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Learning to Blog -- Blogging to Learn

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**Overview**

Blogging can be an effective teaching tool to engage students with psychological concepts. This resource introduces the use of blogging assignments for instructional purposes. The term instructional blogging (IB) is used here to refer to blogs that are used as class assignments to promote student learning (Office of Instruction & Assessment, n.d.). The resource covers four areas: an introduction to IB, pedagogical considerations, 10 lessons for novice instructors, and a sample syllabus assignment. A companion classroom presentation resource in PowerPoint® format can be used to introduce students to instructional blogging.

**What is a Blog? A Brief History**

Computer scientists first used blogs to keep track of hyperlinks. Jorn Barger was credited for first using the term “web logs” in 1997, which was shortened to “blogs” in 1999 by Peter Merholz (“Blog History in Timeline Form,” n.d.). Blogs quickly evolved to online diaries and news outlets.

More recently, higher education has embraced blogging as a teaching tool (Farmer, Yue, & Brooks, 2008). A community of practice is evolving to support instructors who use IB. The University of Arizona, for example, has a well-developed web site on the topic (Office of Instruction & Assessment, 2010).

**Pedagogical Considerations**

I have drawn on my experience learning how to use IB to address learning outcomes and instructor responsibilities. Common questions, and their answers, are included at the end of this section.

**Achieving Learning Outcomes**

Instructors can use IB to achieve learning outcomes related to content knowledge in psychology and to goals in liberal arts, supported by a psychology education.

First, IB assignments can promote student learning about the science and application of psychology (APA, 2007). Four goals for undergraduate psychology education are listed below with examples of IB topics. Although these goals are for undergraduate education, they are also relevant to high school and graduate education in psychology.

Goal 1. Knowledge Base of Psychology. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in psychology. (APA, 2007, p. 9)

**Example:** Students in an educational psychology course blog about the application of student learning in high school.

Goal 3. Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology. Students will respect and use critical and creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and, when possible, the scientific approach to solve problems related to behavior and mental processes. (APA, 2007, p. 10)

**Example:** Students blog on the misuse of psychological findings in the news.

Goal 4. Application of Psychology. Students will understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues. (APA, 2007, p. 10)

**Example:** Students in a community psychology course blog about local social problems and how psychological interventions or preventions might be implemented.

Goal 5. Values in Psychology. Students will be able to weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically, and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology as a discipline. (APA, 2007, p. 10)

**Example:** Students in an introductory psychology course are assigned conflicting positions to blog on the ethics on classic psychological experiments such as the Stanford Prison Dilemma and the Milgram shock experiments.

Second, IB assignments promote critical thinking, good writing, and active learning. For example, blogging requires students to integrate information and real events in a public forum (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008). The integration of material is central to critical thinking. Blogging promotes critical thinking by requiring students to take a position on a topic and to provide evidence for their position (Williams, 2004). Writing blog posts provides students an opportunity to interpret their ideas and knowledge about psychology and to see their thinking evolve over time. Blogs can give students access to a learning community that crosses time zones and geography (Martin-Niemi, 2009). IB is ideal for a student-centered classroom (vs. instructor-centered), where students create information. Students are motivated by creating content rather than being passive consumers of content (Farmer et al., 2008).

Learning how to blog aligns with at least two of the liberal arts goals supported in psychology undergraduate education in psychology (APA, 2007). When students learn how to use blogging tools and to write in a blog style, they increase their information and technical literacy (Goal 6) and their communication skills (Goal 7).

### **Instructor Responsibilities**

Students can learn ethical behavior in written assignments but this learning may not transfer to online assignments. Therefore, instructors need to educate students about ethical guidelines when blogging and about online safety and privacy.

**Teach ethical behavior.** Require students to adhere to the law and to be ethical in their blog posts. Students may copy pictures from online sources without realizing they are in violation of copyright law. Images in the public domain can be copied and used. Students need

to get permission from the owner or author for images that are not in the public domain.

Resources about using material in the public domain material include:

Bloggers' Code of Ethics: <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php>

Copyright and Blogs: <http://www.dailyblogtips.com/copyright-law-12-dos-and-donts/>

Creative Commons: <http://creativecommons.org/>

IB provides an opportunity to remind students about the ethical use of psychological information. Students have an obligation to post responsible information, especially if it is about others, which is truthful and minimizes harm. Student interviews and surveys can be especially interesting to include in blog posts. Remind students to write from a scientific perspective and to present factual information, rather than writing sensationally.

**Educate about online safety and privacy.** Discuss online safety and privacy with students. Students need to be sensitive about posting personal information. It is important to give consideration to an unknown, future public, which could have negative consequences for them. For example, a future employer may review an archived site of an opinion that was not well-written or fully formed. Blog content may be archived by programs that crawl and archive pages on the Internet. Thus, even if blogs are later deleted, copies of the blog could be stored online. Students need to understand that information they post may be available years into the future to unknown others such as future employers.

I do not require students to attach personally identifying information, such as names or photo, to minimize privacy intrusions. Some course management software has a blogging tool that allows the blogs to be viewed by students in the course, but not by everyone else.

### **Common Questions**

IB assignments reflect the pedagogy of a course and the realities of the institutional setting. The following questions are common for instructors new to using IB.

**Public versus private?** The literature suggests that the power of blogs is their publicness (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008), but the degrees of publicness can vary. For example, course management software can limit who can view blogs to, perhaps, only students in the course or only students enrolled at the institution. Public blogs can be posted under a pseudonym.

Private blogs allow students' mistakes to have limited consequences. Consider the possibility that a student interviews someone for a controversial topic and posts it on his or her blog, misattributing the organization where the incident happened. The organization becomes angry at you and your school. It is advised that you consider how to handle worse case scenarios before they occur -- and do your best to educate students to avoid possible problems such as these.

Public blogs allow students to invite their family and friends to read their writing, which can motivate students to post high quality work. Students may also receive comments and feedback from the public, which can be rewarding and enriching. My students have been thrilled when other bloggers have linked to their blog.

The topic of the blog assignment may dictate if blogs should be more or less public. For example, if a blog topic requires posting sensitive information, then the access to the blog might be limited or another type of assignment might be warranted.

**How much editorial control?** Some instructors ask students to submit text for approval before making a blog post public. This can improve the quality of the blog post but it is also time consuming. I allow students to post directly, without my prior approval, but we spend time talking about good writing and the importance of correct grammar and spelling.

**How much feedback and commenting?** Feedback is important to student learning. Clarify how you will provide feedback at the beginning of the course. Some instructors publicly comment on each post. Another option is to require students to comment on other students' posts. You can (and should) reference blog posts throughout the course as a way to provide feedback, to show you are reading their IB, and to tie the assignment to the course content. My practice has been to comment on individual student posts, require students to comment on other students' blogs and to reference the posts in class. Students tell me they look forward to my comments and those of their classmates.

**How many blog posts to require?** I have found five to six blog posts over the course of a semester to be about right for my undergraduate and graduate psychology courses; blogs contribute 20-30% of the total grade. This schedule gives students time to set up a blog and then to have about one week in between blogs. However, if blogging will be one of the main assignments, then more frequent blog posts or heavier grade weighting may be warranted.

### **Lessons Learned**

Below are 10 lessons I learned after incorporating IB assignments into my courses. I have used IB in courses populated by traditional and nontraditional students and at different institutions (e.g., public, Hispanic-serving and elite, private). The courses in which I have used IB were small, with between 10-20 students. I have assessed student experiences through a focus group and through surveys about their blogging experience. Their experiences informed mine and I have included some quotes below to illustrate certain points.

#### **1. Take Small Steps**

Students who are new to blogging may be overwhelmed at the idea of setting up a blog and making blog posts. My instructions now direct students to take four small steps, described below, over the first two weeks of a semester-long class.

1. Require students to read psychology blogs related to their topic of interest and report back on them in class.
2. Ask students to set up a blog, name it, and to post a sentence outlining their topic.
3. Have students send their blog URL to you (if it is not in course management software).
4. Assign students to write their first blog post.

## **2. Connect Blogging with Psychology**

Students are more receptive to IB when they understand that IB is another way to write and express thoughts critically, while mastering technical skills. I relate the IB assignment to goals in undergraduate psychology (APA, 2007). My students have appreciated learning how to express their ideas through blogs.

*“I am getting a lot more comfortable in writing blogs. They are also becoming much more fun since I get to choose the topic.”* (Student comment from Spring, 2010.)

*“I feel that the blogging is a good concept to get people to think and discuss how the course material relates to life and current affairs.”* (Student comment from Spring, 2010.)

## **3. Set Expectations on Time Commitment and Distribution of Effort**

I expected students to spend 2 hr on each IB assignment. However, my undergraduate students reported spending between 3-4 hr on each IB assignment. Most students spent about 1.5 hr researching information and 1.5 hr writing and editing their post. The time decreased by about 30 min over the course of the semester. Most students reported spreading their work out

over several sessions; however, a few students did all the work at once. I learned to tell students to spend about 2-3 hr on each blog post, which should include researching, writing, and editing their post, and to distribute their work over several sessions to improve deep processing and learning of the material.

#### **4. Make Public Blogging Optional**

I like blogging because other individuals can read and comment on student blogs. I learned to give students a choice about public blogs because of my concerns about privacy. Most of my students agreed they were comfortable posting information on a public blog. However, I noticed that student comfort with public blogging is related to the sensitivity of the topic. For example, students in a course on psychology of terrorism were less eager to post on public blogs, even when their names were not attached to them. Preservice teachers have blogged on more controversial topics, such as lesbian and bisexual identity, when I managed the blogs in the course management system, which afforded some privacy.

#### **5. Provide Feedback**

Not surprisingly, my students wanted me to comment on their blog posts. However, I was surprised they also hoped to have comments from other students. I learned students assumed I might not be reading their blogs! I learned to be explicit in the syllabus about (a) when I would comment and (b) requiring (through grading) other students to comment on classmates' blogs. I learned to reference the blogs in class to connect their work with the course material. One way to promote student-to-student feedback is to encourage (or require) students to link their blog, through a blog roll, to the other students' blogs. Instructors can also link their students' blogs to their own teaching blog. This ability to link blogs creates a community of bloggers around a topic and makes feedback easier.

## **6. Manage Up**

I learned that many teachers do not use blogs for class assignments. I had a student complain to the department head about having to blog. Fortunately, I had educated my department head in advance about the use of blogging in my course. Therefore, he was able to support its use and encouraged the student to talk to me. I would like to think he would have supported me no matter what; however, he told me it helped him to be able to say it was a sound educational practice and to have known about my use of it. This management-up can prevent potential problems if students complain or make inappropriate posts.

## **7. Use Only for Appropriate Classes or Students**

Not all of my students enjoyed blogging. Whereas one student commented that *“It’s been great blogging this semester!”* another one commented that, *“I hate blogging and I’ll be glad when it is over.”* This student never came to love blogging, but felt a lot more competent about blogging at the end of the semester.

I learned that blogs work well in courses where I want students to develop their writing skills and to become proficient in using technology to share psychological information. IB is an easy way to introduce students to Web 2.0 tools. Even novice students learn how to make blog posts quickly and told me they experienced a sense of accomplishment at the end of the semester. It may not be practical to have students in large classes blog; you would have to consider carefully how to grade it. It might also be confusing to use blogs, with their informal writing style, if you are teaching students how to write formal papers.

## **8. Convey High Expectations**

Student comfort and familiarity with blogs will vary by institution and course. Blogging can be a great learning experience for students, including underrepresented minority students, low-

income students, and digital novices, all of whom populate my courses. Almost none of my students had used blogs before encountering them in my class. I learned that my students needed to hear me (a) talk about how technological literacy is an important skill for psychology students, as is the ability to communicate findings about psychology in everyday language and (b) affirm that the students are absolutely capable of completing this assignment. Students told me they enjoyed learning another way to express their ideas.

*"I like that fact that blogging can be informal."* (Student comment from Spring, 2010.)

*"I like it more than formal papers."* (Student comment from Spring, 2010.)

*"My idea of a blog is that you synthesize all your research into a main point and solution. It is supposed to be something easy to read and thought provoking."* (Student comment from Spring, 2010.)

### **9. Model Blogging by Creating a Teaching Blog**

Modeling and imitation are important learning mechanisms. I created a teaching blog so students could see what kinds of blogs I expected. My blog is about using blogging, but it could also be about the course topic. A "Teaching Blog" allows students to see what the instructor expects from a blog post and can help to demystify blogging as a learning tool.

### **10. Use RSS Feeds**

I learned about RSS feeds! Subscribing to RSS feeds of other blogs helps students understand what they will project to the world through their blogs. Subscribing to an RSS feed of students' blogs also helps instructors manage new posts without having to go to the site to look for them. Students have options for subscribing to an RSS feed, such as Google Reader. The following web site describe RSS readers in more detail: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS>

### **Sample Assignment**

The sample assignment described next has been modified over several semesters. I have used this assignment for individual blogs in undergraduate and graduate courses, where they contributed to between 10-30% of the course grade. In this assignment the blogs were public. I did not preview the posts before students submitted them, and the syllabus listed the grading rubric. This assignment was in an educational psychology course and counted for 20% of the grade.

#### **Sample Assignment: Instructional Blog for Educational Psychology**

You will create a blog and make five posts. Your blog will be on a SINGLE topic that relates to teaching and learning. Your first assignment (Week 1) is to read and follow 5-10 blogs that are related to your possible topic. Next, you will propose a single topic or general question to examine in each blog post (due Week 2). After I have approved your topic, you will set up a blog site (Week 3). Your blog will be public, and I hope you will invite your friends and family to read it. However, you are encouraged to write under a pseudonym.

We will brainstorm topics during the first class. Think broadly about what truly interests you. What do you wish you knew more about as you prepare to become an expert teacher? How can you best help students learn? You will need to commit to a topic in the first week.

You will also read and comment on the blogs of your classmates. I will provide you feedback, via posts, on your blog within 2 days of the due date. It is assumed your blog will be well-written and professional.

Get started by creating your blog here [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) and link it to my blog <http://proflunsford.wordpress.com/>. Be sure to read the information at the end of my post on ethics and copyright information. You must have permission to use photos from the internet.

Send me the URL of your blog so I can add it to my blog list. You will be required to add your classmates' blogs to your blog roll.

### **Due Date, Grading, and Feedback**

Your blog post is due by 5 p.m. on Wed. in Weeks 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. Your post must be related to the course concepts and to your topic in order to receive any credit. I will post the grade in the course management system: 5 points per blog entry as described below, for 20 points total out of a possible 100 points in the course.

- Clearly stated position or question of interest to be examined (1 pt).
- Critical examination of topic (2 pts) supported by evidence, e.g., multimedia links to videos, news, statistics (1 pt).
- Well-written, persuasive, interesting, main point easily understood (0.5 pt).
- Posting comments on classmates' blogs (0.5 pt). Comments need to go beyond agree or disagree by adding new information and links, posing thoughtful questions about the post, or extending the argument made in the post.

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