RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES AND NETWORKED LEARNING SPACES: USING BLOGS TO CONNECT INDIVIDUALS TO HISTORY

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Introduction

Blogs have been used to support teaching and learning for over a decade, providing public spaces for student exploration of course topics. Students perceive blogging as a useful learning activity (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Blogging supports both direct learning via writing (Hansen, 2016) and vicarious learning via reading (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Bloggers create online identities (Dennen, 2009, 2014), which may leave students feeling vulnerable in a learning context (Dennen & Burner, 2017). When course topics are potentially sensitive, such as religion, students are likely to have personal narratives to share although those narratives may not be of use to their peers or may not be something they are comfortable posting online. At the same time, students will benefit from having a forum for exploring the relationship between their personal beliefs and experiences and the course content.

This case study examines student use of "disposable blogs" (Pimpare & Fast, 2008) in a History of Religion course . The instructor used edublogs to create student blogs that would not be indexed with pseudonyms for each student author. Students were asked to post two times per week, once in response to the readings and once on a self-selected topic. While students were using a networked space to complete the course activity, their blogs were semi-private (Elm, 2009), with an audience restricted to their instructor and anyone with whom they cared to share the blog URL. Although these privacy restrictions were deemed important for encouraging free expression on the course topic, it was not known if that would negate the value of using a blog to support learning.

The questions that guided this study were:
1. How did students perceive the use of blogs to explore personal connections to readings and the course materials?
2. How did the use of a semi-private networked public space contribute to the students' experience?
3. How did the blogging assignment contribute to student learning outcomes?

Method

Participants were the 34 students enrolled in the course. Four types of data were collected for this study, student blogs, student grades, an end-of-term survey (completed by 25/73.5% of the students), and instructor reflections. The student was conducted with approval of the university's ethics board and student consent. Student surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Open-ended items were thematically coded and counted. Blogs were analyzed for content, and the instructor reflections provide contextual information and triangulated other findings.

Findings

Student Impressions of Blog Assignment
In open comments, most students indicated that the blog activity had positive effects on their learning, pushing them to read more deeply (n=15) and keep up with the readings (n=2), reinforcing class sessions (n=4), and given them practice with writing on the course topic (n=3). Students indicated in comments that the activity and format was helpful to them:

- *I do not like to speak in class so I liked how I was able to share my ideas and thoughts about different topics we discussed.*
- *I enjoyed writing on whatever I wanted related to the class.*
- *I liked being able to use technology in a effective manner and utilize a virtually untapped way to learn*
- *Getting to explore the readings in connection to ideas not necessarily pertinent to class discussion but that interest me was good.*
- *I liked posting my thoughts in general on religion and getting instructor feedback on them.*

A t-test showed no significant differences in student interest in the blogging assignment from the beginning to the end of the semester, with most students reporting a positive attitude toward the activity. Still, not all students were active bloggers, and some struggled to keep up with the assignment. The workload was the most cited element of blogging that students didn't like (n=11). Four students indicated that they had forgotten to do it, and others offered an array of individual excuses for missing posts, from travel to a dead hamster. Four students felt it was a challenge to come up with topics, and three wished that the blogs were not graded, while one complained that the assignment (presumably its due date) interfered with a Wednesday hangover. The dead hamster and hangover responses are worth mentioning here because it was clear from their

open-ended responses that two participants were expressing, across items, a general feeling that the activity was not worthwhile

Use of Semi-Private Networked Space
Five survey respondents (20%) indicated that they shared their blogs with people outside of the class, ranging from friends and dating partners to parents. Students also indicated a clear sense that they were writing for an audience – namely, their instructor – and that they enjoyed receiving his comments. Students used the blogs primarily to write about course readings, although they also integrated outside sources and personal experiences. From the instructor perspective, students used the space effectively to discuss the course topic, review major points of the readings, and articulate their opinions and interpretations. The instructor reflected on some students' need to share their personal experiences and beliefs about religion within the class, whether germane to the course material or not, noting ""If you don't allow a space for that to happen, it's still going to come out some way." The blogs were that space during this semester, whereas in prior semesters the instructor felt that students were more prone to use in-class discussion as a platform for sharing their beliefs.

Blogging and Learning Outcomes
There was a positive correlation between blog grades and final exam grades ($r=.657$, $n=34$, $p=0.01$). This correlation may simply be an indicator that students who are well-prepared for a final exam also are diligent about completing the blogging assignment and responsive to instructor feedback.

Conclusion
Was it important that this journaling assignment was conducted via blog versus some other medium? We believe that the medium made a difference for these students. The short article format of blogs provided a forum for students to develop a sense of ownership over the course material. The use of an online, networked tool provided a sense of writing for an audience even though the semi-private, pseudonomized settings gave the students the necessarily sense of privacy to freely express their religious beliefs without sparking extraneous class debate or attracting uninvited course outsiders. Although the students had a limited audience, they nonetheless were highly attuned to that audience and gained more practice articulating course concepts than they might if applying the same word count to a research paper. The students also learned from the instructor's blog, where both form and content were modeled for them. The blogs provided students with a space to negotiate the intersections of their personal narratives and religious thoughts with the historical narratives being taught within the course. Collectively, these findings suggest that the space and format in which students write is important, and that networked spaces can be useful for supporting student learning even when audience is restricted.

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