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The Relevance of Blogs in the Composition Classroom

The classical model of the writing process consists of five steps: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. While this process has undergone changes over the years, it remains the path people are prone to follow in their writing. This model is also the way teachers urge their students along the writing process, even if they use different names for the steps. In this paper, I am not seeking to upend the way writing and composition have been taught for years—I merely think teaching methods and delivery should evolve to fit with the times. Social media is such a prevalent part of students' lives, so why not use it in the classroom? Blogs are an invaluable way of documenting the writing process because they are the only form of social media capable of encompassing every step of the writing process in depth.

A blog can be whatever its creator wants it to be, but it is, first and foremost, an internet space where a creator can post information. The information posted is up to the writer. Some people treat blogs like diaries, and their posts are like internal monologues. Others use them as personal pages, a way to have their own sites without having to pay for a domain. No matter how one chooses to use a blog, blogs are completely adaptable. Every aspect of the formatting can be changed to reflect the blogger's personality. Unlike other forms of social media, blogs allow creators to share any manner of media—words, images, sound clips, and videos. Their adaptability is why blogs should be used in the writing classroom.

In the past, writing instruction has consisted of teachers training students on how to write what the teacher wants to read and expects to see on the paper. This does not provide students with the opportunity to feel much confidence in their writing, and it does not instill in them the importance of writing in the realm outside of the classroom. As teachers, we must “find ways for students to take charge of their writing, to provide them with a sense that writing matters” (Tryon 128). This means we must provide students with writing tools that they find relevant. Right now, social media is relevant. By using social media, mainly blogs, in the classroom, teachers can “encourage students to engage with contemporary social and political concerns in a productive way” (Tryon 131). Students can therefore see the relevance of writing to their own lives *and* the real world application of it.

Invention, also known as prewriting, is defined as “a writer’s search for all the kinds of material that can shape and determine what can be presented and even known” (Glenn and Goldthwaite 151). Essentially, invention is the process through which writers find and determine what they will be writing on. One of the most popular methods of teaching students the process of invention is journaling. While there are several different types of journals, they have one thing in common: the application of pen to paper.

Blogs should replace traditional pen and paper journals for several reasons. The first is that “[b]logging about our work creates a type of digital portfolio, as blogs can be searchable and permanent” (Junco 259). With a quick CTRL-F search, people can look for any keyword with ease. Students no longer have to flip through pages of notes they have written across the course of weeks. A blog creates a much quicker and easier way to sift through information. The best part is that students do not have to worry about losing their writing—unless they take it down, it is going to remain on the internet. Some students may have no trouble physically writing and

may even keep personal journals. However, not every student is going to feel comfortable putting pen to paper.

Blogs are also an invaluable tool in other forms of invention, such as brainstorming and clustering. Perhaps some students are not inspired by words at all. New technology allows people to share “image, sound-effect, movement and so on” (Jewitt 1). Reading and writing these days is no longer strictly about words. If students are inspired by music and images, they are able to share music and images in a blog in a way that a physical journal could never offer. Blogging blows open the doors for the process of invention. Through blogging, students are allowed to discover, with the help of the nearly limitless internet, what inspires them. They can then take these inspirations and gather them into one post that they can look at throughout their writing. A blog post is almost like a virtual storyboard in this manner, allowing students to gather words, images, and even videos and sounds to tell their story.

Arrangement, also known as drafting, can be described as the way the “material in an essay grows out of a complex blend of the author’s purpose and knowledge of the subject” (Glenn and Goldthwaite 174). Arrangement, or form, can be one of the hardest steps in the writing process to teach because it takes experienced writers years to learn how to perfectly blend form and content, while teachers may only have a semester or two to teach this. Blogs should be used to teach form for the same reason they should be used to teach invention: the convenience of composing digitally. Composing a piece of writing on a computer is not only more convenient, it is more relevant. Reading is no longer about reading words on a page. With digital writing, “[w]e do not simply read text, we click on it” (Yoder 141). Teaching students how to draft their writing on a blog teaches and allows them to incorporate elements that are more relevant to themselves and the reader.

Style is defined as “the material embodiment of the relationships among self, text, and world” (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 423). Essentially, style is the way a writer shapes his writing to both reflect himself *and* give the audience what it wants/needs to hear. In the past, with the exception of some peer editing, the only one who read a student’s paper was the teacher responsible for grading it. However, this does not fully teach students about audience and effective writing. Laura Ewing, an educator, used Tumblr blogs in one of her classrooms. Regarding the students’ style, she says, “The Tumblr blogs posed a different challenge...as students knew they were being observed by each other and graded by me...Furthermore, students were careful to post on topics they thought would be of interest to readers...While the term ‘ethos’ was new to many, the concept was not” (Ewing 557). Blogs are a useful tool for the teaching of style because they can be used to teach students how to alter their writing according to their audience.

Part of what makes the internet, the internet, is the fact that it is public—content is available to anyone and everyone with the right access. Students write for their classes knowing who will read their work, but “[t]he public nature of most social media also makes it so that we often don’t know who is reading (and reacting) to our posts” (Junco 260). Most people enjoy having that barrier of anonymity. In one of his classes using blogs, Charles Tryon had students analyze a few different blogs. The bloggers themselves became aware of the project, and some of them even chimed in. Interestingly enough, some of the students were uncomfortable with the fact that the original bloggers had joined their discussion. In Tryon’s class, this led to an important discussion on the relationship between writing and audience (style). Tryon said about the project: “Some of my students shared my discomfort at being discovered and explained that they were more careful when criticizing the arguments of the bloggers I assigned” (Tryon 130).

Unfortunately, some students are wont to turn in poor writing because they believe no one will see it. Having them publish their work on the web through a blog makes them more accountable for their words.

Memory is perhaps the hardest step in the writing process to put into words. Sharon Crowley describes memory as “a heuristic, a way of stimulating selection, reworking, and amplification of *all* that writers know” (Crowley 44). By the time a writer has reached the memory phase, he has done all of his research and the paper is written. The memory phase is when the writer takes a step back and looks at his paper, asking himself: Does this paper make sense? Can the reader relate to and understand what I have said? The best way to relate to the reader is through the sharing of experiences. Blogs are a perfect way to do this because they are a communal space based on the sharing of information. They also allow people to bond and share experiences with more than just words.

Delivery, or publishing, is the way in which a writer gets his text to the reader. Putting academic writing online makes it both more accessible and relevant. Several academics have experimented with putting their work on the web to see the kind of attention it garners. Melissa Terras, an educator, “wondered whether making all of her papers publicly available and blogging and tweeting about them would influence the impact of her work...Terras found that the papers she blogged and tweeted about were eleven times more likely to be downloaded” (Junco 262-263). Academic writing has the possibility to become so much more than it is. In an article on the Digital Pedagogy Lab, Leila Walker discusses how blogging has changed the process of publishing for academics. She says, “I (and many like me) use Twitter or blogs to communicate with other scholars, ask research questions, keep up-to-date with others’ scholarship as it unfolds, float new avenues of thought or new ideas for research projects, promote new work, and

get feedback on new ideas” (Walker). Gone are the days where academics kept their research to themselves while they waited to publish in prestigious journals. Publishing their work on the internet allows writers to both provide and receive necessary feedback.

While blogs may be an invaluable resource in the writing classroom, they are not without their problems. Because they are published on the internet, which is an open access public sphere, blogs pose some privacy concerns. Marlana Eck, an educator, ran into problems with her school’s administration when she tried to implement a blog into her classroom. The school’s main concern was the privacy of the students, which Eck found to be ironic because “we live in an age where if I Google a student’s name, I can find them (listed with their full name) on sometimes five or more forms of social media” (Eck). Most students are likely familiar with what it means to have some personal information on the web. A useful trait of blogs, though, is that they can be set to either public or private. Choosing privacy settings can be dependent on grade level or the students’ preference for and comfort with sharing their writing on the web.

Another concern with integrating blogs into the classroom is accessibility. This entire argument for using blogs in the classroom works on the assumption that all students have ready access to the internet, which is simply not the case. Access is often a financial problem, and if we expect technology to be used in the classroom, “economic and cultural barriers must be addressed, access must be assured” (DigiRhet.org). Additionally, not all of the students with easy access to the internet use social media. A writing course that revolves around the use of blogs would only be possible if every student has easy access to the internet, and preferably their own computer. Some knowledge of social media would be a plus, but it does not have to be required. However, if knowledge on how to use social media is not required, this places more work on the teacher. In her class, Ewing had several blog assignments happening at the same time. While she

felt the class was a success, “it required a good deal of effort on [her] part to review all online forums and keep track of the various spaces students used” (Ewing 560). Teachers would have to be both willing and capable of using technology in the classroom.

A divide exists between teachers: those familiar enough with social media and technology that they implement them into the classroom, and those who do not have the skills or confidence to do so. While this divide is unfortunate, it is the result of education and training. Not all teachers are receiving the training they need in order to implement technology in the classroom. Teaching assistants, especially, are often ill-prepared. They are expected to teach first year composition courses, but “some teaching assistants are being prepared only to use specific tools in specific ways for specific classes and are thus lacking preparation in critical and rhetorical literacies” (Hauman, Kastner, and Witte 49). The argument comes full circle. If we wish to use technology and social media in the classroom, teachers must be trained how to do so. In order for teachers to be properly trained, we must use technology and social media in the classroom. The sciences thrive with the use of technology, so why shouldn't English? Literacy in the twenty-first-century includes digital literacy, and “[i]f we are to engage the already existing digital literacies of our students and further support their development as twenty-first-century citizens, we need to fill the techno-pedagogy gap within English graduate curricula” (Hauman, Kastner, and Witte 55).

The main issue with implementing blogs, or any social media for that matter, into the classroom, is the stigma people have against the use of social media in the classroom. In his book, Reynol Junco says, “Social media sites are banned in almost all K-12 schools. The implicit message is that these sites are nonacademic in nature and can only serve to distract from the educational mission of the school” (Junco 96). A school's banning of social media sites on

campus sends a message to both students and parents. Students are led to believe these sites are *wrong* and *not good* as far as their productivity is concerned. Parents are led to believe that social media sites hinder their children's ability to learn. What this leaves us with is an educational system that is unwilling to change despite the ever-changing world that exists outside of education. Even if educators and administrators were to come together and approve the use of social media in the classroom, the students and parents would still need to be convinced of the relevance and benefits of doing so.

What parents and educators must realize, is that technology is now a necessity in the classroom, especially the writing classroom. The very way people write has changed because of technology—there has been a shift from pen and paper to keyboard and screen. Not only has the medium changed, the ways in which people disseminate their writing have changed. DigiRhet.org, a writing collective, points out: “Never before...have writers had at their fingertips the tools to almost seamlessly integrate text and graphics...and to dynamically publish and widely distribute the products of that convergence to virtual spaces” (DigiRhet.org 234). The days of typing a paper out and having one person (the teacher) read it are coming to an end. The classroom has always been a place of preparation to send students out into the “real world.” Rejecting the use of technology and social media into the classroom is nothing more than a failure to fully prepare students for the real world.

Blogs, especially, are a hard sell in the classroom due to how people perceive them. Those who are unfamiliar with blogs have led to the misconception that “blogging communities have a reputation for wild, unfettered political commentary, [which is] hardly the form of writing that would seem to lend itself to reflection or the multiple revisions of a polished essay” (Tryon 128). While the “anything goes” idea is an essential part of some blogs, people must realize that

when it comes to social media, students *can* separate the personal and the educational. This is something they have been doing since the very inception of technology and social media.

In an article for the Digital Pedagogy Lab, Sean Michael Morris writes: “Right now, the digital is relevant, present, and is that thing that seems to provide the most interesting possibilities and the most contentious challenges in the scholarship and practice of teaching and learning” (Morris). To reject the use of technology and social media in the classroom is a disservice to students because it teaches them that what is relevant in their day-to-day lives is not relevant in their education. The truth is, “when students engage with a multimodal computer application they learn from all the modes present on the screen not only from written words or speech” (Jewitt 80). Technology presents students with nearly endless learning opportunities. Granted my future employer permits it, I would like to use blogs in my classroom for several reasons. The ideas I have presented in this paper are only a few of the reasons why I would use blogs in my own classroom. The main reason I would like to do so is because of the sense of community and opportunity for collaboration that blogging allows. Through blogging, students can open conversations with classmates and outside readers, they can give and receive feedback, and they can become actual creators as opposed to participants.

The best form of learning is the learning that gets students involved and truly makes them care. By using blogs to teach composition, teachers can help students realize the real world relevance of their education. Writing is not something that happens only in the classroom—it is something we use every day. By incorporating technology into the classroom, we are providing students with the means to learn and express themselves through the media that they encounter the most in their lives outside of the classroom.

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