

Setting Up a Blog or Podcast for the Teaching of Psychology: A "How To" and "Why To"

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You have probably heard a great deal about how technologies such as blogs and podcasts can be used in the classroom. In this chapter, I'll give you concrete explanations of how to set up a blog and how to post audio on it, and I will mention a few reasons for doing this.

Why Use a Blog?

Blogs are simple web pages with time-stamped entries or "posts." Typically, a blog is written by one person and readers post comments in reaction to what that person (the administrator) had to say. Only the person who created the blog can create a post; all others can only comment on a post.

If you have access to a content management system like Blackboard, then in many ways you already have a system that is capable of doing some of the things for which you might use a blog: communicating with students and creating online discussions. If you don't have access to such a system, then a blog is a good way to quickly get a web presence for yourself and your class where you can discuss topics. What other purposes are there for a blog?

A "tough topics" blog

As you know, students tend to ask the same questions every semester. Why not record (either in text or audio) your answers to these questions and post them on a blog? Use student blog comments to refine your explanation over time and to better understand why students are confused on a topic. Before students come to your office hours for help, ask them to go to the blog first to see if the answer lies there.

A "psychology internship" blog

Since blogs encourage bloggers to record their thoughts and reflect on their experiences, a blog can be used to help students keep a journal of their experiences during their internship. At the end of the semester, students will have a dated record of their thoughts throughout the experience and can use this record to put together a final paper on what they learned and how they grew during the internship.

Guest speakers

Here is a wonderful idea from the book *Classroom Blogging* (Warlick, 2005): Record your guest speakers. This is an especially valuable idea because they are always hard to

get. When you have someone to come to speak to your class, record him/her and get it on a blog so students this semester and in the future can benefit from it.

An easy to use, powerful class website

Because blogs have become so popular, many people have written free "plug-ins" that make blogs far more versatile and more like powerful websites. On my blog (<http://www.thepsychfiles.com/>), for instance, I have plug-ins that allow visitors to (a) email me, (b) receive an email notification whenever I post something to the site, (c) leave a voicemail message that I can either place on the site or keep private, and (d) allow visitors to respond to a poll. I didn't have to know any programming at all to add these "widgets" to my site. You can use these tools to post homework, make announcements, or communicate with students.

Peer review

Another good suggestion from Classroom Blogging is to use a blog as a place for students to provide their peers with feedback on their writing. First, ask students to sign up for an email notification from other students' blogs. Then, when students post a draft of their work, other students will be notified and then can go to the blog to leave comments and learn from their peers' work.

How to Set Up a Blog

Setting up a blog is fairly simple. It is free and it requires no knowledge of HTML. I recommend either Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) or Blogger (www.blogger.com). I'll outline the steps for setting up a blog using Blogger.

Step 1: Set up an account with the blog host using your name and email address

Go to <http://www.blogger.com/>, click the "Sign Up Now" button, and follow the steps to set up a username and password. Once you receive the confirmation email, go back to Blogger and log in.

Step 2: Follow the three prompts to create a unique name URL for the blog

For example, assuming your name is Smith and you are setting up a blog for your fall '07 psych101 class, you name your Blog "Dr. Smith's Blog" and you might try a URL of smithpsych101f07. If Blogger indicates that this name is available, your blog's URL is now <http://smithpsych101f07.blogspot.com>. Note that "www" is not part of this url. That URL isn't pretty, but it's free. Email it to your students so they can bookmark it. Later on, if you have web space from your college, you can work with your help desk and they can move your blogger site over to your college web space so you can use, for example, www.mycollege.edu/drsmith.

Step 3: You're now ready to go

You'll be sent to a generic, customizable blog homepage. The Blogger interface is fairly intuitive and is all menu driven. You'll use the "New Post" button most frequently. Blogger will provide you with a Microsoft Word-like WYSIWYG editor, so the images you see on the screen as you write are the same as users will see. You might begin by writing

a post on the topic you discussed in class and then ask students to comment on your post to keep the discussion going.

Have your students follow the same procedure outlined above to start their own blogs. The student is the administrator of their blog and you can only comment on the students' posts. Students should email you the URL of their blog.

Creating an "Audio Blog"

Suppose that in addition to, or instead of writing posts, you would rather record audio files of yourself talking. You can put these files into your blog, but it will require a few steps. I can provide some general guidelines, but exactly how you do this at your college or university will differ depending on your system.

Creating an audio file

Recording audio on a computer is becoming fairly commonplace, so if you are comfortable doing this you may wish to skip to the section on how to upload your recorded files.

You probably don't want to use your computer's built-in microphone to record your voice. These microphones are okay in a pinch, but the audio quality is usually poor. Instead, you'll want to use your computer's USB port to connect an external microphone. Many good quality microphones can be purchased which have a USB input at one end. Search for "usb microphone" on Amazon.com and you'll find many options.

You will need software to record your audio. Many people use the free audio editor called Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>). It's easy to set up. Connect your microphone to your computer first, then open Audacity and go into its "Preferences." Under the "Device" drop-down menu in the "Recording" tab, select your external microphone. Recording is as simple as clicking the red record button. You can save it as a .wav file if the audio file is short. Longer files should be saved as .mp3 files which will compress them into a smaller size.

Uploading your file to a web server

A "web server" is simply a computer connected to the Internet that can distribute your audio files to listeners. Your personal computer is not set up to do this. Your college, however, has probably given you some server space so you can host a web page if you wish. You can also use this space to host and serve your audio files. Here's how to do this.

First, upload your audio file to your folder on your college web server. You'll probably need to use an ftp program to do this. If you've never used such a program, then it's best if you contact your college help desk for assistance. The general idea is this: if your space on your college web server is called www.mycollege.edu/myname and you recorded and saved your first lecture as `psy101_lecture1_090607.mp3`, then after uploading the file the link to this file would be: www.mycollege.edu/myname/psy101_lecture1_090607.mp3.

Instead of giving out that URL in class, you may want to create a link to this file from a post in your blog because it is too long for anyone to remember. In Blogger, create a post (or edit an existing one) and highlight a sentence like "Click here to listen to this lecture." Then click the "link" button on the toolbar and type in (or copy) the long URL above.

Your students will hear your audio file when they read your post and click the link. Keep following this method for all your future files. You may need to ask your college for more server space if you record a lot of audio. Video can be hosted in this same way. For a video walkthrough of this process, go to <http://www.thepsychfiles.com/2007/08/09/episode-24-almost-complete/>

Let the Internet Come to You

Suppose you have many students on an internship and you've asked them to set up a blog to reflect on their experiences. Do you have to visit each student's blog every day to see if he or she has written a new post? Thankfully, no. There is an easier way to find out if there is anything new on a blog using RSS. RSS files are small, typically generated automatically by your blog, and allow people to "subscribe" to your site. You'll be notified when something new is posted.

Suppose you have 30 students posting to 30 different blogs. Subscribe to each student's blog and whenever a student posts something new, you'll be notified. All you need to do is copy each blog's RSS (or Atom) file and use the free Google Reader program (<http://www.google.com/reader/>). Click the "Add Subscription" button and copy the name of the RSS file into the box. From then on, just check Google reader, and you'll see whether one of your students has created a new post. The process for setting up your reader does involve a few steps, but there is help available. There is a getting started video and a "Take A Tour" walkthrough once you arrive on Google reader, but you may also want to try this "5 Minute Walkthrough" of Google reader available on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ltttw5yORv8>, or this longer walkthrough at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65iL0Q97RCg>.

Conclusion

Blogs and podcasts can be pedagogically sound tools to add to your repertoire as an instructor so long as you are clear about the role they will play in your class and how they will contribute to student learning. Blogs are especially useful for helping students to reflect on their learning and to continue conversation beyond the classroom. They may also serve as a handy place to put your responses to frequently asked questions on tough topics. Audio recordings are useful for creating an archive of great talks given by invited speakers. As you become more comfortable using the technology, you'll find more uses for these tools in the classroom.

References and Recommended Readings

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Warlick, D. F. (2005). *Classroom blogging: A teacher's guide to the blogosphere*.
Raleigh, NC: The Landmark Project.

Recommended Blogs

PsyBlog: <http://feeds.feedburner.com/PsychologyBlog/>

Psych Central: <http://psychcentral.com/blog/>

Psychology Today: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/index.rss>

PsycPort: <http://www.psycport.com/siteware/rssfeed.xml>

The Psych Files: http://www.thepsychfiles.com/tpf_feed.xml