

Chapter 14. Composing Communities: Blogs as Learning Communities in the First-Year Composition Classroom

Kathryn Crowther

PERIMETER COLLEGE AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Writing is only one of the many things that happen in the freshman writing classroom. As the name implies, the focus of a *first-year composition* course (FYC) could be seen as resting equally on the *first-year* or *freshman* component of the course title. Granted, not all students in a FYC class are actually first-year college students, but the name implies that there is an element of initiation, of learning something related to maturity and experience, as well as the more obvious sense of an *introductory* writing class. Indeed, as we work with students to practice and improve their writing, it becomes clear that there is so much more to learning how to write than just writing. Besides the more obvious pedagogical objectives embedded in a writing class (reading comprehension, critical thinking, argument development, drafting, revising, etc.), there are the arguably more valuable learning habits and life skills that are inextricably tied to the writing process. In the first-year writing classroom, students develop the routines and attitudes that will shape their approach to writing and to learning throughout their college and future careers; it is, therefore, our job as writing teachers to connect the acquisition of those skills to the learning objectives of the composition course.

When I teach first-year writing, I am also teaching time management, note-taking, brainstorming, process, revising, and other learning strategies that help students perceive writing as an organic, integral part of their personal and professional development. Of course, the primary objective of a FYC course is to have our students practice and improve their writing skills through a variety of writing assignments. There is a significant body of work on the benefits of using *low-stakes* writing in the composition classroom (see Elbow's essay, "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing"); for regular low-stakes writing, I have found that blogs work well to give students a personal space to develop their writing skills. In my freshman composition classroom, blogs serve as a place for brainstorming, drafting, thinking through arguments, considering audience, and reflecting on our reading and class discussion; in short, we use the blog to work through all the steps of the writing process. But as I've used blogs as an integral part of my writing courses, I've noticed that the blogs come to serve a different purpose, one that is perhaps more beneficial to the students as a whole than my overt pedagogical goals. The more the students blog, the more they develop a strong sense of their writing self, and the more they lay claim to their in-

dividual writing persona and develop strong writing habits. Yet commensurately, they become part of a larger blogging community, and they begin to exchange dialog with their peers and with external readers in a way that gives their writing a sense of authenticity and purpose in the real world. Blogging, therefore, expands the boundaries of the classroom and creates an authentic community that benefits the students in both the development of their writing and learning skills and in their sense of participation in larger, higher-stakes learning community that stretches beyond our classroom.

I have asked my students to reflect upon the role that blogging has had on their writing and on their experience of the class, and I have asked them to participate in surveys and focus groups to gauge how students evaluate the role of blogging in our classroom. In 70 student blog post reflections, 50 final evaluations, and three *focus group* sessions, students overwhelmingly responded that while they found weekly blogging a chore, it benefited both their writing and their sense of participation and community in the class.

Blogs (short for *Weblogs*) provide an online venue for individual writing as well as a forum for interactive communication through the *comment* function. Teachers of writing and communication have recognized the value of such a space and blogs are now increasingly common in the composition classroom. Overwhelmingly, the literature on blogs in the classroom suggests both their potential as writing forums and their ability to house multi-modal forms of communication. An overview of blogs being used in the composition classroom by Steven Krause “suggest[s] that many writing teachers seem to be using blog spaces as places to facilitate dynamic and interactive writing experiences.” (Will Richardson writes, for example, “Blogs are being used as class portals, online filing cabinets for student work, e-portfolios, collaborative space, knowledge management, and even school websites” [21].) In “Writing and Citizenship: Using Blogs to Teach First-Year Composition,” Charles Tryon details his use of blogs in several composition courses. Tryon argues that blogging works as a composition tool as it encourages a “no-holds barred argumentative style” (128) and provides an informal way for students to reference their own writing in class discussion.

Much of the emphasis in critical discussions of blogging is placed on the notion of space. As Ferdig and Trammell write in “Content Delivery in the ‘Blogsphere’”:

Blogs are useful teaching and learning tools because they provide a space for students to reflect and publish their thoughts and understandings. . . . Blogs also feature hyperlinks, which help students begin to understand the relational and contextual basis of knowledge, knowledge construction and meaning making.

The space that blogs provide, the critics argue, is both personal and public, allowing for meditative writing along with interactive linking and collaborative

commenting. Furthermore, as much of the literature observes, blogging encourages students to consider audience in a more dynamic way than they do with a standard academic essay. The idea that a post will be open for readers to comment on and give immediate feedback changes the notion of writing as static and final to dynamic and evolving. As Will Richardson writes, “ultimately, [a] post is still a draft, a way to test my best ideas and writing against an audience” (31). To summarize in Richardson’s words: “The differences between blogging in this manner and writing as we traditionally think of it are clear: Writing stops; blogging continues. Writing is inside; blogging is outside. Writing is monologue; blogging is conversation. Writing is thesis; blogging is synthesis” (31). In contrast to other online writing mediums such as Twitter, blogs provide a more customizable and open-ended writing space, a place students can go to write drafts, continuously edit and refine posts, add pictures, and, perhaps most importantly, face a blank page that forces them to rehearse their writing personae. When students practice writing in a low-stakes environment that is designed for frequent writing, reader interaction, and limitless chances to edit, they grow comfortable with a flexible writing process that encourages drafting, feedback, and revision.

I have employed blogs in my composition classes for several years with varying degrees of success. I originally began assigning blogs as a more dynamic space for students to keep a weekly writing journal but quickly found that it was also useful as a space for pre-writing exercises; in fact, I now use blogs for all phases of the writing process from free-writing, clustering, outlining, to drafting and editing. After experimenting with different models, I settled on the *hub-and-spoke* style of blogging in which each student keeps a personal blog, but they are all connected to a central class blog that I run. (When I designed my course blog, I used the model described by Boone B. Gorges at teleogistic.net/2009/08/hub-and-spoke-blogging-with-lots-of-students/.) At the beginning of the semester, I help the students set up their own WordPress blogs (these can be hosted independently at wordpress.com or hosted on a school server) and I introduce the blogging assignment, explaining to students that they are required to keep the blog all semester and write a minimum of one substantial post (150-300 words) per week on a topic related to class. However, I stress that they are encouraged to blog much more than that, to blog about other things loosely related to our course (though I discourage *diary* type blogging) or to link to relevant media content. I also encourage them to personalize their blogs, to choose a new template and to add links, pictures, videos, and other media to make the blog space individual and multi-modal. Typically, about 75% of the class follows these recommendations, while 25% of the students do the minimum weekly post and do not personalize their blog. All students are put into *blog groups* with four or five of their classmates and are responsible for reading and commenting on their group members’ posts weekly; I do this both to make the reading-load manageable and to create small blogging communities. These individual student blogs form the spokes and I run a central *hub* blog that works to connect them. As I often teach

reading, rather than skimming it before class. As a result, students come to class having processed the ideas and contribute to our discussion more readily; indeed, many of the comments in my class begin with “I blogged about this and” I often ask students to have their blogs open in class so they can remind themselves of their impressions of the text we are discussing—in this way the blogs serve as a space for pre-writing and critical thinking. Additionally, reading their peers’ blogs allows the students to see the different ways people can read and react to a text and better prepares them for the multiplicity of opinions and readings they encounter in our class discussion. Reading another student’s reaction to a text often causes students to rethink their own position and results in a deeper reflection on the more complex elements of the reading.

FEB 06 2012
1 COMMENT
UNCATEGORIZED

A NEW SET OF EYES

Okay, time to be completely honest.



As I sat there trading inquisitive glances with my unfamiliar peers and measuring up professor, I eagerly awaited the class topic for Dr. Crowther's English 1102 course, an interesting theme. A class covering conspiracy theories or American wars would instead, my heart sank when it was announced that the class topic disabilities. I did spend an entire semester pretending to feel sorry for a group of people that I have no interaction with. None of my immediate family is disabled and I have never had a disability. It was something that I could not relate to; it was something I had no idea

The night after the first class I frantically searched T-Square for an english class wit and GPA. Pretty shallow, huh? Well, at the time I would say that it was unfortunate find another english class, but now that I look back on it, I feel like I was meant to

In the four short weeks that I have spent in this class, I honestly feel like I have become a human being. Not only have I become more knowledgeable concerning the issues facing disabled, but I have become more tolerant of those labeled as different. And most importantly class has given me a new set of eyes with which I look at the world. Before, I would sneer demeaning glimpses when I happened to come across a person of disparate abilities, but upon them with admiration. Just the simple contemplation of the adversities they have had in their lifetime is astonishing. I feel like I all of my worries pale in comparison with theirs. I take so much for granted? How could I, for even for a moment, possess an ungrateful th

But more importantly, this class has made me realize that we, as human beings, are in fact more similar than the untrained eye is able to recognize. I realized that the physical appearance of our bodies has very little significance in the grand scheme of life. In no substantial way do physical bodies alter the advancement of the human race. In fact, our physical body's only is to simply act as a medium through which our curiosity, rationality, wisdom, and empathy communicated. In this way, our physical condition and our human condition work together to shape the world we have come to know. Our physical body serves as the sculptor of our tangible while our mind serves as the luminary of our existence.



Figure 14.2. Blogging about the challenging topic of disability.

This deeper engagement with the reading leads to the second advantage I observe with the blog platform: the development of more sophisticated critical thinking skills. In the spring semester of 2012 I organized my composition course around a difficult and often controversial topic: disability. At the onset of the course, many students expressed their anxiety (and reluctance) to talk about a topic that was fraught with political correctness and—as many claimed—was outside of the realm of their experience. As students tackled some difficult theoretical readings, the blogs became a space to explore the complexities of the topic and the ways to talk about a difficult subject. The more we read and discussed in class, the more the students began to *talk out* their apprehension in their blog, and many wrote candidly about how they had seen their awareness and understanding of the complexities of the rhetoric of disability transform as they had read and discussed our texts. This level of critical engagement was augmented,

I firmly believe, by the nature of blogging—both confessional and public. (For a detailed discussion of the productive public/private dynamic of the academic blog, see Fernheimer and Nelson.)

After the first few weeks, I find that the handful of students who move past the weekly blog assignment and use the blog as a personal writing space (these students are often already familiar with the genre of blogging) begin to inspire other students to branch out in their blogging. More and more, students write posts about other aspects of the course and, in many cases, about their broader experience as college students. This movement towards spontaneous, self-generated content pushes students to think more about the act of writing and brings, I would argue, some of the greatest benefits in both academic skills and writing skills. Many students commented in their final reflections that at the beginning of the semester it was a chore to sit down and think of something to write about. However, as the semester progressed, they found that they began to think about their blog as they went through their day and made mental notes to write about their experiences later. With our focus on rhetoric and communication, students began to see the quotidian arguments that surround them and posts on Super Bowl advertising, election rhetoric, and campus controversies began to appear on their blogs. Other aspects of the blog format benefit the students' writing skills. The chronology of the blog format (entries generally appear in reverse chronological order with the most recent entry appearing first) helps them to conceptualize the process of writing an academic paper as a multiple-step process that evolves over time, with plenty of time for revision and editing. I frequently asked students to begin thinking through a topic with a free-write or brainstorm on their blog and then begin shaping those raw ideas into more structured essays. As this comment shows, many students expressed that beginning a writing assignment was much easier and less stressful when they had blogged about it first.

Indeed, the more the students write, the more comfortable they feel writing, and many of them begin to post regularly and to fill their blog space with personalized content. Perhaps the most common (and most rewarding) comment that students made in their evaluations was that the act of sitting down to write became easier as the semester progressed. Many wrote that what was so challenging at the beginning of the semester—finding time to write, coming up with a topic, organizing ideas, starting to write on the blank screen, meeting the word count for the post—grew gradually easier the more they wrote. As they took ownership of their site, they became more confident with their writing and began branching out to new topics and engaging with other media, embedding videos, linking to external content and to other students' blogs. In this way, students *rehearsed* their writing personae in the way that Pamela Henney suggests in her chapter in this volume on "Acting the Author." By acting the role of the academic author in a low-stakes (and, therefore, low-anxiety) setting, students ultimately blossomed as writers and as individuals, finding and claiming their voice and their right to speak in the strange mix of public and private that constitutes a blog.

As they become confident individual writers, a sense of community grows up around the blogs. The dual nature of blogs—that they foster individual writing and yet create a network of interconnected readers and writers—distinguishes blog writing from journaling or weekly response papers. The potential for a self-sustaining (and to some degree, self-governing) community to emerge organically from a blog network is exciting for teachers of all subjects and it effectively flips control and management of the assignment and the larger dynamics of the class over to the students. One of the first critical writers on the genre of weblogging, Rebecca Blood imagined the benefits of the blog community as a place where a writer would feel comfortable expressing opinions in a public venue:

As he enunciates his opinions daily, this new awareness of his inner life may develop into a trust in his own perspective. His own reactions—to a poem, to other people, and, yes, to the media—will carry more weight with him. Accustomed to expressing his thoughts on his website, he will be able to more fully articulate his opinions to himself and others. He will become impatient with waiting to see what others think before he decides, and will begin to act in accordance with his inner voice instead. Ideally, he will become less reflexive and more reflective, and find his own opinions and ideas worthy of serious consideration.

In my course, the sense of community begins within the small blogging groups but generally grows to include the whole class and, by the end of the semester, all three of my sections. What starts out as a requirement to read their group members' weekly posts and leave a comment becomes an ongoing conversation that takes place both in and out of the classroom. As I read the students' blogs, I see that discussions that we began in class are continuing and evolving in their blog posts and in the comments, and vice versa: conversations that begin on the blogs come into class discussion and allow the students to shape and guide where our exploration of a topic goes. Again, there is an evolution in confidence and voice that I see over the course of the semester; while initial comments are perfunctory and nearly always complimentary ("Great post!"), by the mid-point of the semester students are really responding to each other and providing feedback and counterpoints.

The blog comments provide another vital element of the writing process: authentic audience and feedback. Rather than writing solely for the teacher, students know that their peers are reading their posts and it raises the stakes of the exercise in a more authentic way than grading. Occasionally outside readers find the blogs and leave comments, which both exhilarates and scares students when they realize that their public voice is finding an audience! Additionally, when their peers leave feedback on their writing, it reinforces and augments the classroom peer review in a more informal setting. The same students who question their authority to give feedback to their peers early in the semester, often leave

honest and constructive critique on their group members' writing later in the year. The blogs help to showcase that writing is a collaborative, reader-focused endeavor, and an ongoing community in which they are all always both writer and audience.

At the *hub* of the class blogs is the centralized blog that I use for several purposes. First, at the beginning of the semester, I blog along with the students to showcase how the blogging genre works (writing with embedded media and links) and to model good writing. In this way, the blog serves as the kind of holistic space that Rachel Anya Dearie Fomalhaut describes in her essay on affective pedagogy in this volume. After watching as I demonstrate writing a blog post in class, students can then go home and practice the physical and mental process of writing, including dealing with the difficulties of getting started, finding the right voice, deleting and re-writing, and dealing with frustration and writer's block. I can model how to deal with these normal yet typically unaddressed writing challenges and help students work through them.

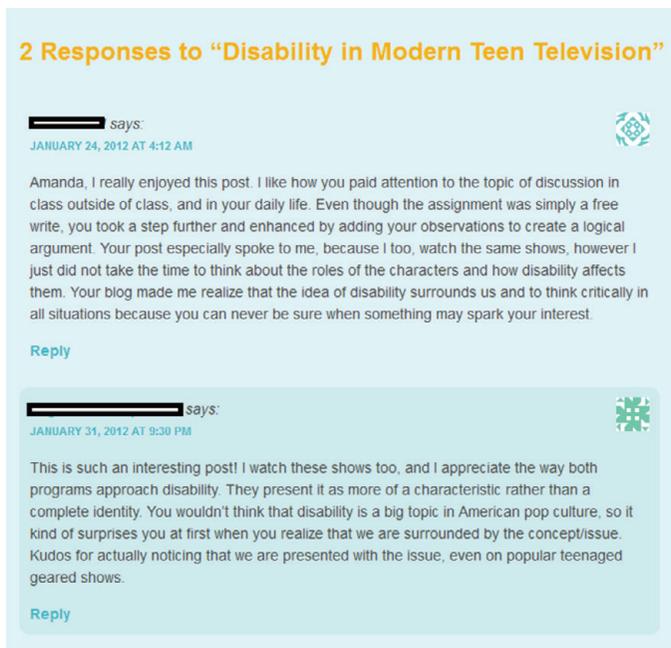


Figure 14.3. Reader dialog and feedback in the comments.

Second, I use the class blog as a place to bring attention to exemplary writing and to the innovative, creative blogging that some students are doing. Each week I solicit nominations from students for the best blog posts they've read that week. I then choose the best post from each section and post it to the central blog along with a short commentary on what made it an exemplary post; in this way, I can spotlight specific writing issues as well as discuss general writing strategies and

highlight what topics are circulating in the class. The winners of “Blog Post of the Week” (BPOTW) receive bonus participation points and it becomes a coveted award. At the mid-point of the semester, I hand BPOTW over to volunteers who *guest-host* it for extra credit. Although this began as a time-saving strategy on my part, I found that turning the evaluation process over to the students leads to a more sophisticated type of peer review and slightly higher stakes for the blogging assignment.

Guest Blog Post of the Week

October 31, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#)

Hello, class! This week I am guest hosting Blog Post of the Week! And the winners are....



's post about how venturing into other cultures makes her appreciate her own culture more is both a continuation of her previous post "[The World, at our Fingertips](#)" and an answer to 's post challenging her argument. I think she makes accurate points about the importance of exploring foreign cultures and supports her belief that the the cultures of the world should be explored excellently. I love that Allison and Robert are using their blogs as a medium for debate!



Figure 14.4. Student guest-hosting blog post of the week.

The learning community that evolves as a result of the blogs has surprised me each semester in the way that it strengthens and improves *all* aspects of the course and of the students' engagement. Most obviously, the regular writing and the authentic audience with peer-review that the comments provide lead to better writing in general, and the interactive blog medium pushes students to think about the ways that writing is collaborative and multi-modal. But, more importantly, as the students blog and read their peers' blogs, the ongoing discussions that the blog engenders unite the class in a mutual conversation about our topic and a collaborative endeavor to practice and improve our communication skills. Students comment that they feel like they get to know their classmates better through the

blogs, and, over the course of the semester, more students share personal experiences on their blogs which spill over into our discussions about being a college student; managing work-loads; prioritizing academic work, mental and physical health, relationships; and other topics that connect back to the general *life* skills the class is building. Overall, camaraderie develops that exceeds the requirements of the course and turns the class into a community. While this is advantageous in simply making class a more fun place to be, the benefits of a learning community are closely linked to student engagement and the achievement of the learning objectives of the course. (For more on the connection between learning communities and student engagement, see Barkley [25].) Ironically, the lower-stakes environment of the blog creates a higher-stakes community to which the students are motivated to contribute. And students who feel that more is at stake in the course than simply showing up and turning in assignments ultimately produce stronger work and are more likely to generalize and transfer the skills they have acquired.

Of course, as with any assignment, there are problems and pitfalls associated with using blogs in the classroom. Not all students commit to the assignment, and their blogs wither early in the semester. Some students use the blogs inappropriately as a personal journal, and I have to monitor them carefully to ensure that inappropriate content isn't shared. I give my students the option of making their blogs private, but the majority choose to have them open on the web which raises privacy and copyright issues (though I do use the former to have important discussions about the ramifications of personal disclosure on the public web and the latter to hammer home the rules of copyright, attribution, and citation as it regards digital publication). And of course, despite the preponderance of positive comments about the value of the blogging assignment, nearly all students complain that weekly blogging is too much and they find it hard to keep up with. Some also complain that being forced to blog contradicts the spirit of the blogging genre, a comment which points to the central weakness of the blogging assignment: that *real* communities rise up and sustain themselves organically, whereas a forced community will always fail in some fundamental ways. In his essay, "When Blogging Goes Bad: A Cautionary Tale About Blogs, Email Lists, Discussion, and Interaction," Steven Krause discusses how his use of blogs in the college classroom floundered when students failed to post frequently and used the blog only to answer the assigned discussion prompts. Rather than becoming a dynamic writing space, then, the blogs became yet another assignment to be completed in rote fashion. As Krause acknowledges, Jill Walker's question, "How empowering is it to be forced to blog?" highlights the contradictory impulse of assigning blog entries as short essay responses while hoping that students will feel empowered to take control of their own writing space. Yet, all in all, I have found the blogs to be an overwhelmingly positive component in the first-year writing classroom, specifically in their capacity to bring central issues about writing and collegiate experience to the foreground and to reinforce good writing and study habits. As individuals, students hone their writing skills and learn to consider

audience and to give critique and feedback. As a class, the blog network creates a communal space that extends the confines of the classroom and brings students together in a common endeavor. And as the community of blogging students grows, the class becomes the decentralized, self-motivating, and self-critiquing classroom we are striving to achieve.

Works Cited

- Barkley, Elizabeth. *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Blood, Rebecca. "Weblogs: A history and perspective." *Rebecca's Pocket*, 7 Sept. 2000, www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html.
- Elbow, Peter. "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing." *Assigning and Responding to Writing in the Disciplines*, edited by Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Peter Elbow, Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Ferdig, Richard E., and Kaye D. Trammell. "Content Delivery in the 'Blogosphere'." *T.H.E. Journal*, February 2004.
- Fernheimer, Janice Wendi, and Thomas J. Nelson. "Bridging the Composition Divide: Blog Pedagogy and the Potential for Agonistic Classrooms." *Currents in Electronic Literacy*, no. 9, Fall 2005.
- Krause, Steven D. "When Blogging Goes Bad: A Cautionary Tale About Blogs, Email Lists, Discussion, and Interaction." *Kairos*, vol. 9, no. 1, September 2004.
- Richardson, Will. *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. Corwin Press, 2006.
- Tryon, Charles. "Writing and Citizenship: Using Blogs to Teach First-Year Composition." *Pedagogy*, vol. 6, no. 1, Winter 2006, pp. 128-132.