

Time to Write

The Newsletter of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Volume 8, No. 2
Spring 2005

NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM:

Greg Downey
School of Journalism & Mass Communication
School of Library & Information Science

If you date the current Internet phenomenon of "blogging" to the founding of the venerable, Google-owned weblog hosting service Blogger (www.blogger.com), then the entire enterprise is only barely five years old. But over that short time, blogs have been repeatedly touted as revolutionizing the corporate media landscape—from their performance during the information chaos of the September 11 attacks to their role in the polarizing presidential campaign of 2004. Some faculty on our campus have already found that keeping a daily weblog can be a unique outlet for public scholarship, even public service. In addition to authoring and publishing a weblog for scholarship and service, I believe weblogs have now matured to the point where they can also be useful tools for instructors in a wide range of disciplines—especially in courses where group collaboration, proper citation of sources, and well-crafted written arguments are important goals.

TUESDAY, MARCH 08, 2005

Open thread - Political Ad lecture & intros

Do you have questions about Dietram Scheufele's guest lecture on political ads, or want to discuss it further? Or hey, maybe you just want to introduce yourself to the blog? Post a comment to this thread and let's try to get this thing going!

posted by Aaron @ 12:47 PM

2 comments

Above: An image of one entry from Professor Downey's Journalism 201 Weblog.
Available at: <http://j201.blogspot.com/>

Though I haven't the discipline to publish my own daily weblog, I recently began using weblogs in all of my classes—from a 450-student introductory communications course to a 12-student graduate seminar. I'd like to describe my experience of adapting these "personal publishing" tools to the task of collective communication. Weblogs are in many ways very similar to other electronic "bulletin board" tools like newsgroups and listservs: they allow for the posting of both instructor announcements and student feedback; they enable students and instructors to engage with the class asynchronously and aspatially; and they preserve a record of class participation which can be reviewed later.

However, I believe the unique origin of weblogs as tools for media production and consumption make them better suited to certain classroom purposes—such as collaborating in analyzing and producing arguments and giving students an outlet for feedback and a say in shaping a course's activities—than are more traditional tools, particularly in three key ways:

(Continued on page 2)

In This Issue

New Technologies in the College Classroom: Weblogs
page 1

Why Learning to Write Well in College Is Difficult
page 3

First Impressions Count: Justifying My Emphasis on Grammar and Mechanics
page 6

WAC Offers Fall Training for Comm-B Instructors
page 6

Time to Write is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Correspondence should be addressed to:

Time to Write,
L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum,
Dept. of English,
UW-Madison,
Helen C. White Hall,
600 N. Park St.,
Madison, WI 53706.

We can also be reached via phone at 608-263-2732 or via email:

Director, Bradley T. Hughes
bthughes@wisc.edu

Asst. Director & Editor,
Matthew Pearson
mdpearson@wisc.edu

1,000,000 thanks to editorial gurus
Katie Gilbert,
Elise Gold, &
Melissa Tedrowe

NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: WEBLOGS

(Continued from page 1)

Why Weblogs? Three Arguments

1.) Most weblog services allow for easy inclusion and citation of hyperlinked text from web sites. This offers both excellent modeling of and practice in using sources as evidence or support for a writer's claims—often one of the most central, yet difficult-to-learn skills in academic writing.

2.) Weblogs are organized in reverse-chronological order—with the most recent entries on the top of the page, getting older as one scrolls down. This offers an immediate sense of their content as “news”; often incorporating comments and links by readers, weblogs offer up transparent evidence that their content is read, debated, and recycled.

3.) Weblogs give course participants—students, TAs, and instructors—a central site for discussing course content and for suggesting modifications or additions to course activities that might further student learning.

Nuts and Bolts of Setting Up a Weblog

For my classes I use the Blogger service, because it allows free registration; free creation of any number of weblogs; free hosting of those weblogs (no need to bother your department computer person); free comments on weblogs (some services charge money to comment on a blog); and an advertising-free appearance for your weblogs. Blogger offers another feature that many other services don't: one can invite multiple authors into a blog so that each author may add, edit, or delete posts from any Internet-accessible location.

Using Weblogs in a Seminar

Having multiple authors is crucial to using a weblog in small-seminar, upper-level undergraduate or graduate discussion. Once I set up my seminar weblog, I simply invite all of my students to become members. Then each week I ask my students to prepare for live in-class discussion by posting to the weblog—both posting something themselves and commenting on another student's posting. Not only is the record of student reactions productive to have as the in-class discussion unfolds, but it also allows us to review our positions weeks later, keeping an automatic historical record of our evolving understandings as the seminar unfolds.

Using Weblogs in a Large Lecture Course

In the large-lecture undergraduate survey course that I teach, I also use a multiple-authored blog, though in a very different way than in my seminar classes. J201, “Introduction to Mass Communication,” is a writing-intensive course meant to fill the Comm-B requirement and involves some 450 students and nine TAs. The TAs and I, all of us co-authors of the weblog, started using it as a way to pass along course announcements, freeing up valuable discussion section time.

Quoting and Citing Sources

So far so good. But the weblog holds certain extra benefits far beyond making course announcements. One of the most exciting aspects of weblogs for college-level writing teachers has to do with how they allow for quoting and commenting on online text—a practice that models for students how academic writers marshal evidence to support their own claims. As a large number of weblogs evolved to become self-proclaimed media watchdogs, so did their tools evolve. From Blogger, I installed in my Web browser a one-click trick that lets me jump immediately

from any online news article I might be reading into my weblog—with the tricky URL of that article, as well as any highlighted text, automatically typed into my weblog posting box.

This easy-to-use feature allows my TAs and me to use the weblog to point students to “just-in-time” news stories that relate to what we are discussing in class that week, as an integrated part of our own online media consumption activities. Our students quickly see that understanding the media means being able to read and properly cite sources, a practice that student-writers need to use in a range of disciplines and written genres. For example, one student commented on a posting about a recent article on Americans' views of Muslim Americans, post-9/11:

“The survey showed that 27 percent of respondents supported requiring all Muslim Americans to register where they lived with the federal government.”

I read this last night too, and I was ready to tear my hair out! I would prefer to think something was wrong with the study itself to think 27% of my fellow Americans would like me to register and identify myself as a potential terrorist.

[<http://j201.blogspot.com/2004/12/in-us-44-percent-say-restrict-muslims.html#comments>]

“Our students quickly see that understanding the media means being able to read and properly cite sources, a practice that student-writers need to use in a range of disciplines and written genres.”

(Continued on page 4)

WHY LEARNING TO WRITE WELL IN COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT

[Available at <http://www.uwlax.edu/wimp/teach/whywriting.htm>]

Bill Cerbin, Assistant to the Provost, UW-La Crosse, and Terry Beck, Department of English, UW-La

This semester we're pleased to feature a contribution from two colleagues at UW-La Crosse, a campus noted for its strong writing-across-the-curriculum program. In the list below, Corbin and Beck offer insightful explanations about why students struggle when they move from high school to college writing and as they write in courses across the curriculum. In doing so, they offer instructors explicit and useful things to consider when designing writing assignments, working with students on their writing, and evaluating written work. The list is not, of course, meant to rationalize sub-par writing by college students. Nor can one course instructor address all the challenges listed below. However, we can, learn from this list and push ourselves, for example, to teach explicitly the genres we assign, or, when we confer with students about their papers, ask them about the previous writing advice they've received. By understanding why writing is difficult for some of our students, we can work to help students develop into more confident and able writers.

- 1. Variations from discipline to discipline.** Disciplines are discourse communities with their own methods of developing and communicating knowledge. However, students take classes in several disciplines (i.e., several discourse communities) at the same time and have difficulty mastering the different forms of inquiry and the different stylistic conventions that apply. It takes a long time to develop writing proficiency in one discipline—let alone several.
- 2. Lack of uniform criteria and standards.** Criteria, standards, and definitions of good writing differ from course to course (even within the same department). Students develop the idea these are arbitrary and a matter of instructors' personal preferences. This prompts them to search out "what you're looking for" or "what you want" in their assignments.
- 3. Lack of explicit criteria and standards.** In some courses, students have little or no information about what constitutes appropriate writing, no clear sense of the goal they are supposed to work toward.
- 4. Undeveloped writing processes.** In many classes students are expected to write well, but are not taught how to do so. Courses do not try to develop students' writing: they simply require it. And students are left to use whatever strategies and competencies they have. But—unless they are given feedback and helped with their composing processes—students will not get better by simply writing a lot.
- 5. Misleading or incomplete writing instruction.** In some classes, formal writing may be treated solely as a list of rules governing the use of language (grammar, spelling, punctuation) rather than as purposeful communication of ideas. When this is done, mechanical aspects of language are emphasized to the exclusion of important conceptual abilities. Often key writing concepts are never addressed in courses. For example, how to adapt one's knowledge to the audience and the situation (i.e., rhetorical thinking) is extremely important but rarely taught. Similarly, how to develop a coherent train of thought is crucial to good writing—but rarely taught.
- 6. Incomplete understanding of the subject matter.** Students very often have to write about subjects that are unfamiliar to them. And, typical of novices in any subject area, their understanding as they write tends to be incomplete and naïve. Thus, it is very common that their writing lacks coherence and structure—reflecting their fragmented understanding of the topic, not necessarily their incompetence as writers.
- 7. Lack of experience with and failure to understand genres.** Most assignments are academic writing exercises: "tests" in which students demonstrate their knowledge to the teacher (e.g., essays, library research papers). These are genres that are rhetorically difficult and confusing—and poor preparation for the writing they will do after their university careers. Students have fewer opportunities to develop knowledge of other forms of writing and to write to different audiences.
- 8. Lack of consistent coaching.** As students go from class to class, they experience writing as a hodgepodge of activities, assignments, advice, etc. It is unlikely that these unrelated, discrete experiences promote cumulative learning and develop writing expertise.
- 9. Non-reflective writing experiences.** Students probably do not treat writing as a deliberate skill to develop. For the most part, they do not analyze their own writing or reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, and development as writers.
- 10. Students do not care about what they write.** Often students perceive academic writing as a chore rather than as a meaningful learning experience. While this is part of current student culture, it is not inevitable. Students are more likely to be invested in their work when they have some control over the selection of the topic and the work has an "authentic purpose" beyond getting a grade.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: WEBLOGS

(Continued from page 2)

Students Shape Course Activities via Weblog

The most interesting blog-based innovation in J201 came about almost entirely through student engagement and shows how a blog can serve as a space to both capture an innovative idea for a course-related activity and become the site of this activity. Before each of our three in-class exams, we handed out a list of "review terms" to our students, and we offered them a place to discuss these terms on our weblog (we set up a "blank" posting and student comments made up the entire discussion). To our surprise, these "virtual study sessions" were a gigantic hit. It might not seem surprising that students would log in electronically to ask their peers for answers to an upcoming test; what was surprising, however, was the amount of students willing to offer those answers, often in great detail, and often late into the evening on the day before the exam. The weblog ended up producing a space where students could take on a tutoring or even mentoring role themselves, advising their peers not only on particular textbook answers, but also on test-taking strategies. One student later said "it was like studying with the whole class."

Maintaining Civility: A Word of Advice

One word of advice for using a weblog in such a large course concerns limiting anonymous posting. Though we initially left our weblog comments wide open to anonymous postings, hoping students would remember the rule of thumb that "if you wouldn't say it to someone face to face, don't say it to someone online," sadly, a few anonymous posters began to disregard this rule—perhaps egged on by the mainstream media in the polarizing 2004 election season. Removing the ability to post anonymously probably limited feedback a bit, but students were still free to post "pseudonymously"—using an alias or "handle" rather than their real name—as long as they registered with the Blogger service to do so. On the bright side, encouraging students to register with Blogger enabled them to create their own weblogs, an opportunity that many took advantage of and kept up with even after the course was over.

Teaching the Limits of Blogs

Of course, blog participation is no substitute for personal, physical participation in class (we still take attendance) or for more formal paper assignments. In fact, I've developed some blog-based exercises for my seminar classes that highlight these very ideas. For example, one week during the semester I'll have my students meet for the entire week online in the blog, trying to hold as rich and productive a discussion asynchronously in text over the course of a week as we would have in person over the course of a few hours. Inevitably students come out of the experience a bit frustrated, which is exactly the point (we have a good time when we finally get together in person to complain about the limits of getting together online). In addition to this exercise, I've asked students to create blogs anonymously and then to read each others' blogs, trying to guess at the identity of their creators. This exercise often forces students to see how complicated identity can be in writing and reading online discourse.

Weblogs already may have enjoyed their fifteen minutes of fame in the news media, or they may be the new paradigm for that news media. Either way, the time is ripe for using free and simple weblog tools like Blogger as a way to help students understand both the power and limits of the written word in a whole new way. By doing so, we can help them learn important writing skills. Further, blogs can facilitate community and collaboration in a course and allow students to be more accountable for their own learning. Happy writing!

You can find links to Greg Downey's course weblogs on his UW web site: <http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/~gdowney/>

Below: An image of part of one entry from Professor Downey's Journalism 676 Weblog. Available at: http://j676.blogspot.com/2004_02_01_j676_archive.html

J676 - Cyberspace and hypermedia

Weblog for students to post discussion questions and other tidbits.

Links

Login to blogger to post a response
Course web site
Instructor's web site

archives

01/01/2004 - 01/31/2004
02/01/2004 - 02/29/2004
03/01/2004 - 03/31/2004
04/01/2004 - 04/30/2004

Current Posts

Wednesday, January 28, 2004

1. Gender in Internetworking. In Prof. Downey's Article, He talks about the feminine/masculine labor involved in digital and analog internetworking (p. 228) He quotes Jennifer light saying that "the job of the programmer, perceived in recent years as masculine work, originated as feminized clerical labor." What aspect of programming is masculine? If women initially performed these operations, what caused the labor to be transferred to the "masculine" side of labor? Has this separation caused any benefits/problems to internetworking? language often gives gender to items not out of gender, but out of association. Are there items in the language of internetworking that are gendered? If so, what? If not, why?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT: JUSTIFYING MY EMPHASIS ON GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

Eric Schatzberg
Department of the History of Sci-

I always teach at least some writing in my courses, whether they are officially designated "writing-intensive" or not. In my lecture courses, I teach writing through one-page reading responses and take-home essay exams. When I first started teaching, students often questioned my approach in their course evaluations. They complained that they had not signed up for a writing course, and some felt that I was not interested in their ideas when I corrected the mechanics of their writing. In response, I developed a little justification that I give to the students before the first assignment. It's extemporaneous, but goes something like this:

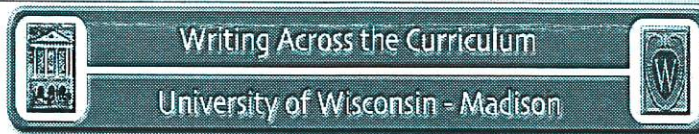
"Writing is not just for writing courses. Writing well—that is, being able to express your thoughts clearly in prose—is the single most important skill that you can acquire as an undergraduate. To that end, I expect your writing to use direct, concise prose that conveys your meaning with specific, carefully chosen words. I also expect generally correct spelling, grammar and punctuation."

"In past courses, some students have complained that I am less interested in their ideas than in their spelling or punctuation. But you can't separate the ideas from the form of their expression. Think of your writing assignment as a job interview. No matter how qualified you are for the position, you still want to dress appropriately for the interview. Appropriate clothes help communicate your qualifications for the job, conveying your competence and maturity. You wouldn't wear dirty jeans and a torn t-shirt to an interview for a professional position, because such attire would make it harder for your prospective employer to recognize your qualifications. The rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation serve a similar purpose. But the rules of writing are more than just appropriate costume; they are also essential for getting across your intended meaning."

VISIT THE WAC WEBSITE!

- Find discipline-specific pedagogical advice for teaching with writing.
- View and adapt sample writing assignments.
- Arrange for individual consultations with Writing-Across-the-Curriculum staff.
- Find out about training for Communication-B instructors.
- Read advice about responding to student writing.
- And much more!

<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>



Helping faculty and teaching assistants in all disciplines teach with writing

[How We Can Help You](#)

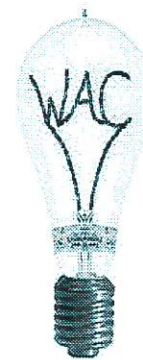
[Integrating Writing into Your Course](#)

[Comm-B & Writing Intensive Courses @ UW](#)

[WAC Events and News](#)

[Browse Site by Discipline](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)



[Contact Us](#)

Copyright 2004
Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin - Madison
Sponsored by the College of Letters and Science

Helping faculty and teaching assistants in all disciplines teach with writing

WAC OFFERS FALL TRAINING FOR COMM-B INSTRUCTORS

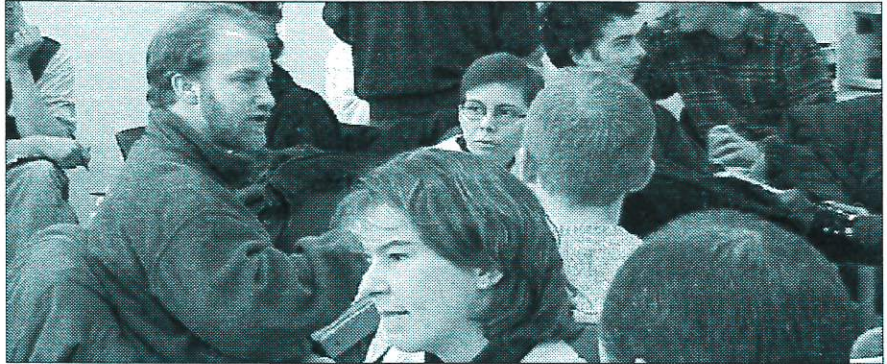
In August 2005, on Monday the 22nd and Tuesday the 23rd, the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program again will offer training for instructors new to teaching with writing.

Training will take place from 9 AM-12:15 PM each day, in Room 7191 of Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park Street (just across Park Street from Memorial Union).

These interactive workshops, which have been offered every semester since January 1997, are designed to complement the course-specific training departments and programs may already provide for TAs in Comm-B courses.

Sessions will feature presentations by Comm-B Teaching Fellows—outstanding TAs who have recently taught Communication-B courses.

Attendees finish the training having learned to think carefully about their own methods for teaching with writing and how best to incorporate the writing pedagogies they have learned.



Above: Comm-B TAs discuss teaching strategies.

- All Comm-B TAs and faculty are welcome, but registration is required.
- Please register at <http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>
 - ⇒ Click on "WAC Events and News" and then on "Fall Training for Comm-B TAs"
- For more information on the training, contact Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum. Brad can be reached at 608-263-3823 or bthughes@wisc.edu.

The Newsletter of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum University of Wisconsin-

Department of English
University of Wisconsin-Madison
6187 Helen C. White Hall
600 North Park Street
Madison, WI 53706
<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>



Our mailing labels reflect current personnel listings, and therefore we cannot make changes or deletions. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.