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Course Blogs and Current Events

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How do you keep students engaged on close to a daily basis when classes meet only two or three times a week? How do you integrate current events into classes throughout the semester, especially in large classes where photocopying poses logistic problems? And can that be done without taking too much time away from the course readings? I have pondered these questions, with limited success, over years of teaching Political Science and Public Policy at Brown.

New technologies, I am pleased to say, hold the promise of addressing some of these old challenges. Email provides an effective method for disseminating breaking news to students. The cyber-era of teaching began for me on December 12, 2000, when I emailed the U. S. Supreme Court's decision in Bush v. Gore to my Law and Public Policy seminar between our Monday meetings. Emailing works well for extraordinary circumstances, but it would not work well as a repeated practice. Students are good at ignoring mass email, and repeated emails would certainly be seen as overly intrusive.

Electronic reserves – a major technological breakthrough for teaching in the last two years – also provide an excellent new way to disseminate articles to an entire class without the costs attendant to photocopying. But e-reserves require advance notice to students, and constantly posting news articles on electronic reserves would not

work well. The hurdles to accessing any given article are simply too long for browsing or quick checking.

I recently experimented with something that appears to provide a more promising solution to both of these challenges: a course blog.

A course blog?! Aren't blogs online journals with endless accounts of sundry matters, from the mundane to the intimate, which would often be better left unpublished? Aren't blogs also places where publication often occurs by impulse and without the constraints of fact checking or editorial judgment?

Yes and yes. At least sometimes they are. But blogs have design features that hold the dual promise of engaging students on a daily basis and integrating current events throughout the semester without displacing too much course content. Blogs are, after all, designed to facilitate the easy input of material; and blog readers return to sites with the expectation that they will be updated frequently. And they exist outside of class.

Creating a Course Blog

With those ideas in mind, I created a course blog for PS10, the Introduction to Public Policy (Fall 2005). The course had about 180 students. I began the blog the first day of class and ended it on the last day. I do not have my own blog and my only previous experience with blogs was the experimental use of "blog sections" in Ethics and Public Policy (Spring 2005). In that class, there were three groups of a dozen students each who volunteered to keep their own course blogs linked to each other on an organizer page through WebCT.

That is where I learned that the blog software available through Brown, Moveable Type, is extremely easy to use. With the help of an Instructional Technologist, my WebCT site was configured to stream the titles and first two sentences of the three most recent blog entries onto the course homepage. Students could also access the blog through the direct URL, where it still resides: <http://blogs.brown.edu/course/PS10>.

Since it was an experiment, I told students that reading the blog was entirely optional. I likened it to the extra features now common on DVDs. I used the blog for

several purposes. First and foremost, it was for integrating current events into the course. The most common blog entry, then, involved an item from one of that day's major newspapers along with some explanation, an image of some sort, a little commentary, and often a question or two.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* on marketing cars by their fuel economy provided the lead for an early entry that also linked to the [Sierra Club's objections](#) to these advertisements. An article about proposed cuts in the food stamp program allowed for graphics from the *Wall Street Journal* and links to [Mathematica](#), the think tank that did the analysis reported in the newspaper. Controversial rules proposed by the U.S. Marine [Fisheries Service](#) were briefly explained in another entry, complete with links to the agency's rulemaking process. All of these examples made connections to concepts from the course readings.

The more relaxed environment of blogs allows for a refreshing touch of whimsy. The front-page center columns in the *Wall Street Journal* (known in the trade as A-heds) provided a wonderful combination of relevance and quirkiness. For example, the A-hed in late November about regulating women's dress sizes in Argentina provided an intriguing context for discussing theories about markets and market failure. Similarly, a news story about the ferocious bickering between two Ivy League economists over school vouchers and the number of rivers in school districts around the country provided an excellent topic for another blog entry. Why these economists are arguing about the number of rivers is a somewhat complicated story; but the dispute has been documented and discussed widely in the blogosphere, allowing for my blog to provide an entry point into the controversy.

The final news item of the semester was something that I saved from November: a *Wall Street Journal* story about a [petition to the Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) to change the official serving size for fruitcake. The subject is inherently funny, especially replete with a glossy color image of fruitcake adorned with green and red candied fruit. But the news item raises several important questions: Is it appropriate that industry groups are using the "[Citizen Petition](#)" mechanism? Why is the FDA in the business of regulation serving sizes? Should the agency approve a proposal that is intended to *portray* fruitcake as less fattening (as opposed to actually making it less fattening)? All of those questions relate to larger concepts in the course. And in twenty minutes, I described the article, provided links to the electronic docket at the FDA, and posed a few policy questions on the course blog.

A secondary purpose of the blog was to extend points from class. Sometimes I provided links to additional information, or I tried to better explain something that was unclear in class. I did less of that than I had imagined at the beginning of the semester, partly to avoid having the feeling that class lecture was constantly being amended. But it was useful on occasion to explain a point or provide more information.

Finally, the blog provided a mechanism for feedback and comments. Blogs do not have to be configured to allow for this feature, but I welcomed the idea of a virtual space where discussion might occur outside of class. There was less of that than I had hoped. But a handful of posts generated extended comments. I configured the blog to be alerted when students commented, which made it easy to respond directly to the student by email when that seemed appropriate.

How Well Did It Work?

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the blog. I did not employ any software to measure traffic, but I solicited feedback through the anonymous “survey” feature on WebCT about half way through the course. I found out that about 75 students read the blog nearly every day. They loved the range of topics and the number of posts. They particularly liked the occasions on which I expressed my own views—something I would not be likely to do in class. And they asked for more controversial topics and for more pointed questions on my part.

I consider the course blog to have been quite successful. Students were able to see the connections between class and the larger world on a regular basis. There was always new material and it was available in a format that was engaging, easy to browse, and not at all intrusive. I also made connections with students I might not have otherwise met in such a large course. Moreover, I had a creative outlet that was far more fun and rewarding than I would have guessed in advance.

The obvious disadvantage is that blogs take time. Large classes are time consuming enough. How much time will a course blog add? That depends on the level of detail. A news item can be summarized and a question posed in a manner of minutes. And with Google’s image search capacity, there are often countless images

readily available whether the topic is traffic congestion, cell phone towers in national forests, or fruitcake.

I did not keep track of the precise number of hours I spent on the blog. I found that I enjoyed it and easily fit it into my schedule. I made some kind of entry almost every day. Some days I made two. The longest it took me to compose an entry was half an hour. The shortest was literally a minute or two. The more time-consuming entries were probably the most educationally useful as they provided details and references for further inquiry. But the quick entries also made it enjoyable to visit the site.

My best guess is that this was an extra two or three hours a week. The payoff for this amount of time was significant given the number of students who read nearly every post. I am not quite sure how people sustain blogging over the long-run. But then I never managed to keep a journal on a regular basis either.

The advantage of a course blog is that it ends when the semester ends. I'm sure that when September 2006 rolls around, I'll be itching to get back to this daily practice--for thirteen more weeks.