Blogging to Develop Honors Students' Writing

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"One should rule a great kingdom as one cooks a small fish"
—the *Tao de Ching*

After an exciting class discussion, you might want students to write conventional papers directed at you and focused ultimately on a grade, or you might prefer that they bring their further insights to their classmates, continuing and enriching the ongoing class collaboration. Blogging is an excellent way to implement the second option, continuing an exchange of ideas and providing students with another tool to improve their writing skills. Student class blogging offers many benefits—for student and instructor alike—compared to assigning conventional papers directed only at the instructor. The collaborative writing and peer editing inherent in blogging offer challenges as well as benefits, so guidance in facilitating a meaningful exchange as well as navigating the nuts-and-bolts technicalities may be useful to honors faculty who are establishing a class blog. Ideas for class exercises, assignments, and evaluative expectations co-designed by an instructor and a team of honors

students may also help bring out maximum creativity and collegiality in the honors blog.

BLOGGING BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

Most teachers are inspired by new tools that can potentially enhance classroom pedagogy, but they may have reservations about implementing unfamiliar tools and technologies. Blogs are relatively easy to integrate into the class experience, but one should prepare carefully before integrating it into class assignments. With such preparation, establishing class blogs is easy and affordable, the benefits greatly outweigh the minor drawbacks, and ongoing maintenance is minimal. As composition instructor Joel Bloch makes clear in his helpful book on teaching and technology, "Blogs can be set up either by a teacher or a student, often at no cost, on a blogging service. Blogs can be set up for individual students, for a group of students, or for an entire class. . . . [It is] a simple and low cost way of giving students access to publishing and distributing their writing on the Internet" (128). Given the many different ways to blog now, a teacher has nothing to lose by giving it a try.

Bloch also points out that logs are democratic: they allow everyone to publish their unique perspective, "free from traditional gatekeepers" (129). Another advocate claims that the way students learn on a blog is different from how they learn through traditional writing:

> [Students write to each other in] virtually all of their course communications, expanding ideas of audience, purpose, and context each time they contribute to a message board, create a blog entry, or engage in an email-based peer review. The online format—by its very nature—requires students to learn to use writing to interact with others. (Warnock xi)

Blogs can facilitate "constructivist learning strategies such as self-directed, collaborative, and active learning" (Gresham et al. 44) as well as enhance digital literacy. When blogging, students learn to explore topics that interest them. They can share their discoveries with their peers in a communal setting, where everyone's voice is valued. Blogs are especially effective at

> . . . allowing students increased time and flexibility for student-to-student interaction, as well as student-to-teacher interaction, by expanding the range of resources available. Students also have increased responsibility for their own learning, and an online

component allows for the production of an individualized environ-
ment to suit students' different needs and learning styles." (Gresham
et al. 44)

Finally, the "online environment is an ideal place for reflection, much more
than the face-to-face environment where external factors can influence a
student's ability to speak up" (Johnson 91). Blogs thus create a perfect oppor-
tunity to expand the conversation outside the class discussion and allow
quieter students to have a voice.

Despite all these benefits, many of us have tried adding a blog component
to our classes only to be disappointed by the results. Students do the mini-
mum amount of work required to pass the course; their comments on others'
posts are not substantive, or they fail to provide any depth of critical analysis
(Johnson 91; Brescia and Miller 50). They groan about another class chore,
and they drag their feet about the online discussion, which can feel forced
(Camp 166). They find the workload onerous—more blogging, more writ-
ing, more reading, just more everything. For instructors, it becomes too much
work to police another forum—the online agora—and they revert to handed-
in response papers and other more traditional forms of weekly writing. The
idea of students writing for someone beyond their teacher, however, remains
tempting; no doubt "their sense of perspective and ownership of their writing
changes" when the writing activity does not produce a uni-directional, sterile
document aimed at one recipient, especially a more powerful recipient who
grades them (Konkel and Gammack 151).

Stephen Downes notes another problem with a class blog: "assigned blog-
ging in schools cannot be blogging. It's contrived. No matter how much we
want to spout off about the wonders of an audience and readership, students
who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher" (24).
In working on a well-organized blog, though, students can and will write to
their colleagues. When run with a light touch, a class blog can help students
feel like owners of their own writing. The key is in the, at best, near-invisible
mechanisms and strategies built up around the blog.

THE TECHNICALITIES

Many structures can be employed for class blogging. Some instructors
ask each student to create her own blog with its own title and url. In James
Farmer's system, each student's blog is linked to others' blogs, and all students
are asked to visit the blogspaces of their colleagues. As Farmer says,

> [The ability of bloggers] to retain ownership of their writing, edit at will, refer to previous items and ideas, and control in its entirety the space and manner in which the weblog is published can significantly augment their control over their expression and hence increase the opportunity for them to project and the motivation for doing so.

My concerns with Farmer's structure are that it adds to the students' workload and that less technologically adept students may find themselves at an unfair disadvantage. Other instructors use institutional platforms like Blackboard to protect student privacy and give students easier access. To many, including me, institutional platforms validate students' suspicion that the blog-space is a cleverly disguised unidirectional writing format. On the other hand, the idea of broadcasting students' personal writing across the World Wide Web may be undesirable. Though students themselves may not care so much about online privacy, instructors should, and I personally do not wish to create a publically accessible permanent record of an enthusiastic freshman's rant about a controversial topic that could someday be accessed by, say, a prospective employer. The solution is to set up a blog to be undiscoverable by search engines and to allow access to the blog only by accepted authors, i.e., the students in the class.

A number of blogging platforms are available online for practically no cost. Two of the most popular are Blogger and WordPress, and both provide the necessary features to implement the strategies I explore in this article. Although other blogging options are available, these two offer a balance between simplicity, style control, and aesthetic freedom for student bloggers (see Johnson, Plattner, and Hundley on these formats, 53). Wordpress comes in two flavors—wordpress.com and wordpress.org—with the former being the more palatable for those willing to trade the highest degree of technological control for a greater degree of simplicity. Both Blogger and Wordpress offer almost infinite stylistic freedom, and students seem to enjoy making design and presentation choices that set their posts apart from those of their peers. As Patricia Worrall has noted, students have been able to learn another kind of digital literacy this way: "as designers, students had to be aware of the visual components of their projects in addition to the content" (Worrall 90; see also Teske and Etheridge 108 and Kress 56). I create one blog for the class, with each student logged in as an individual author, and I require that students create their own passwords for added security and privacy. Having a single blog creates a collaborative format, with the instructor as "blog host" and students as "contributing authors." With a single blog, instead of individual student

blogs, students do not have to look for others' blogs: all the current posts are on one webpage, and students can click into the comments section with ease. A single website format makes the complete conversation literally more visible, reduces the total workload for students and instructor alike, and arguably makes participation in the conversation easier for students.

KEEPING IT INFORMAL

The less official a class blog feels, the better the posts, in my experience. Excessive formality can be the kiss of death for an otherwise healthy blog. "The more formal the communication, the less likely others are to respond in a timely manner" (Tu and McIsaac 144). Students must feel that their style and tone are their own, that they are writing to friends, and that they are free to experiment with ideas and writing styles that will not be immediately discredited by their peers or, worse, their teacher. Arguably, the blog is another style of expression entirely, neither completely formal like an article or a research paper nor completely informal like texting or Twitter:

> There is a possibility that weblogs encourage significantly more in-depth and extended writing than communication by email or through discussion board environments and yet less extensive than more formal modes of publication, producing in an academic sense a kind of discourse somewhere between the conversational and the article. (Farmer)

Andergassen et al. argue that in student blogging, the most important learning takes place in informal contexts (204). Informality, in this case, is the mother of invention.

In order to provide space for the innovation and creativity that the blog format affords, instructors need to reduce workload elsewhere. Garrison makes a strong cautionary point:

> The issue of reflective and permanent discourse is one to consider when designing for each of the phases of inquiry in an online context. Online learning also creates the need for learners to accept increased responsibility for their learning. In this regard, workload must be seriously considered. If collaboration and discourse are to be at the core of the inquiry process, then students must have the time to engage other students and reflect upon these deliberations. This is not possible if the workload is too heavy. (28)

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In my class, the blog post and online commentary make up the entirety of the weekly writing workload. Students use their blog posts as drafts to develop two short papers in a more formal style twice during the semester, and these formal papers build on groundwork laid in the blog; even the revision process is facilitated through peer comments on the blog. I do not load students up with other writing, and I make sure they know how to use the blog posts to study for the final, which in our honors curriculum is a written exam.

The evaluative structure needs to reward collegiality, timeliness, and deep content, the lack of which often makes student blogs seem shallow or irrelevant. After all, honors students love depth and detail, and, as former University of Maine Honors Director and Dean Charlie Slavin pointed out,

> Students in honors are willing to take intellectual risks both in their discipline and outside of it; they enjoy the challenge. . . . Their personal economies guide them to get the most out of their under-graduate education. Sure, sometimes they are bored or turned off by topics they view as irrelevant to their education, but they are willing to explore and often find themselves surprised at their interest. They're willing to take the risk. (16)

If risk-taking in the blogspace is rewarded and encouraged, the instructor will be rewarded threefold with unique and innovative posts. I have had students spontaneously create Buzzfeed-style photo essays, digital art with poetic captions, and newspaper-quality editorials in their blog posts. Beyond showing academic risk-taking, inspired student posts generate a ripple effect throughout the class, raising the quality of other commentaries and sparking everyone's resolve to create something new.

AMPLIFYING CLASS DISCUSSIONS IN A POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOP

A good blog does more than provide a forum for student writing; it provides a means for amplifying, developing, and complicating in-class conversation. As D. R. Garrison notes,

> At the heart of a meaningful educational experience are two integrated processes: reflection and discourse. These are the two inseparable elements of inquiry in higher education. In an online learning experience the advantage is given to reflection in a way that

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is not possible in the fast and free flowing face-to-face environment. The face-to-face classroom experience requires verbal agility, spontaneity, and confidence to express oneself in a group setting. Reflection and even dialogue are greatly limited in most campus based classrooms . . . [and] there is evidence to suggest that online learning may in fact have an advantage in supporting collaboration and creating a sense of community. (25)

Timing the blog post in the center of each unit seems to allow the most space for reflection, discussion, and new ideas that will then return to the classroom before the class has finished discussing the unit's material. In class discussion, students can bring up the most provocative points from the blog and include the comments of peers who might otherwise be unlikely to volunteer ideas themselves in a live class discussion setting (Tu and McIsaac 143).

If the evaluative structure requires students to write to and for their peers, not the instructor, students feel more compelled to make their posts relevant. The hallmark of a good honors program is this kind of "shared responsibility for teaching and learning," as Kathryn Huggett argues while discussing the results of her study of successful honors programs:

Programs that invite students, faculty and staff to be both teachers and learners help to create a culture animated by a shared commitment to individual and collaborative teaching and learning that is essential to enhancing students' growth and development. . . . Students who worked in collaborative settings enjoyed learning from each other and those who assumed individual responsibilities for teaching were sometimes astonished to find they had so much to contribute. (66)

A good blog asks students to produce fresh content for their learning community, not just to recycle ideas presented to them by their instructor. They produce ideas for themselves and their teacher, sure, but the blog format makes it clear that their writing is really for their peer group (Ratliff). Studies show that students who engage actively with constructive online feedback report feeling more confident in their writing and in their scholarship (Ertmer 87). Blogging encourages spontaneity so that students can judiciously ignore set assignments if they feel particularly inspired to post on a revelation, epiphany, or nascent thesis. Thus the blog becomes more of a workshop, a microenvironment for interactive participation (see Huggett 62).

In order to maintain the spirit of peer-to-peer collaboration and community, teachers should try to be as invisible as possible as presences on the

blog. If a blog is running well, students should be responding to one another and not even thinking of the instructor as an audience member. The teacher should provide evaluative feedback no more often than once a month. I have argued elsewhere that honors education needs to be consciously anti-teleological; no period of history or human experience should be subordinated to any other (Harlan-Haughey 98–99). I now argue that instructors should model a lateral community of learner-scholars, where the instructor dominates discussion and learning neither in nor out of the classroom. As Kathleen B. Yancey writes, "If we believe that writing is social, shouldn't the system of circulation—the paths that the writing takes—extend beyond and around the single path from student to teacher?" (310–11). Students cannot perceive the many circulative paths of their blog writing if the teacher lurks around the blog-space like Big Brother. "In a student-centered honors course, emphasizing what the teacher should *not* do is also important" (Wiegant et al. 224). It is important to "encourage student-led decisions in shaping the course and thereby their final product, thus enhancing their sense of ownership and their pride in what they have achieved, so teachers should keep some distance from the students' decision-making process" (Wiegant et al. 224). (For a cogent rebuttal of this approach, one that suggests teachers should closely direct and guide all blog activity, see Garrison 69.)

Students should create a substantive post no less often than once a week, with no fewer than three timely comments on their colleagues' posts. Johnson et al.'s rule of thumb is three times a week for check-in and commentary at a minimum (59). In the case of my blog, students produce one substantive post a week (usually around 600 words) and provide in-depth commentary on three other students' posts. As instructor, I read all content weekly and take notes on my assessment rubric but do not actively take part in online discussion even though I will bring people's ideas back into the classroom. In such a scenario, honors instructors serve as "coaches or facilitators rather than the sole authorities or experts" (Otero 22), and such a role is ideal for honors educators.

HARNESSING STUDENT INTEREST

I make sure that students have a stake in their blogs in several ways. First, I allow students to design class assignments and questions on the blog. Second, I encourage students, whenever possible, to write on subjects of their choosing and to include multimedia illustrations, explore different genres of writing, and directly engage their audience creatively. In this way students are gaining

digital literacy in an unprecedented manner as the blog challenges them to produce more than text: "contemporary technologies of page or text production make it easy to combine different modes of representation—image can be combined with language, sound can be added to image, movement of image is possible" (Kress 56). As Kress says, "one person now has to understand the semiotic potentials of each mode—sound, visual, speech—and orchestrate them to accord with his or her design" (56). This kind of multimedia challenge is a boon for honors students, who must have many digital and creative skills to find careers.

Because they are evaluated and responded to by their peers, students are inherently more invested in the quality of their work. They know they are not just writing for a grade but writing to one another. And because the blog is generational—my honors blog has been running now for five years, and no content is discarded—they know their content will never disappear; they write to posterity, i.e., the next few years of honors students (Konkel and Gammack 151). In this way, students are engaged in the ongoing collaborative project of creating a living artifact of their active learning process that honors their agency. After all, current honors students belong to a "wired generation" that thinks more creatively about online affordances than their older instructors might (Otero 21; see also Hawisher and Selfe 3–4). We should not get in their way; we should live up to the aspirational goal of honors to be "leader[s] in pedagogical innovation, serving as laboratory space[s] for new modes of teaching and learning" (Schuman 66; see also Carnicom et al. 166).

THE GREENING HONORS COLLABORATION

One example of a pedagogical innovation using a class blog was a set of blog prompts and in-class assignments that a group of three students and I, as preceptor, developed at the University of Maine. The three second- and third-year student team members, who had previously taken the first two courses in UMaine's four-semester Honors Civilizations sequence, took the notion of a scholarly community beyond their own experience of the first year, designing ways for the students currently enrolled in the first-year courses to find a new focus in the diverse set of readings.

A perennial challenge of a typical Great Books honors curriculum like the one at the UMaine involves balancing the tensions among close reading, coverage, thematic relevance to current issues, and the responsibility to replace general education courses. Students can feel disenfranchised when they sense that any of these factors is getting short shrift, yet balancing these

responsibilities is difficult while keeping students engaged within the time constraints of an honors program. In an effort to lend the first two semesters of Honors Civilizations some much-needed thematic cohesion, satisfy the general education replacement values, and explicitly link readings with modern environmental concerns, our group—an interdisciplinary team of thinkers—is developing a multidisciplinary, multi-technology learning platform that emphasizes the environmental issues inherent the first year's readings.

Our group wanted to build on Marcus O'Donnell's compelling idea of the blog as a kind of ecology: "In a linked or networked approach to learning the sense of agency and individuality is powerful but it is not isolating or egocentric. Each node in a dynamic network has the ability to both send and receive" (15). Toward this effort we decided to use a class blog to parallel class discussion, which provided space for students to work out ideas before class and thus sparked substantive in-class discussion. Our team developed a series of student-created assignments, readings, images, and links that spoke to the multiple intelligences and majors of our students and that demonstrated the relevance of the past as a means of illuminating modern environmental issues.

Our aim was to get students thinking about humans' relationship with nature as a fundamental lens when exploring texts in the Honors Civilizations sequence. We hoped to move beyond the classic anthropocentric questions common to Great Books curricula, such as "What does it mean to be human?" and "What is civilization?" One student on the team noted,

> [When] speaking with my peers about Honors, I found that in general students often feel that the focus of the curriculum is either unclear or so broad that it appears unwieldy, that discussions in seminars lack depth and [are] often filled with prolonged silences, [and that] we move through dense (often lengthy) texts too quickly without any sort of foundation for interpretations that delve beneath surface narratives. While many students like the relaxed, discussion-oriented atmosphere that Honors provides them and feel that many of the texts are interesting, they feel dissatisfied with their exploration of the texts—they want more from them, but don't know where to find what they're looking for. (Each quotation in this section was generated by the three-person undergraduate team of Cunningham, Estrup, and Lees in a collaborative document and will be referred to as "Undergraduate Team").

In order to get the Honors Civilizations sequence to yield more for students, we hatched the "greening honors" idea. The goal was to give the honors great books sequence a more clearly defined focus. The team was challenged "to incorporate this practice of reading ecologically without overbearing or narrowing the scope of the students' reading experience" (Undergraduate Team). The team members could not focus specifically on environmental questions to the neglect of other important themes. The group was not asserting that the environmental aspect of a text is the only important focus, but as one team member noted,

> By focusing codified texts, which often carry calcified notions with them, through a somewhat more abstract lens it pushes students to look deeper while also opening discussion of texts to possible modern applications. The environmental or ecological context of a text is interesting to analyze because it can be specific (with instances of natural imagery/symbolism). It therefore pushes students to be careful interpreters but also introduces broader questions about what we perceive to be reality and where humanity falls within that perceived reality. This then highlights the key question we revisit in Honors: What does it mean to be human?

The student team members came to the current class sections, posted questions and assignments on the blog, and led informal discussions both in and out of class. This way, students currently in the class saw and commented on the blog that "a team of undergrads from different disciplines and years [were] contributing to the curriculum." Their presence in the first-year students' honors experience, both in the classroom and on the blog, seemed to enhance "everyone's sense of a community of scholarship, and of accountability." This student team found many innovative ways to "turn established texts 'inside out' by juxtaposing them against 'disorienting' or de-humanizing phenomena like the environment" (Undergraduate Team).

While using the blog to address specific environmental questions, one group member made the following observation:

> [Having students] post their thoughts on the blog and comment on their peers is useful in expanding the volume of discourse around each text. This process allows students to take the time to consider and develop their thoughts as well as the thoughts of others. This process gives a voice to students who may not be as vocal in class, and makes it so that ideas already have some mobility before class.

Another team member wrote about the topical student-prepared blog posts that they

> . . . provide students with a focus prior to their reading, presenting them with ideas for reflection so that they read with purpose and more actively make connections. [They] also provide the opportunity to pull in supplemental articles or other useful resources (links to images, videos, etc.) to enrich the educational experience.

While the student team noted that "establishing the rhythm of these blog prompts" was a work in progress, the team members agreed that

> . . . the vast majority of students commented that they liked the discussions in class because the students [earlier had] the freedom to shape them. . . . It helps that Sarah [the course instructor] is there to participate and aid if the discussion falters or sways but . . . not there [to] drive the discussions. It is this balance that we want with our blog prompts and discussion questions concerning the environment in these texts.

Our green focus worked on three different levels: it encouraged close reading and in-depth scrutiny of specific textual or philosophical questions; it connected works from the past with present concerns; and it encouraged students to connect these concerns with broader questions regarding the significance of humanity and civilization. One student in our group reread the blog responses week-to-week and noticed some shifts as the class progressed:

> Initially, few students seemed to want to pick up a deeper discussion of natural elements in the text and the majority felt more comfortable with summarizing and surface-level connections. Later students seemed more comfortable making connections and expressing ideas that move away from more conventional interpretations. More students are now addressing the natural contexts of honors readings (those responses often seem to have greater depth of thought). Unfortunately, students still seem to be reframing questions to serve as answers, [and] often responses are filled with general impressions rather than more carefully considered interpretations or abstract ideas. Overall the general trend online seems to be toward a more dynamic dialogue, but it's not quite there.

Our team, in other words, was heartened by the initial results of our experience but believed more fine-tuning was needed.

Using the "blog space as an extension of class, a way for students to construct ideas and to respond to other students' impressions outside the classroom in an informal but constructive setting" seemed to help students feel less rushed during in-person class discussion (Undergraduate Team). One of our collaborators noted,

> Our curriculum faces the constant challenge of time within the classroom and [with regard to] the required reading, and I know I would personally come into class at times having done my best to read but not always having thought about the material extensively enough to really have something potent to say in class. One student commented that "Sometimes it's hard to get your thoughts into the discussion without time to think it over," and I see the blogs as a space to organize your thoughts and articulate ideas to capitalize on the time with the other students and [the instructor]. (Undergraduate Team)

In addition to time restrictions, our team experienced another problem:

> [We had trouble] getting students to comment on other posts and getting them to do so respectfully but also critically. Many of the comments on others' posts are enthusiastically affirmative [but merely] paralleled with blog responses that at times regurgitate our prompts. I see these as the largest challenges we've faced. We want to spark ideas, not provide them. (Undergraduate Team)

This comment led me to create a more in-depth evaluative rubric for future class blogs, one that focuses especially on invoking high-quality citizenship in the online scholarly community.

CREATING FORWARD-THINKING EVALUATIVE STRUCTURES

I use a detailed scoring rubric based on Christopher Long's innovative model (available at <http://www.personal.psu.edu/cpl2/blogs/cplportfolio/2009/01/blogs-and-assessment.html>), introduced to me by Meghan J. Shen, who uses a similar hands-off strategy in her classroom. In addition to blog content, students gain a range of points for creativity; constructive, detailed, and timely feedback to their peers; support and reference; and follow-up posting. My blogging students get a numbered score based on six

categories: (1) collegiality and constructive comments; (2) timeliness of primary post and three comments; (3) grammar/mechanics/syntax; (4) creative thinking and connection making; (5) critical thinking; and (6) respect for evidence and argumentative support.

The monthly grade sheet I return to students rewards them for excellence and originality of thought as well as collegiality. I write these evaluations by hand, a distinctly non-digital format that further separates my role as teacher and evaluator from the blog space. We meet in individual conferences so that we can discuss the grade sheet and I can address any anxieties or concerns the students have as well as encourage collegiality on the blog and in the classroom. While we may also spend some conference time discussing mechanics or grammar, I work hard to emphasize the bigger picture: how the students are writing; whether they have strong personal styles; whether they are responding to their peers in a constructive, respectful manner, and if not, the importance of tone in informal and formal writing like emails, memos, and other forms of communication they will need to master in their lives. I also use this forum to discuss their performance as citizens in the classroom.

BUILDING UP AND OUT

The class blog often becomes the launching pad for bigger projects. Students are required to revise two or three posts substantively and to build formal writing assignments out of their one- or two-page weekly blog posts. The process of revising and workshopping becomes an end in itself in its visibility on the blog. Blog software offers many options for editing text visibly—from strikethrough to tracking of changes. When students revise, they show their revisions on the blog and thus validate their peers who prompted the revisions and enter into further discussion with them. Students learn that ideas need weeks of incubation and that excellent work does not take place in a vacuum.

The blog, as a handy "online filing cabinet for student work," also becomes a useful place to study for written exams and finals (Richardson 20), constituting the core of a class as it feeds into class discussion, exams, formal writing assignments, and each student's sense of self as a citizen-scholar. Some semesters, I have students complete their final projects on the blog. I have had students produce short documentaries on the blog and create videologs on the themes of the Honors Civilization course as well as extensive skits and dramatizations, and some students incubate ideas on the blog that may become the subject of their senior capstones. The creativity and enthusiasm

of a well-engineered blog has no limit. One need only establish a logical blog structure, create a repeating evaluative mechanism, and stay out of the way.

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