the online newspaper combined—on an average day, the blogs served 474 visitors, the newspaper 210. At the very least, the blogs were entertaining enough to increase the online audience of *The Campus Press*. If the blogs and the online paper included advertisements, the blogs could be the most important revenue generator in the entire operation.

The blogs' popularity taught us something about the appetites of future news consumers. Simply put, more people visiting our college newspaper Web site preferred blog-style content to traditional news. It is hard to predict whether this style of content will appeal to this same audience in 10 years, but it may.

I should point out that *The Campus Press Blogs* content was hardly "journalism" in the traditional sense of the word. Blog posts rarely included detailed reporting. Content was conversational, casual, personal, occasionally litigable, and frequently unverifiable. The blogs were mostly just talk, not reportage. But "what people are talking about" has always been an important component of the news business. When our bloggers talked about the 4/20 pot protest in their blogs, CNN.com and local newspapers based stories on those conversations. *The Campus Press Blogs* showed us how blogs can be a source for news leads, tips, and stories, a source that is archived indefinitely and indexed by the finest information-retrieval services (Google, for instance) that humans have ever known.

On a few occasions, blog content on *The Campus Press Blogs* approached the quality of a newspaper editorial. Bispøngnġ's "Laramie Project" post is one example. Such posts hint at the journalism potential of blogs. Blog software is just a content container, after all; the nature of the content is entirely determined by blog authors. Blog technology potentially enables countless more authors to produce good journalism. I think future blog aggregators or nonprofit reporting collectives may pose a serious challenge to traditional media corporations.

We have a lot more to learn about the implications of social media. Luckily, the most valuable attribute of *The Campus Press Blogs* project may be its pedagogical utility. The students and instructors who worked on this project had an incomparable educational experience. We successfully introduced a major new media product into an existing newsroom on a shoestring budget, and in the process we engaged our campus and community in a fresh new endeavor. And, to my great satisfaction, our audience ate it up.

So, it worked. I received my diploma in May. Blogs are now a default component of *The Campus Press* online product (though any specific implementation of them is mired in a technical and/or political bog at the time of this writing). We all learned a lot about our audience. It should be clear by now how relevant these tools are to journalists and journalism educators.

I took away three lessons from this experience that may be instructive to educators throughout the academy: First, students are almost certain to surprise us. These new media technologies are called *disruptive* for a reason, and they do not become less so in the hands

of enthusiastic young people. We do well to exercise caution and diligence when planning such experiments.

Second, encapsulated in the above narrative is a model for assimilating technological change. As an erstwhile member of the younger generation, I brought some technical savvy with me to campus, and I discovered a school sorely in need of it. Many students in every discipline do the same. At a time when all fields are undergoing unprecedented technological evolution, such students can help higher education institutions stay current and relevant. That is, if universities can find these students and enlist them.

Third, technology is changing the way we communicate with one another, and the social impact of this change is likely to be at least as great as changes wrought by the invention of the printing press or the television. Members of the generation now in high school will expect to be treated as participants in a grand conversation rather than as passive consumers of education. They will expect their contributions to be incorporated, with attribution, into the subject matter. Some of them may expect to be paid for contributing bits of information or analysis to a body of knowledge. If the university's culture does not keep up, future students will have countless alternative forums to consume and contribute to. And some of these alternatives may be entrepreneurial competitors in education—commercial endeavors, independent instructors, and other universities.

In the media business, technology has dissolved established boundaries between producers and consumers and—in the process—has severely shaken the industry. Educators should be prepared for changes of the same nature and scope—vast revisions to the roles and relationships defined by traditional educational models, driven by innovation in communication technologies. At this very moment, a service, widget, or protocol that will completely transform our campuses could be incubating in one of our dormitories. Are we prepared to seek it, recognize it, and embrace it?