

Blogging in the classroom can help both students and educators

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Credit: Penn State

Most people share a similar memory from their days in school: writing reflections in a special notebook doled out at the beginning of the year. Teachers were likely the only ones who read what was written, and students probably never looked at what they wrote again, either.

To revamp the way students think and write about what they've learned in [class](#), some Penn State faculty are using blogging platforms—like the Sites at Penn State service—to replace notebooks with student [blogs](#). Instead of jotting down their thoughts on paper, students can publish blog posts that other students can read and comment on.

"One of the biggest benefits to using blogging in class is that students can interact with each others' blogs," said Priya Sharma, a Penn State associate professor of education. "Plus, students don't have to stop at just writing their posts. They can also add other media, like photos, videos and links to other sources. The options for creativity and expression are much greater."

Using blogging to make meaning

Sharma has been interested in blogging since the late 1990s, when websites like LiveJournal and Blogger hit the scene to make blogging easy for everyone. What started as a personal hobby turned into a research interest when she began using blogging in the LDT 467 emerging web technologies and learning course she started teaching in 2008.

"Since then, the course has been my gateway into looking at the effects of blogging in the classroom," Sharma said. "I've taught the class for several years now, and it's been invaluable to my research."

Sharma's recent research focuses on how blogging in the classroom can help students in "meaning making" around the course material, which she describes as "students interacting with each other to build shared knowledge."

In her course, Sharma instructs each student to create a blog specifically for the class. They can customize and style the blog however they'd like and use it to respond to several prompts that Sharma provides throughout the semester.

"I like to pose broad questions that will get my students thinking without them feeling like they have to respond in a specific way," Sharma said. "They're not told what to write, just given the opportunity to express themselves."

Sharma says the results usually amaze her, not just with the depth and insight of the blogs, but also the sheer amount some students write.

"If you copy and paste some of these posts into Word, they amount to two or three pages," Sharma said. "If you would specifically assign that much writing, you might get an eye roll, but it can come naturally when the length is left up to them."

Helping students find their voice

Besides allowing the students to help each other learn, Sharma says blogging can help students who may otherwise be unlikely to speak up in class.

"Students who are introverted tend to really like blogging," Sharma said. "It gives them a voice and lets them express themselves in a way they might not want to do face to face. Those voices that might be missing in the class are very strong and present online."

Tara Beecham, an instructor in English at Penn State Berks, says students can also learn how to channel another voice: that of their future professional selves.

Beecham has the students in her ENGL 202C technical writing course answer writing prompts in their blogs, where they write posts as though they're in a professional setting. The students then have the opportunity to read and comment on each others' posts. Beecham says she hopes this interaction will show her students that the things they say and write in the workplace will influence and be seen by other people.

"Hopefully, this reinforces the need for strong grammar, punctuation and writing skills in order to be taken seriously in the workplace," Beecham said. "It also shows the importance of having a level of respect for the thoughts of others they are working with side by side."

Customizing the classroom

It's not just students who are benefitting from blogging.

Burt Staniar, associate professor of equine science, uses Sites at Penn State to provide content and a blogging space for the students in his AN SC 107 introduction to equine science online course. He says that in addition to blogging, the platform offers him many other tools for teaching his class.

"For me, Sites at Penn State is so much more than a blogging platform," Staniar said. "I think it's definitely underutilized, and if you look through the great examples of themes and all that can be done, many would see great opportunities."

He uses the class website he built on Sites to post text and videos for each week's lecture. Students use the site to turn in assignments and also take turns writing posts for the site's blog. One assignment—called Old Coaly's Bones—instructs the students to take a photo of Old Coaly's skeleton in the HUB-Robeson Center and then label each part before submitting it online.

Staniar says he appreciates that the platform allows students to interact with each other's work, as well as provides him with many options for creating his course.

"I really love the flexibility Sites at Penn State gives me to be creative with how I design and structure my class," Staniar said. "As an educator, I like to have options for how I present my material, and Sites gives me that."

No matter how a faculty member wants to incorporate blogging into their classes, Sharma says it's important for them to have a clear idea of what they want to accomplish before the class even begins.

"How you structure your class really affects the level of interaction and depth of comments within the blogs," Sharma said. "If you break the students into small groups, they're commenting on fewer blogs but those comments are more developed and in-depth. If the blogs are open to the entire class, there's more interaction but perhaps less insight in the comments."

Sharma says faculty should provide sample blogs, so students can see examples of well-written posts, and also be prepared for a heavier workload for themselves, as they also have to read and comment on their [students'](#) posts.

While it might not be time to toss out notebooks for good, blogging is proving to be a good alternative.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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