Teaching history with blogs for student engagement and critical use of digital media
Ensino de história com *blogs* para participação estudantil e uso crítico da mídia digital

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Resumo: Este artigo descreve o uso de *blogs* por um professor em cursos de graduação em História por três anos e as estratégias que desenvolveu para facilitar o uso crítico dos estudantes da mídia digital. Entrevistas semiestruturadas com o professor, bem como os grupos focais e uma pesquisa de avaliação com os alunos em seus cursos, foram utilizadas para coletar dados sobre os benefícios e desafios do uso de *blogs* voltados a ensinar cursos de história no ensino superior. Estudantes recuperam, avaliam e partilham de recursos de mídia, como vídeos, *podcasts* e arquivos *on-line*, levando a um aumento da motivação, da participação e da compreensão dos conteúdos do curso, além de maior capacidade para avaliar criticamente os recursos *on-line*. De acordo com os alunos e o professor, os estudantes adquiriram uma abordagem mais crítica com a pesquisa, ao apresentarem e resumirem as informações na Internet, o que será útil para eles em outros cursos e contextos.

Palavras-chave: habilidades midiáticas, recursos midiáticos, pensamento crítico, curso de história.

Abstract: This paper describes the use of blogs by one professor in undergraduate history courses over three years and the strategies that he developed to facilitate students' critical use of digital media. Semi-structured interviews with the professor as well as focus groups and a feedback poll with students in his courses were used to collect data on the benefits and challenges of using blogs to teach history courses in higher education. Students retrieved, evaluated and shared media resources such as videos, podcasts, and archives online, leading to increased motivation, participation, improved understanding of course content, and their improved ability to critically evaluate online resources. According to both the students and the professor, students acquired a more critical approach to researching, presenting, and summarizing information on the Internet that will be useful to them in other courses and contexts.

Keywords: media literacy, media resources, critical thinking, history course.

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy has been defined as the ability to access, evaluate, produce and communicate using different types of media (AUFDERHEIDE & FIRESTONE, 1992). It is a means to apply visual and print texts to examine historical, political, social and economic contexts and influences of all forms of media and technologies (TYNER, 1998). In order to educate students to be media literate, educators have to engage students in the process of accessing, analyzing, evaluating, producing, and communicating using multimedia. More recently, Leu *et al.* (2004) argue that students need new literacies that involve using the Internet "to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others"

(online). Such literacies can be developed by educators who leverage students' familiarity with digital and social media in their teaching and require them to evaluate and synthesize information or resources, thus preparing students to use digital media in professional settings in the future (ALEXANDER, 2006; PRENSKY, 2001). Undergraduates currently enrolled in universities and colleges often use digital content in the form of YouTube videos, podcasts, or images on social networking sites and blogs (KUMAR, 2009; 2010; LENHART & MADDEN, 2005; 2007). Free online applications that facilitate communication and interaction like http://www.facebook.com, or http://www.blogger.com are popular with teens and undergraduates who view them as integral to their social lives. Educators often assume that students' familiarity with digital media translates to the effective and critical use of such media in formal environments or their coursework, but this is not always the case (KENNEDY *et al.*, 2009; KUMAR, 2009; KUMAR, 2010). It remains important for educators to model and encourage the evaluation and application of online digital media in teaching and learning environments (LEU *et al.* 2004; ROBERTS, FOEHR, & RIDEOUT, 2005; STROM & STROM, 2007). This case study describes one professor's experiences in using blogs to inculcate a critical approach to digital media in his undergraduate history courses over two years. Student feedback and the professor's reflections highlight the benefits and challenges of using multimedia and artifacts in undergraduate courses, and the different ways in which blogs can be used in different contexts within the same subject. Although the findings cannot be generalized to all subjects and contexts, the strategies used by the professor as well as the resulting benefits to student learning can be leveraged in other higher education courses.

BLOGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

"Today's tech-savvy student generation is actively participating in social networking and other online communities, so most students not only understand how to use Web 2.0 teaching tools, they thrive in the environment when Web communication solutions are integrated in the classroom" (DRISCOLL, 2007, p. 10). In a study encompassing several Web 2.0 tools, blogs were found to be the most used by students in their daily lives (LENHART & MADDEN, 2005; 2007). Richardson described blogs as a "way to communicate with students…, archive and publish student work, learn with far-flung collaborators, and 'manage' the knowledge that members of the school community create" (2003, p. 5). Richardson (2006) went on to assert that blogs can be used by participants to construct knowledge, share ideas, and collaborate equally. In addition to knowledge construction, Ferdig and Trammel (2004) stated that links to different types of resources could be provided on a blog, providing students with exposure to the content and diverse perspectives as well as with opportunities to verify that content. They also asserted that the process of verifying content and making their own contributions helps build student expertise in a subject. The public nature of blogs also encourages students to accept more responsibility and ownership for their contributions and their learning (FERDIG & TRAMMEL, 2004; GODWIN-JONES, 2003). In summary, blogs are useful for learner-driven and participatory learning, where students are "critical, collaborative, and creative participants in the social construction of knowledge" (BURGESS, 2006, p. 105).

In a higher education context, instructors can create blogs where students can react to resources and postings by the instructor or their peers. Students can also be required to create or contribute to blogs as part of course assignments. Content that is posted or updated on a blog can be automatically sent to students' email addresses using RSS feeds or can be linked with their social networking or social bookmarking profiles, enabling them to read the content without logging into the blog or visiting the blog. A key feature of blogs is that large media files can be uploaded and shared by an instructor or student, and others accessing the blog can comment on the uploaded file. Likewise, links to YouTube videos or other audio and video files can easily be embedded within several blogging software, making it possible to discuss those resources within the blog, instead of asking students to click on a link, visit the video, and return to the blog to discuss a

resource. This can be particularly useful for the teaching of subject-matter that relies heavily on digital media. In this research, for instance, the professor leveraged this feature of blogs to engage students in media-sharing and discussion of those media instead of just text-based discussion. Although learning management systems like Blackboard™, Sakai or Moodle are valuable for integrating resources and provide both opportunities for student assessment and protected virtual environments for higher education courses, the professor found that undergraduates were more comfortable using online blog software, and termed it more "user-friendly."

CONTEXT: TEACHING HISTORY WITH DIGITAL MEDIA

The professor in this study had used blogs (using http://blogger.com) in undergraduate history courses (e.g. US history, Global History, Environmental history) at a large private university in the United States since the Fall semester of 2006. He was extremely keen to integrate the wealth of primary source materials available online in his history courses, not just as resources that he provided as links and that students were required to access and discuss, but as resources that students explored, evaluated, and used in their own projects. Some of the resources that he used and wanted students to explore were texts and videos of political speeches, campaign advertisements, political cartoons, propaganda posters, protest songs, and other textual, aural, and visual materials online. Open source and public domain sites such as Wikimedia Commons (http://commons.wikimedia.org), Bartleby (http://www.bartleby.com), Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org), and the Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org), as well sites created and maintained by colleges and universities, such as the Center for History and New Media (http://chnm.gmu.edu) at George Mason University were recommended areas in his courses where students could access resources.

The professor had previously used the learning management system recommended by the university to post links to such resources but found it difficult to embed media e.g. videos within the system. He also found that the online discussion forums did not facilitate student contributions of online resources because of technical difficulties and the limited file size that the system allowed students to upload. Furthermore, he wanted students to continue to access such resources after they completed their courses with him. He first decided to experiment with a blog in an undergraduate history course in 2006 that had a traditional lecture format. He had often found that he had insufficient time to engage students in discussion during the allotted class time, so he hoped that a blog would increase student discussion of course topics. He added his course resources, assignments, syllabus, and lecture Powerpoints to the blog, and also asked students to find and contribute videos or cartoons related to two class topics to the blog anytime during the course. The professor could then either comment on students' videos or cartoons in class or during his lectures. He was surprised to find that students began commenting on his lectures, the videos, and the course topics on the blog, leading to more engagement with the content than in any of his prior courses. This motivated the professor to include a blog in his course planning for the Fall 2007 semester.

DATA COLLECTION

The use of blogs in four undergraduate history courses by a professor at a large private university is described in this study. The 14-week courses enrolled between 20 and 30 undergraduate students and encompassed US history, Global history, and environmental history. Three main questions drove this research:

- (How) did the professor's use of blogs in undergraduate history courses change between 2006 and 2009?

- What were some benefits or challenges for students' learning that were perceived by the professor during his use of blogs to teach undergraduate history courses?

- What were some benefits or challenges for students' learning that were perceived by students during their use of blogs in their undergraduate history courses?

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the professor – one in Fall 2008 and the second in Fall 2009. He was asked questions about his use of blogs to teach history, the ways in which he had changed his use of blogs, and the benefits or challenges of using blogs for students and for his own teaching. A 20-minute focus group was conducted with 21 students in one undergraduate history course taught by him in Spring 2009 where students were asked about their perceived benefits and challenges using a blog in that course. The professor was not present during the focus groups and was not involved in the data collection. The data from the focus groups were used to create a feedback poll that was loaded into www.surveymonkey.com and implemented in a Fall 2009 course taught by the professor. All interviews and focus groups with the students and professor were taped with their consent, and the data was transcribed and managed using qualitative research software. Data from the feedback poll was downloaded as an excel spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS software.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Data from interviews where the professor shared his perceptions of the benefits and challenges of teaching history using blogs, as well as data from student focus groups in Spring 2009 where they shared their experiences using primary sources and learning with the professors' blogs is presented here.

THE PROFESSOR'S USE OF BLOGS

When the professor first used course blogs in Fall 2006, he saw them primarily as a tool to share media content, especially online video or new publications, with his students. The communication and sharing features of the blog, however, immediately became apparent to him: "Almost immediately I discovered, however, that this resource was most useful as an avenue for students to communicate with each other and with me." He had earlier struggled with technical difficulties in the learning management system when he asked students to post relevant textual, audio, and video material to the course blog as part of their course participation. In every course, he required students to contribute such resources online, and then introduce and explain those materials in the classroom the following week. He found that using a blog for this purpose made it much easier for both him and students to post multimedia that caused difficulties in the learning management system.

The professor explained to students that "this would be their forum to demonstrate that they were thinking, reading, and learning" about the topics in the course. Students did not have to post every week but their online participation for the semester would count toward their participation grade. He asked students to a) Find online resources on course topics and posting them along with a short summary of how and why they were relevant b) Comment on lectures, course readings, or current events that were related to course topics. The structure of the activity ensured that students sifted through multiple resources before choosing an appropriate resource to post on the blog. They also visited websites that are routinely needed or used by students of history. The professor viewed this as a valuable way to get students to reflect on the different types of resources and sources available on the Internet, and to make events in history seem more real to students. He also provided the following contribution guidelines to students:

- All student posts had to be relevant to the topic at hand.

- All claims or statements had to be supported with live links, preferably from major news sources (e.g. the BBC, New York Times, The Economist, Wall Street Journal) or academic journals and .edu websites.

- Students had also to evaluate whether a resource provided a Creative commons license and the type of license it provided, before using material from that resource, and had to cite appropriately.

- He encouraged students to use Wikipedia as a place to start their search on a given topic, but did not accept it as a cited source in papers or blog posts.

Another assignment that the professor used in every class was either a term paper that students had to research and write, or an e-portfolio that students created after researching a particular topic. During the semester, the professor encouraged students to post drafts of their project on the blog for feedback from him and their peers. He believed that the process of publishing their work in a public forum and giving as well as receiving feedback in that forum prepared his students for their future professions: "The blog creates a textual arena of peer review that in some ways prefigures what students are likely encounter in their postgraduate careers in an academic or professional setting." As he continued to use blogs, the professor encouraged students to frame their feedback or responses to their classmates' work in the form of questions. He asserted that this avoided "reckless criticism" and that he did not want his course blog to represent some of the "flame wars that dominate so much informal discourse in the Internet". The use of a blog to share student work at regular stages as well as student's use of questions reflected the professor's teaching philosophy, which was to emphasize "the dialectical nature of historical scholarship and of the writing process itself". In summary, the professor stated that there were three ways in which he saw blogs as useful in his history courses.

> *First, the ability to post links and videos, allows me to share a wealth of information that is not in the textbooks, and which I cannot fit into lectures. Second, the ability for students to post content helps to foster their own research and critique, especially in the realm of primary sources. And finally, the comment function on blogs has helped to facilitate peer review among students both inside and outside the classroom.*

STUDENTS' COMFORT-LEVEL WITH BLOGS AND PARTICIPATION

According to the professor, the blog in his two courses in the Fall semester resulted in "more comments and postings than I had ever dreamed of. They just went crazy, this was their medium and they knew what to do with it." During the focus groups, some students did express concern that the blog might be in the public domain, so they were not comfortable posting initially, but that changed as the course progressed. Students also appreciated being able to post to the blog in the night and to demonstrate to the professor that they were active participants in the course. They stated that sometimes they did not get to a reading before the class or were too tired to participate in the classroom. One student stated that she would be intimidated contributing in a classroom and that she found it easier to participate on the blog. In his interview, the professor reflected that a blog was not very different from a traditional discussion forum in a learning management system, in that students who were shy to speak during class discussion might not be as shy about posting to an online forum. He viewed the blog as an extension of the classroom discussion process, and stated,

> *It gives students an opportunity to share questions, views, and information outside of class time. I would never make posting on the blog a stand-alone assignment, but rather make it a part of class participation. Some students are more comfortable talking in class while some are more comfortable posting to the blog. Both activities count as class participation. Some features that blogs can offer, such as polls, can help to spur class debates and discussion.*

STUDENTS' USE OF BLOGS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

Although the professor believed that the students were comfortable finding resources and communicating on the Internet, students who participated in the focus groups mentioned that they had initial difficulties with finding and posting resources. One student stated, "I wasn't sure, like, whether it was ok to post what I had found. I had to, like, stop and think, like, is this a good enough article? Or, like, is it someone just expressing his opinion, it's all wrong, and maybe I don't know it, you know." She claimed that it got easier to post quality resources a few weeks into the course as the professor would comment or discuss their resources in the class. Another student found that he didn't understand certain comments in a video and had to check up on the

facts about that event in history to completely understand the allusions made by the presenter. He said, "If the professor had put that up, I'd have never bothered to go look it up, unless it was going to be, like, in an exam of something. But if I'm putting it up, then I have to know what it means, it's like my responsibility." Both the students as well as the professor stated that the activity resulted in students' learning to be critical of resources that they contributed, reading more about the topic that they were posting about, and spending more time reading about course topics online than if the professor had provided the resources.

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND INFORMATION

Both the professor and the students reported that they were exposed to a number of very different perspectives and a large number of resources because of the blog. The professor reflected that he was not aware of many resources that the students had found and shared with him and their peers. The students made similar comments and added that those resources were extremely useful to them when they began working on their assignments for the course – they reviewed the ideas as well as information in the context of the professor's lectures and the course readings. The professor stated that the blog was a repository that he could also refer to when he planned to teach the course the following year.

FINDINGS FROM THE FEEDBACK POLL

In the feedback poll, students in the professor's Fall 2009 course were asked to respond to three questions about the usefulness of the blog using a Likert scale ranging from Strong Disagree to Strongly Agree. They were also given the option of providing comments on the professor's use of

the blog in the course. 75% of students (n=8) agreed or strongly agreed that the blog improved their understanding of course content, and 62.5% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the blog improved their ability to critically evaluate online resources (Table 1).

In open-ended responses students appreciated being able to share their work and get ideas or feedback from peers. One student commented

> It was helpful to see what other people were thinking when trying to understand the material for myself. Other students posted what work and ideas they had through essays, and being able to access them gave new perspective to either agree with or argue in my own writing.

One student stated being initially "self conscious about posting essays online for all other students to see, but it soon passed as I appreciated the opinions of my classmates." The only challenge cited by students (3 of 8) was their difficulty in navigating the blog due to the large number of responses and posts by their peers and the instructor.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The professor in this study began using blogs to provide resources and communicate with his students, but after his first course he recognized and exploited the medium for peer-peer interactions. Initially he wanted to disseminate media easily to students, but quickly capitalized on the participatory nature of blogs (BURGESS, 2006) and required students to evaluate and contribute resources for discussion. Students actively reviewed his resources and commented on them, but they also contributed their own resources after searching and evaluating several resources available online. They reported increased motivation,

Table 1: Student responses (n=8) to the feedback poll in Fall 2009

The blog	%Agree	%Strongly Agree
a) improved my understanding of course content	62.5	12.5
b) increased interaction among students in the course	37.5	37.5
c) improved my ability to critically evaluate online resources	50	12.5

participation, research, and learning as a result of their blog contributions, echoing research findings by Ferdig & Trammel (2004) and Godwin-Jones (2003). According to both the students and the professor, students demonstrated a more critical approach to researching and presenting information on the Internet that will be useful to them in other courses and situations. Students in the courses where the professor used a blog, therefore, were developing "new literacies" (Leu *et al.,* 2004, online) that they can transfer to other courses and other environments and apply in their future professional lives. Students' development of such strategies was guided by the instructions provided by the professor – students, therefore, do not acquire a critical approach to digital media use just by using a blog in their coursework, but have to be guided to evaluate online resources and recognize credible sources.

Despite the small sample size of students in the focus groups (n=21), the low response to the feedback poll (n=8), and the focus on only one professor of history, the activities, student perceptions and professor perceptions presented in this research could be useful to other educators aiming to use blogs in their teaching. The activities used by the professor in this study, where he asked students to find resources according to certain criteria, articulate why they considered those resources relevant to the course content, and conduct peer reviews of that content, are strategies that can be used in other disciplines and other contexts. The limited feedback from students in the poll suggests that using blogs in this manner could improve students' understanding of course content and their ability to critically evaluate online resources. Notwithstanding the value of blogs as a forum for asynchronous textual discussion, sharing of information, and interactive dialog, this research indicates that blogs are a useful medium for students to share and critique multimedia resources (online videos, primary source documents, podcasts, cartoons) and acquire skills that will help them to access, evaluate, and synthesize information that they find online.

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