

Collaborative Learning, Critical Thinking and Blogs: Internet Journals as Graded Assignments

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Abstract

This paper describes how I designed and implemented writing assignments based around the use of internet based journals (blogs), as well as some of the problems that I encountered. These journals offer many advantages over traditional journal assignments, for instance, they can be used to encourage collaborative learning. As with traditional journals they also give instructors a significant source of information when considering how to improve class room techniques. However, several drawbacks were also discovered. These include issues with student privacy, enthusiasm for new assignments and, often times, learning a new technology.

Student journals have been a commonly used alternative grading mechanism for years. The rise of on-line journals (aka web logs or “blogs”) allows new applications for this well-established teaching strategy. Over the past two years, I have used blogs as a graded assignment in several classes. These classes included two summer sections (Introduction to Philosophy and Introduction to Ethics), an honors sections of introduction to philosophy and an upper division writing intensive class (20th Century Philosophy). In some of these classes, journals were a requirement; in some, they were optional. In all cases, keeping a blog rather than a traditional journal was at the students discretion.

Briefly, a blog is website, or part of a web site, built around a scrolling list of short entries usually presented in reverse chronological order, most recent

first. Most blogs are written with software that makes updating very easy, so that users can quickly add content, usually text, but pictures and sound are also common, with relatively little computer experience.

“Blogging” is a very popular, but still relatively novel variety of internet publishing. However, academic philosophers have been well represented among the early adopters of this technology¹. Some readers who are already familiar with blogs may be interested in their pedagogical uses, while others may be interested in learning about blogging in its entirety. To accommodate both audiences, I have written an appendix to the current paper describing many of the services and programs that together make up the practice of blogging. This paper describes the benefits and drawbacks of this practice.

1 The Assignments

The blog assignment in each section followed the same basic template. During the first day of class I would briefly explain the relevant technology and distribute a handout detailing the expectations for the semester.

The exact details of the assignments varied from class to class. The introduction to philosophy sections, for instance, were as much a reading journal as anything else, while the students in the upper level class were encouraged to be more actively comparative and critical in their journals. However, the assignments in each class were based around the following criteria. The amount of writing (roughly 12 pages) is equivalent to a term paper. My impression is that students devoted more time to the entire project than they would have to a term. However, with a few exceptions, this work was more evenly spaced over the entire semester than the work on a term paper.

The common criteria in each assignment were:

1. *length* The total number of pages (page equivalents) should be at least 12 pages (250 words per page). This a minimal standard. Failing to meet the first standard will result in a penalty of 10 points/page missing. No bonus will result from exceeding this goal. This is the only criteria that may result in the loss of points.
2. *accuracy and relevance* Many entries will be little more than summaries of the text. This is ok, but an entire journal should not consist *entirely* of such entries. Most entries will contain some summary, Providing

an accurate picture of what the author has intended is of great importance. When setting up an argument, some presentation of the “target” author’s position will be necessary.

3. *understanding and application* Does the text help you understand a current movie or passage in a book? Is some passage or argument clearly wrong? Can you extend an argument to some new circumstance? Answering these questions as “yes” or “no” will not be sufficient, developing an argument is critically important. Efforts towards this goal will generate more points than other categories.
4. *presentation* Presentation here refers more to the presentation of ideas than anything else. Entries should contain complete sentences. While different entries may be completely independent, ideas expressed within an entry should be expressed clearly and with precision.
5. *other* I reserve the right to add points for quality entries which do not fall into any of the above categories. In the even that a student does not grasp either the text or my presentation, a serious effort to explain their confusion or to raise helpful questions will be worth points. I may find other reasons to assign points.

These criteria, as well as the number of points required for each grade were communicated to students at the beginning of each course. There would generally be accompanying paragraphs describing the expected tasks in each section. In the lower level classes, students were expected to demonstrate that they had read the assigned critically. In the upper-level, there was an expectation that they would also be comparing assigned readings, looking for themes and issues. In all classes, students were encouraged, though not required to share their work with each other. This procedure was meant to encourage students to use their blogs in a flexible manner. A student who simply linked to a useful resource on the internet could expect to receive 1 or 2 points for this relatively small task, while a significant piece of work could receive more than 15 points.

Blog grading should be at least as clear as any other grading technique. Hopefully ever student should be able to tell what they did to earn (or to lose) each point. I tend to grade using a rubric that I share with students at the beginning of each course. Regardless of one’s preferred grading techniques, journals, and blogs pose their own problems for fair and consistent grading.

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My practice has been to assign points on a per-post additive basis. Points were assigned according to three criteria, length, accuracy and understanding. I retained the right to assign points for other reasons. Practically speaking this meant that each post receives a certain number of points, a post of typical length and good quality should expect to receive a post in the 10 to 15 point range. These points are added to a running total and the final grade for the assignment are calculated on the usual scale (over 90 is an A, 80 to 90 a B and so forth). This would average to 9 good posts during a 15 week semester.

Since the grade consists of a discrete portion of the grade, This means that a student can tell, with relative ease, exactly what sort of effort will be required to get an A for at least this portion of the overall grade. I've found that they will occasionally aim for lower grades. In discussing grading with students, I've discovered that many think very strategically when managing their resources and this may mean pursuing a B or a C so time and effort could be devoted to other goals.

In addition to encouraging students to keep blogs, I kept one myself². Many students were unsure about trying a new form of writing and having access to an example was helpful. It also gave me a supplemental way of communicating with my students about class materials, as my entries were often discussions of the course material that didn't fit into my class presentations for that day. I have a tendency to pursue tangential, but the blog was a way of following the tangents without wasting class time.

posts

comment It's important to convey feedback to students that allows them to understand why they are receiving particular grades while also preserving their privacy. Thus, there will be a difference between comments that an instructor might leave on a particular blog and grade related comments that should be conveyed in some other manner, such as e-mail correspondence or a face to face writing conference.

1.1 Goals

I had several goals that I wanted to accomplish in using blogs as assignments. These were relatively unformed when I first used blogs in my summer classes but were much more explicit by the time I used the assignments in the honors and writing intensive classes. I hoped to construct an assignment that possessed the following characteristics:

1. Comprehensive, allowed students learning to be monitored over the course of the semester,
2. Integrative,
3. Collaborative,
4. Encouraged responsible writing, that is, taught students to be aware of and accountable to one or more audiences, and
5. supported my own goals for improved teaching.

The first three goals are encouraged by the continuing and serial nature of traditional students journals. The second two are met by the more public nature of blogs. Web based journals are easily publicized to fellow classmates, and at least have the possibility of acquiring a public readership. Let's consider each of these goals in turn:

Comprehensive: By comprehensive, I mean an assignments that incorporates material from the entire semester. In this sense, this was a writing assignment that took the place of a comprehensive final. (In the honors class, the journal was an optional assignment that took the place of a comprehensive final. Students probably spent more time working on their journals than they would have spent preparing for a final, but the time was spread over the semester instead of crammed into the already busy final's period. Students reported that they didn't mind the trade off.) The comprehensive journal will tend to test comprehension and analysis skills, while a final will tend to be more effective at testing knowledge acquisition. Blogs encourage writing by requiring sustained writing practice over an extended time.

Integrative By integrative, I mean allowing students to notice patterns and draw conclusions about the material covered in a course. I hoped the assignment would lead to good philosophical writing because students were encouraged to consider simple ideas in a sustained fashion. Objections to ideas that weren't clear on first reading will become more apparent if that idea is considered over time. While many students would notice patterns and discover themes in the reading, only a few revisited earlier materials in the light of later readings.

Collaborative Students learn better when they are active participants in their own learning³. The goal for this particular assignment was to build a community of students where students could encourage each other's reading, analysis and interpretation of the texts we were considering in class. In the writing intensive class, this goal seems to be coming to fruition only after the end of the course as some students are continuing to discuss the class material and occasionally using their blogs as source of communication.

I hoped to encourage students to work together by sharing the addresses (URLs) of their blogs and commenting on each other's work. This was a forum for which students could continue the conversation among themselves. In my assignment materials, I noted that comments left on other students blogs would be considered part of the *commenter's* blog for the sake of grading. There were no cases of incivility in any of the classes in which I used these assignments. All comments were encouraging to the writer of the post commented upon. The problem in this regard was students who did not receive as many comments as they desired. I am considering requiring students to make a certain number of comments as part of the graded component of future assignments.

Responsibility. Students should be encouraged to write for a public audience that includes, but may not be limited to, their peers. After discussing writing with many of my students, I have come to the conclusion that at least some sloppiness in writing is due to the students impression that "only the instructor will see this". While this attitude is strongly counter-intuitive, no one else but the instructor actually assigns a grade, it is nonetheless real. Making students aware of potential audiences improves their writing. Blogs are quite useful in this regard since the possible audiences are much larger than the generally assumed audience for other writing assignments (ie. the

instructor alone). Students who blog are writing for public consumption, whether or not the public opts to consume. There is no reason to assume that classmates, or a wider public, will look favorably on arguments that closely repeat materials covered in class. Taking responsibility for their prose by thinking about their audience, is one way in which students can become more actively engaged in their own learning. Blog posts have a relative permanence that e-mail messages or bulletin board postings don't have. Students work remains in place until they choose to remove it, the work posts do not disappear at the end of the semester when the instructor resets the class web site to prepare for the next semester.

I'll return to this topic later in on in my section on the "many audiences" of a blog.

Feedback Teachers require feedback to improve their craft. Most assignments serve two purposes: they are as tools for generating grades and methods for measuring the success of the instructor in meeting their classroom goals. Journals have some advantages in this regard. Journals provide an important source of feedback for instructors. Ideally, an instructor should be able to find important information about how well students are learning from class activities in their blogs. Journal entries represent a students first reactions to the material. Blogs have the further advantage, over traditional class journals, in that they can be read almost in real time to gauge reactions to important classroom events. If a class has syndicated⁴, a sudden wave of messages may indicate a noteworthy section. Given the rising interest in class room assessment, it is important to take note of those assignments that can be most easily utilized to demonstrate progress towards classroom goals over the course of a semester.

1.2 Comparison to Traditional Journal Assignments

One purpose in developing these assignments was to clarify the ways in which blogs offer new possibilities that traditional class journals do not offer. There are also many valuable features of traditional journal assignments that are preserved.

All class related journals serve two goals: they are integrative and writing intensive. A journal as a daily exercise spans the entire semester, not just a particular unit. Since journals require constant (or near constant writing) they encourage the craft of the writer. Most journals will approach these two

goals more directly than a paper based writing assignment. Papers tend to be more heavily focused on a particular topic or class unit and, lacking other techniques such as required rewrites, often becomes an exercise in cramming or intense writing over a short period.

Syllabi based on journals have often emphasized the personal nature of the journals. In some cases, the instructor doesn't even examine the journals themselves, but considers student summaries of their own journals. I would like to suggest that blogs offer a very different model of how journals can be used in class. The method discussed in this paper emphasizes public communication and collaboration over private writing and personal growth⁵.

One common misapprehension about journals in general, and blogs in particular, are that they encourage a fast and informal style that depends on personal experience and devalues careful argumentation. While I understand the origins of this attitude, I do not believe that it is necessary that any of these tools lead to that outcome. The model of teaching with blogs that I discuss here is meant to encourage the development of engaged but civil communication that favors a relatively formal, as opposed to casual, approach to discussing philosophy.

Finally, journals offer an important source of instructor feedback. Sometimes this will be explicit, because students can post questions on their own blog when they have had some time to think about the activities in a particular class session. It can also be less obvious. Students' writings are very good clues to what they don't understand, the writing done soon after a class is often a good sign of what they did, or better, what they did not understand in a particular presentation.

1.3 Problems

I quickly discovered that adding blogs to a class was not simply adjusting journal assignments for an electronic medium. The old saw that students are necessarily more technologically savvy than teachers turned out to be false. While some students kept their own blog and a very small minority (specifically one student) demonstrated significant savvy in editing their template, many had never heard of blogs and many were unsure about using computers for more than simple word processing.

Significant problems with designing assignments included: 1. privacy concerns, 2. encouraging student buy-in, and 3. managing the instructor's work load.

Privacy Concerns Student privacy is a current matter of importance. It is important that instructors do not require students to disclose identifying information. I address this issue by allowing students to have options concerning different parts of the assignment. In all but one of the classes in which blogs were used, journals have been an optional component of the class replacing either the final or another writing assignment, submitting the journal on-line has been optional (though I don't accept hand-written journals, so all entries are usually digital), and finally publicizing the url of a journal has been optional. So students have had the option to keep a journal which may or may not be on-line and may or may not be publicly accessible. In the writing class, journals were not optional but students could choose between blogs and paper based journals. Students were also made aware that blogs could be kept anonymously. With the exception of the instructor, no one else needed to know that a particular blog belonged to that student. During the first class, when I explained student assignments, I made sure to explain *how* to keep an anonymous journal. Many of these details are summarized in the appendix.

Opting in to each facet of the assignment is a positive act in which a student acknowledges the possibilities for the public exposure of their work. I do not deduct points for students who choose not to take advantage of every possibility on the project. However, I do reward students who manage intelligent discussions in their comment sections. In this sense, making use of a lite-version of the assignment does put a student at a competitive disadvantage since they will be missing a potential sources of points.

As far as designing journal assignments goes, there are really two important goals in managing student information. 1. Ensure that students are aware of when and how their work will be publicly accessible and that blogs may be anonymous, and 2. Maintain grading privacy.

Most of the fee blogging services make no requirement that a blogger publicize any personal information. Since these sites are free, they don't require any billing information, it is possible to use an e-mail address from Yahoo to Google to sign up for a blog so that the service does not have any identifying information. Of course, a class related blog won't be very useful if the instructor doesn't know who's writing it.

Instructor's comments, especially grades and comments that explain grades, should not be left in a public area or placed in a blogs comments section. While I encourage students to leave the comment section open, I use them very carefully while a student is still enrolled in one of my classes.

student buy-in While many current students are technologically sophisticated, this sophistication is not universal and, even among early adopters, it can be limited by the interest of a particular student. For many students, setting up an electronic journal will not be a problem. Usually, one or two students in each class will have their own blogs already. However, they are somewhat uncomfortable with class assignments that differ from the traditional papers and exams format. This unease is often heightened among students who may be taking their first philosophy class. Unfortunately, this exercise can only work if students are willing not only to write their journals, but also to read and comments on their peers.

Students approach technology in the same way as non-students, particular technologies are adopted to meet particular needs. American undergraduates seem to make more agile use of technology because they are at a stage of life where they're still figuring out what their needs and those needs can be more easily changed to fit the available technology. An instructor can easily assume too much sophistication on the part of students. Internet messaging is a fine example. I've been offering my messaging address as a method for students to contact me for years. Only recently have students begun to take advantage of this, usually to clarify details of an assignment or to request electronic copies of the syllabus.

Before using a new technology, most people will ask some version of the question, "what is it good for?" Providing a clear answer to students can be difficult. Answering that this project will enhance collaborative learning doesn't help much. The immediate students response to that answer is "and why would I want that?" The goal of the assignment, and collaborative learning in general, is to break down the one way transfer of information, because students are more likely to learn when they are active participants in their own education. In my experience, most students don't find this explanation convincing. The most effective answer has been to point that writing takes effort and practice, journals are the place where rough writing can occur in preparation for more polished writing in the form of papers. Then I explain that getting peer input is more useful at the rougher stages of writing than near the end of a project when a student may already have invested significant effort in several pages of poorly constructed writing⁶.

The instructor needs to convince students that learning a new technology will help them to achieve their own goals for the class and further in life. In this case, using the blogging technology will help them to learn how to write and how to construct better arguments. Some students have reported

an increased understanding of and comfort with computers or the internet, but the primary focus needs to stay on class objects. Despite everything I've just said, blogging is a relatively easy computer activity. Setting up a no-frills blog can be easier than navigating many university web-sites. Some students were unwilling to learn the new technology because of a reticence about trying new and unknown tasks in general, not by the general difficulty of this particular task.

workload In the early classes, I e-mailed students a standard form with point break downs and comments explaining why points were assigned in each category. I soon had to back off from this practice, communicating in this amount of detail each week soon became a nearly impossible exercise. The assignment was presented as optional in part to avoid this outcome. Early rounds of comments led students to believe that feedback would be extremely fast. After the first few weeks, I could expect almost daily queries about comments.

In more recent courses, I have been clear that I would provide only a limited number of comments and that students would not receive comments from me on every post. This new policy led to a more manageable workload and did not result in any student complaints. The blog assignment was a new task for each group of students and managing their expectations in the early days of the semester was critical. If students were led to expect comments early and often, then they were disappointed if they didn't receive them almost immediately. If students were led to believe that comments would be less frequent, they were comfortable with a more reasonable number of comments.

2 The Many Audiences

Each class related blog has three audiences, the instructor, classmates and the wider world. Each should be considered in designing a successful assignment.

Students and teachers should be aware of the potential audience for on-line writings. Journals can be either part of a closed class related resource, such as WebCT, but as generally understood, blogs are available for the entire world to read.

The instructor The most important audience, and often the only one that students consider when writing. This habit can be mitigated by using assignments that force students to consider other audiences. In some cases instructors have been known to require students to get someone else to sign a worksheet attesting that they have read the paper. Another approach is to use assignments that have built in audiences. Much of this paper has been how the instructor can shape the learning outcomes a student can expect from on-line journal assignments. However, blogs have many audiences and learning may be enhanced if students are made aware of them.

Classmates Student can be a great resources for each other. In classes where writing assignments move beyond topics covered in class, they can suggest approaches, suggest possible counter arguments and collaborate on library and internet research. If students' journals mediate collaboration, class time does not have to be taken up by managing collaborative activities.

The wider world The possibility of a wider audience can be intimidating for students. Students are often uncomfortable sharing their work with any audience other than the instructor. This reticence is not dispelled by pointing out that the instructor is the one who assigns the grades and, as such, should be the most intimidating audience. This attitude often has negative consequences for student assignments in that a large number of problems could be avoided by having someone else read an assignment before handing it in. In part, these assignments are designed to force students to consider a larger audience. In addition to finding errors in composition, a wider audience forces clarity. When the instructor is the only audience, a student can assume that whatever has been covered in class will be understood by their audience. This is true even if the class discussion was unclear, considering a wider audience forces students to consider elements of the topic that they don't particularly understand.

Google is the great driver of traffic on the internet. This can lead to interesting audiences. This is often unpredictable. In one of the early entries in my own blog I used the phrase "employee tardiness" as part of an illustration in a post meant about argumentation explanation. As of this writing, my blog now has the 5th highest rank in Google for the phrase. After my students, this is the single largest source of readers for my blog. Those looking for management advice in my writings are bound to be disappointed.

In other cases, students can be subject to “comment spam”, the practice of posting advertising links in comments after a primary message of a blog.

Students may find themselves developing audiences of their own. This will be more common on some services. This provides significant learning activities for the student and may result in the student’s engagement with class content lasting beyond the finals period. Student’s generally won’t attract an audience beyond their class mates, so this can be made part of the structure of the graded assignment. However, building an audience and managing a discussion do provide learning opportunities that the instructor can encourage when they begin to happen spontaneously.

2.1 Keeping my own blog

Within the academic and philosophical parts of the “blogosphere”, some degree of anonymity seems to be the general rule. One argument for anonymity runs like this. Academics are given a respected position because of their expertise. Any academics expertise is necessarily limited, so the respect granted their opinions should be limited in proportion to their expertise. But, one might assume that academics can generally wrap themselves in the assumed authority of their degrees and their institutions for added credibility that is not properly deserved. Hence, one should strive not to speak as an authority when asserting conclusions outside of one’s specialization. Posting anonymously allows a writer to present arguments in areas related to one’s position without assuming undue authority. Posting under one’s real name as part of a teacher exercise, however, opens the possibility of being misconstrued as speaking as an expert on matters outside of one’s specialty. I don’t have any particular concerns about my opinion being taken as authoritative in any sense. Presumably, this is because I have no illusions about how seriously my positions tend to be taken.

Another argument is that the bloggers are writing as an extension of their academic work, but that they’re looking for a freedom of expression that normal academic writing and expression doesn’t give. As teachers, academics should respect and nurture the opinions and beliefs of their students. Thus, to preserve the dispassionate position of professing truth, as well as preserving the nature of the teacher-student relationship, anonymous posting can be considered desirable. This is particularly understandable in cases such as The Angry Professor⁷ or the Phantom Professor who occasionally poked fun at students, either individually or as a class. The latter of these two lead

to some controversy when the blogger apparently lost their position because of their blog⁸. I find the Angry Prof's discussion quite entertaining and I'm glad they've been written with personal voice that is both engaging and informative. However Angry Prof may cross some lines when it comes to respecting students. This site is not completely free of identifying information and some students are pretty savvy. I'm not so sure how much is gained in posting anonymously in this case, but it does provide some level of discretion.

Both of these arguments have the unexpected consequence that "academic freedom" actually restricts the range of free expressions available to academics.

Finally, there's the question of academic accountability and evaluation. If you're posting anonymously, then you don't have to worry about the content of your blog being part of the evaluation processes at reappointment or tenure time. Of course, I started this project, in part, as a pedagogical experiment, as a way of expanding and reinforcing class content. As such, anonymous posting would be difficult, since I want my students to be able to find this material and I am going to draw attention to it during various steps in the evaluation process.

I've certainly made some mistakes during my blogging learning process. Respect often means holding one's tongue. One thing I learned is that once you start posting, it becomes very easy to slide into material that is not really relevant to one's academic goals. To prevent this from becoming a problem, I started a second blog which I don't house on the university server, it is essentially a personal blog as opposed to this, my academic blog. Of course, I don't post there anonymously either.

To conclude, I see the value of each of the three arguments for anonymous blogging, but I think that they are each out weighed by opposing arguments or, at least, I have chosen not to blog anonymously, regardless of how foolish that may be.

3 Conclusion

The blog is a positive step forward over the already established practice of using journals in class. Blogs are more easily publicized, especially to other members of a class. This opens up the possibility of assignments that have all the advantages of personal journals, but also allow for collaborative learning. The responsibility of writing for an audience enforces a certain discipline on

students. Instead of sharing their personal insights, it encourages writing in way that communicates clearly. I think that both of these are useful improvements over the traditional class journal.

The journal already has several advantages, first, it encourages frequent writing. I used journals in tandem with more formal papers. The journals provided a nice opportunity for partial drafts and a place to try out ideas before committing to them. The papers then provide a place for more polished, *revised* prose. Second, this is a single project that can span the entire semester and allow for more integration. (In a writing intensive class, it can provide a single project that integrates all of the reading from the semester. This would allow papers to either focus closely on single text or use material that students have identified themselves.)

Other things I've learned,

1. Students aren't particularly keen on commenting on the work of others. In addition to whatever social pressures might be involved, commenting is simply more work and students aren't really interested in doing this unless they can see what's to be gained by commenting on the works of others.

2. Students are very interested in receiving comments on their own work. Students learn from feedback on their work, they know this and they tend to value comments made on their work. At least this is my experience.

3. Journal assignments in general, and blog assignments in particular, can become very labor intensive for instructors. Students want interaction with the instructor and they want feedback on their work. Since posts can go up at anytime, this can lead to a constant stream of commenting work by the instructor and writing comments can be very time consuming. I'm beginning to figure out how to make commenting a little easier through the use of rubrics (in essence, grading forms) when grading papers, but I can't think that this would lessen the flood of reading and commenting that constantly updating journals can involve.

So, the challenge for an instructor using blogs in class is to design assignments in such a way that students are encouraged to engage each other's work (perhaps by requiring a certain number of comments per term) and not to expect feedback on everything they write (perhaps by asking them to select their own favorites for grading at the end of the semester, students should definitely be informed of how frequently comments are to be expected at the beginning of the semester.)

A Appendix

A.1 Services

Setting up a blog can be very simple. Most blogging services have an extremely easy set-process, after visiting a website, students often report operational blogs with in five to ten minutes. Of the seventy or so students who have set up blogs for my classes, only one has reported any significant confusion. Hence, the instructions are roughly, "go to site x, follow the steps indicated on that site. Unfortunately, it is impossible to give such a simple set of directions without at least implicitly endorsing some service or company. As such, I have tried to mention a few of the available services and I've focused on free services. Subscription services offer a greater range of features, some of them quite useful, but this appendix is aimed at those who are still considering the practice of blogging and may not have the resources to devote to extra class materials, or may not wish to have students invest even money class materials.

1. Blogger. (www.blogger.com) Own by google, this service offers a simple unified user interface. Blogs can either be set up on a students personal webspace or in their own blogspot. Blogspot posts adds, but it easy to use. Hosting elsewhere would eliminate ads and allows more control but require a little more sophistication
2. LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com) very possible hosting service for on-line journals. Comes in both free and paid version, the paid version includes enhanced abilities, such as the ability to search other users. LiveJournal offers many niceties that facilitate communication with other LiveJournal users. Thus, it comes with a ready-made community.
3. JoeUser (www.joeuser.com) Many of my students have enjoyed using this service. Not as polished as the two above.
4. Radioland (www.radioland.com) A full-featured gate-way to the blogosphere.

A.2 Parts of the blog

A.2.1 the pages

Generally speaking, a blog is a collection of short messages organized in reverse chronological order from most recent. These posts will generally be independent of each other and written by the person or persons who maintain the blog. This differs from the various bulletin board softwares where messages will generally be organized as part of a conversation, that is in chronological order and sorted by the posts to which they are responding.

There are, however, many conventions that have become almost standard:

- page The main page which general contains a central area showing the most recent posts and one or more sidebars with links to other material, such as archives or blog rolls.
 - index links to older posts
 - comments Reader posted material that allows a conversation to occur after new posts.
 - post pages A post page consists of a single message with any comments that have been made about that message. Comments are optional, but if they are turned on the blog may take on more of a bulletin board appearance.
 - archives This are a collection of links to prior posts, either as individual pages or as
 - sidebars Usually the widest column area of a blog is devoted to postings, but space on either the right or left is devoted to other materials such as identifying features of the blog writers, access to archives, links to blog enhancements (such as an RSS feed), social networking links, etc.
- RSS – really simple syndication. One of a few competing formats for syndication. Syndication may be very convenient for readers who use *aggregators* to access web based content. Many of the free blog services do not offer syndication, but it is available for free from sources such as www.feedburner.com⁹. In syndication, a “feed” is established that various software applications can use to present in different formats.
- blog roll/ link – many blogs feature a list of other blogs in the side bar. Given the relatively short duration of a college class, students will

probably not be developing blog rolls. However, they may be useful to an instructor to either publicize student blogs or to direct students to other materials that may be useful.

links to the archive

links to syndication

other content

A.2.2 syndication

Blogs do not have to be read in a web browser. Specialized software, aggregators, can automatically check selected feeds periodically and arrange new information in an easy to read format. Aggregator format usually presents posts without webpage specific formatting and presents all new entries in a list.

I have yet to convince any sizable portion of a class to syndicate their blogs through RSS feeds, but I can imagine that doing so would eliminate much of the book keeping of the project, since many of the tasks of accessing students work would be automated.

A.2.3 templates

Blogs are easy to use, in part, because new users have access to highly standardized formats for presenting new material. Not everyone will be satisfied with the formats that are offered and any blog that has been around for any period will tend to become more and more personalized. In this way, they are like the houses of Levittown which were built on a limited number of floor plans, but became increasingly distinctive as time passed. The template is the part of the blog where the various features of the blog can be controlled. In a single semester, most students will not begin to personalize their templates, but it is still useful for instructors to know what the templates are for. There are many useful resources for personalizing blog templates on the internet. Each service listed above offers its own guidance for beginners.

Notes

¹It should not be surprising that the best places to read about blogs and their impact are on blogs themselves. I would suggest Crookedtimber, <http://www.crookedtimber.org/>, for both its discussions of academic blogs, including those devoted to pedagogy, and links to other blogs.

²*subject to change*, <http://www.personal.kent.edu/~pbohanbr/weblog/index.html>

³This observation has become something of a bromide. That, however, doesn't mean it isn't true. The report of the National Research council published as *How People Learn* (2000) for further discussion of the empirical support for this conclusion.

⁴A technology that allows entries to a user selected group of blogs to be downloaded when they are posted rather than sought out by the reader, see appendix for more details.

⁵See, for instance, the articles by O.T Kent and Stephen North in (Fulwiler 1987)

⁶The writing intensive class in which I made use of the journal exercises was also the first class in which I utilized PTA, or primary trait analysis, in my grading. This technique is described in *Effective Grading* (Woolvord and Anderson 1998). This was attempted as part of a departmental initiative. While I noted a marked improved in student writing over the course of the semester, I have no way to tell which techniques were responsible for the improvement.

⁷ <http://gentlemansc.blogspot.com/>

⁸See <http://insidehighered.com/news/2005/05/11/phantom> for the tale of the Phantom Professor

⁹see <http://www.feedburner.com/fb/a/aboutrss> for an explanation of rss.

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