

THREE WAYS TO INTEGRATE WEBLOGGING INTO WRITING CLASSES

by **Thomas Leverett,**

Southern Illinois University-Carbondale

leverett @ siu.edu

Introduction

Although weblogs can be private, viewed only by class members or only by teacher and student, these three lessons are designed for using them in their public sense: as dynamic, personal contributions to the personal publishing revolution. In these exercises students are joining with millions of others in publishing their thoughts on the Web, for an authentic audience that may or may not respond to their opinions. With the teacher's help, they can understand what they are doing, do it well, make presentable contributions and receive feedback from authentic readers, including their own classmates. As a class newsletter, the weblog community has the advantage of being more immediately connected to the sources of class material and sites of interest, more dynamic (offering opportunities for ongoing dialogue), more open to the general public, and more permanent in the sense that it is more easily accessed in the future, more likely to be read and appreciated later.

Class 1: Weblogging for intermediate students: creating weblogs, getting started

Rationale

This exercise started with the usual purposes of an intermediate reading core class: improved reading fluency, better ability to summarize what is read and express opinions about it; desire to begin and maintain ongoing discussion on some of the issues brought up by the textbook. Orienting the class toward the Web and specifically toward personal publishing on weblogs brought several advantages. Students learned and used new skills quickly and began writing in the new medium, linking to their sources, and linking to the class weblog and to each other's weblogs. The basic weblogging exercise puts their opinions to the front and allows them the confidence of expressing it successfully in a public forum, receiving feedback, and beginning to use their new language in ongoing discussion.

Objectives

The students:

- Learn to set up their own weblog
- Become familiar with processes of posting, editing, setting up template
- Learn to create links in weblog posts
- Become familiar with the Web and opinions expressed in the weblog community
- Write about sites while linking to them
- Post comments on each other's weblogs; participate in a small weblog community

Materials and teaching aids

Each student should have access to a computer with Internet connection. Teacher should have computer with Internet hookup and possibly a projector to show students how to proceed through steps. Teacher should set up model class webpage, remembering logon, password, and URL for future reference, and becoming familiar with process. Some hardware/browser combinations present problems; teacher should work through problems before starting.

Possible problems

Blogger or another host could be slow at a particular hour; connections could be slow; any particular student could start out almost helpless with mouse or with other computer basics. Students using IE on Mac often find that blogger will not allow them to set up a weblog on a computer that has already set another one up. Safari, Opera, and other browsers will, however. IE also makes certain weblogs unsightly on Macs, perhaps as part of a war of intentional incompatibility.

In weblogging the temptation to plagiarise is great, and students are likely to copy phrases, sentences or even pictures from the sites they are visiting. This obviously is a teaching point. Appropriacy of borrowing material is discussed and integrated into the class.

Class profile

10-20 adult intermediate ESL students, from various countries and with wide variety of technological expertise expected.

First class: #1 Setting up a weblog

(Can be done in 30-minute segment of class; faster ones can help slower ones; can be combined with other assignments - #2 for example)

Students are shown the class weblog and prepared by being told, in writing or orally, about the process of starting one: establishing logon, password, weblog title, and URL. Optional handout may explain these and allow them to fill these in as they acquire them. Logon must be unique to blogger; thus, *mohammed* will probably not work, but *mohd4397* is more likely to. True beginners will not understand the concept of "URL" - this one, also, must be used to connect the class webpage to theirs once they have one. Finally, on blogger, they *must post something* before connections to their weblog will find it. As part of this assignment, we have them post a "hello" message.

#2 Weblog assignment: writing about websites

When they are finished with this, they are given the first assignment, which is to visit many websites and choose one to comment on. These are chosen by the teacher beforehand, are put on the class weblog, are often related to class discussion topics, and may be as hard or easy as the teacher wants. To encourage active exploration of the Web, the topics, and the links coming from them, they should be kept easy; if they are playing a more crucial role in the reading program, they can be hard. In any case, students can now click through them to choose one that

they like. Their assignment is to write two paragraphs. The first paragraph describes the site, what it does, what it looks like, what it links to, etc, and will ultimately link to the site (I encourage them to start with "I visited _____" filling in the blank with the name (and/or the URL) of the site they went to; later, they can replace this with their own sentence that does the same thing). The second paragraph gives their opinion and why. It can be their opinion about the site, or about the subject; it can be strong or weak, but it should be original and should be supported with their own ideas. It is a fluency exercise, like a journal, and is not intended to teach rhetorical structure; nevertheless it can be used as the teacher wants.

Second class: #3 Putting assignment on weblog, adding links to the weblog

This generally occurs a couple of class days after the first class, and can also take up only half of a class, preferably the last half, when access to a lab is secured and taking them there is not an issue.

Students had already been asked to write out weblog assignments on paper and bring them to class, using them as part of a speaking exercise (in pairs, explaining to each other what they have seen and what they thought), but this also is optional. In any case, before starting this, they are prepared with what they want to write, and what they want to link to. They have been reminded that they are responsible for remembering their own logon and password. At the computer, they log on to their own weblog, click on "Create Post" and type in their assignment. They are then taught how to link their first sentence, which, on Macs, requires a minimum of code, but on PC's requires only knowing and using an icon. The teacher should be familiar with this process before teaching it, and be familiar with whatever variation there is in the lab computers.

Students must master the difference between "draft" and "publish;" teacher can use "draft" to make grammatical correction as desired, or to have and record students' rewrites. Some teachers make a point to know students' logons and passwords, so that access is easier, or make students write drafts and final copies in common spaces, so that both teacher and student can comment and work on weblog material. Students obviously appreciate having published work be corrected for grammar, but the "draft" function need not be used to accomplish this end. Students will occasionally put everything in "draft," not aware that others can't see it upon entering their weblog.

Later classes: adding more assignments, dropping comments

Process repeats as often as possible; we find that, over time, students become more comfortable with the medium, and when all have finished putting assignments on weblogs, a weblog community exists. Thus, one can go to the class page and visit each student, reading as many weblog assignments as are finished and up, and commenting as desired. Comments can be required of students, and each post then becomes a site with a dialogue about a topic.

Form of work

Students will have their own weblog; it could have any name on top, according to their wishes, but is linked clearly from the main class weblog from their name or a name that they have agreed to. Thus each student can go to the class weblog, click on their name, and see their weblog. Each weblog will have entries consisting of two paragraphs each, the first one linked; entries will be short enough that classmates can and will read and comment on them.

Class 2: Weblog portfolios: putting essays and higher level work on the Web (high-level)

Rationale

While putting formal essays, abstracts and research papers onto weblogs may seem at first to be like wearing a suit to a picnic, in fact the blogosphere is a good place for formal essays and research papers. Since all writing is intended for authentic audience, actually having a permanent, authentic English-speaking audience for formal writing can be seen as a last step that should have been there all along for all writing that has reached publishable condition. Allowing it a permanent place in the blogosphere will give it a permanent place to be found, to be linked to, and to be read by the student, friends, family, and casual readers interested in the subject. In many cases argumentative essays arguing for social or environmental solutions can actually contribute to public argument and discussion, providing links to sources of interest and making arguments that need to be heard. Commitment to this last step is a leap of faith for the teacher, knowing that output of the class will be public and permanent. The stakes become higher in the ongoing war against plagiarism; students realize that in publishing they are putting their name behind their work.

Objectives

The students

- Learn to set up their own weblog (see class #1 above), become familiar with processes of posting, editing, setting up template; create links in weblog posts, link to references
- Write entire essays and research papers, following APA convention, but posting them ultimately in weblog portfolios, learning the art of online presentation
- Write abstracts, posted on class weblog, that describe and point to their own research paper

Materials and teaching aids

As above, each student should have access to a computer with Internet connection. Teacher should have computer with Internet hookup and possibly a projector to show students how to proceed through steps. Teacher should set up model class webpage, remembering logon, password, and URL for future reference, and becoming familiar with process. Some hardware/browser combinations present problems; teacher should work through problems before starting.

Possible problems

As above, connections can be slow or difficult; students may have platform compatibility issues, or have very little experience with online presentation. Some blogger templates have problems translating word files; others have problems when viewed through Mac/IE or other platform/browser combinations. This is an issue if students are working with a variety of platform/browser combinations within the same lab.

Using computers for every step of the process, including the final step of publication of essays and research papers on weblogs, means that students who tend toward shortcuts in their work are more likely to plagiarize - but are also more likely to be caught, if not by the teacher, by some future reader. Increased vigilance in this area is mandatory at every step.

Class #1: setting up weblog (see above)

Steps one and two can be combined, but it is best to give students fair warning and let them visualize what their weblog will look like; where it will fit in; how it will be linked, etc. This is where it helps that many students have gone before them; that there are a number of weblog portfolios already online with similar essays on them. Lacking this, the teacher might want to find or create a model portfolio so that students can have a model to work from.

Class #2: putting essay(s) on weblog

It is assumed that online essays are similar to paper-and-ink essays, with one minor difference: references are linked to the sources themselves; paragraphs are in block style (weblogs customarily eliminate indentation), and separated by spaces; and the work of the portfolio appears in the body of the weblog, allowing the student to personalize and/or decorate the template (side area) of the weblog.

It is also assumed that publication is a requirement, but is not graded in and of itself; that at the beginning of this exercise, the essay is already graded and perfected to a degree that is satisfactory to both the teacher and student. Though drafts can be uploaded and changed while online, and even offer the advantage of remaining online for comparison purposes, generally it is not necessarily easier to grade and edit online work that is in the draft function of blogger or another server; most teachers are still more comfortable doing process revision in the paper form.

Students thus have a presentable version of their essay in a word file on their desktop, and are told to copy it and open their blogger account using their own logon and password, and click on "create post" and paste. Students are shown how to link references and to check them so that they point to the sources of the paper. Students are advised to put spaces between paragraphs and between references as necessary. Teacher works with individuals on online presentation or has more technologically adept students serve as online tutors.

If research papers are too long to be contained in a single post (this has never happened to us), they can be divided into parts, but with the last parts being posted first, so that the final post, the top or first part of the paper, is posted last and given the title of the paper. For archiving purposes this multiple-post research paper could present a problem, in that the title

post must now either link to the other posts or show how to find them by linking to the entire month of the archives. This is necessary because, over time, the link to the weblog itself or to the top post of the paper may not provide immediate access to the remaining parts of the paper to the casual observer. Teaching students to check that their links, particularly to their own material, remain active and useful beyond the immediate class experience is part of the process.

Timing

Finished papers can be uploaded fairly quickly; teacher can use projector to show how it's done, how to edit posts, how to insert links, how to change template, etc., but individual problems will invariably be ironed out personally. More technologically adept students can help others when finished. This will often take the last 20-30 minutes of a class, depending on the size of the class, and lab availability/access.

Form of work

Online portfolios will have most recent essays and/or research papers on top; earlier work will naturally sink to the archives. Thus portfolios will provide longitudinal views of students' writing development, though they may only show the finished form of each work, and not present to the public whatever editing or correction was done to each one. As an option, each portfolio will be linked to a class page, which will contain abstracts pointing to research papers, and will also contain links to the weblogs of the student writers in the classes.

Class 3: Collaborative weblog projects (high-level, mixed language background)

Rationale

These combine the benefits of collaborative projects in general with the benefits of online presentation of work as discussed above. In these the final goal is a single weblog that is devoted to an issue, and presents the combined efforts of a group, whether it be in the form of written summaries of linked articles, interview reports, collected links related to a subject, or even photographs taken and uploaded, all contributed toward exploring a single topic.

Objectives

Students will

- Read an article about their issue and report to group members about what they've read; and write a short summary-response about the article they've read, and
- Create weblog as a group project, based on their issue or subject; each student will put summary-response on that weblog and link their entry to the article they've read (see above).
- Set up interview with local expert on subject; write questions; interview expert, and provide report, both orally (to group members and/or class) and on weblog.

- Work with partners to improve overall image of weblog, so that, as a weblog that presents many perspectives on a single issue, it presents itself well, and explains what it attempts to do.

Materials and teaching aids

As above, each student should have access to a computer with Internet connection. Teacher should have computer with Internet hookup and possibly a projector to show students how to proceed through steps. As above, teacher should set up model class webpage, remembering logon, password, and URL for future reference, and becoming familiar with process. Some hardware/browser combinations present problems; teacher should work through problems before starting.

This particular project is ideal for situations when fewer computers are available than there are students, because students can work together to create one weblog, and do not have to be all uploading at the same time. Work can be spaced so that limited access to computers is provided as each group is ready; others can be reading, writing/rewriting, or interviewing while some are uploading, editing, or adding links.

Possible problems

The traditional complaint about groups, that some lazy students may take advantage of harder-working ones, can be alleviated by grading individual entries. One of the advantages of groups is that the more Web-savvy students can help and even teach the novice ones; thus the weakness or slowness of the novice is not necessarily a burden to the group. Groups are known to lose their logon or password, or to have the main webmaster drop out of the class, leaving everyone in the lurch; these problems also can be alleviated with planning if they are foreseen.

As stated above, plagiarism is always a problem with student work and must be guarded against vigorously, as the work is published and may be read by anyone. The temptation for students will be to make their site prettier in any way they can; lifting of pictures without permission presents a big problem and must be dealt with squarely in the classroom.

Classes #1-5: the setup, the action, the display

The teacher's job here is to do some of the legwork to know whether certain issues will pan out in terms of having a variety of articles that students can read, or sites they can visit and comment on; whether there are local experts in the field, or if something is enough of an issue in a community that people are willing to talk about it and give varying opinions. We have done weblogs on a variety of issues but invariably the students have been given some choice and have done their work on a subject that all liked or at least agreed to pursue. Choices were provided at first. Higher level students can find their own articles, but these must be provided for lower level students.

Students should have something to say before using the "Create Post" function, but they will soon get used to doing reading, interviews, or whatever, and coming back, editing it, and

posting it to the weblog. The advantage really is in other classmates and groupmates being able to have access to the material, once it is posted. This is particularly useful for survey reports; if the group has asked many people a certain bank of questions, results can be posted to the weblog and then commented on as wished, later, by individual group members. The group weblog thus provides the group an online meeting place that not only collects and organizes their work, but also displays it to the public as a final step. Students should be familiar with setting up weblogs, creating posts, linking them, etc. (see above).

Timing

Collaborative projects are spread over many classes because students must do the work outside of class that is then reported on in the weblogs. Uploading, editing, linking and improving weblogs is an ongoing project that may take ten minutes per class of many separate classes, or could be accomplished in a single longer block, given that the content to be uploaded is prepared beforehand.