Blogs and Wikis in the Online Classroom

In order to be effective, online learning must create a community in which the students help build their learning environment, the instructor has an active presence, and communication is enabled both between the instructor and students as well as between students. The key is to keep students actively involved in their own learning, and for students to learn “as much from each other as they do from us” (Friedman & Friedman, 2013).

The skills that students will gain from effectively implemented online learning—critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and the ability to collaborate—are crucial for their future success in the “knowledge economy” (Friedman & Friedman, 2013).

When thinking about integrating any new tool into your online course, consider how the tool will help build the classroom community, as well as allow you to more effectively interact with your students.

For example, some indicators of instructor presence include “communicating with students on a regular basis, sharing information and feedback related to course content, relating to individual students’ interests (such as suggesting a specific book, article, or website), and maintain a sense of community within the course” (Tunks, 2012).

Similarly, some indicators of a successful classroom community include sensing in students “a sense of trust, an obligation to the group, and a belief that the mutual goals can best be met through cooperation” (Tunks, 2012).

Some other considerations to keep in mind when integrating a new tool into your online course:

1. Always plan well in advance.
2. Integrate the tool into existing assignments with the idea of increasing instructor presence and classroom community.
3. Inform students at the beginning of the semester that the use of the tool will be required, and provide all essential information and instructions in the syllabus.
4. Provide examples or rubrics, so students know what is expected of them.
5. Budget for the extra time required to assist and troubleshoot with students.
6. Build in an assessment of the tool to determine if the students found the tool easy to use and relevant to the course, and if they think it contributed to their learning in any way.

How to Use Blogs and Wikis in the Online Classroom

One way of facilitating the creation of an active and collaborative learning community as well as increasing instructor presence is through the introduction of social media tools such as wikis and blogs.

Wikis and blogs have several features in common. They both “enable instructors to demonstrate their presence and allow student to communicate easily without sharing the same physical space” (Tunks, 2010). Wikis and blogs allow students to practice writing for a larger audience, rather than the “conventional essay audience of one” (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2009). They are also asynchronous, which makes their use more flexible, as users don’t have to be online at a scheduled time. Wiki and blog software is available for free and requires no installation, just access to the Internet (Tunks, 2012). Finally, thanks to the popularity of sites like Wikipedia and Wordpress, wikis and blogs have become almost ubiquitous, though students will still need specific instruction on how to use them in your class.
Wikis

Wikis are user-generated web pages that can be created and edited quickly, right from within the web browser. Wikis are edited asynchronously and keep a history of revisions for all pages. The most well known wiki is Wikipedia.

Su and Beaumont describe wikis as being “closely aligned with the social-constructivist approach” and “more natural than many tools where open collaboration and the exchange of ideas is important” (2010). In the words of Choy and Ng, wikis allow individuals to “come together and develop a repertoire of shared practices, bringing new experiences to the group and learning from the group’s existing practices. The wiki itself can be seen as both the site of participation and the artifact that acts as a record of that community’s practices” (2007).

Wikis provide an efficient, flexible, open, and user-friendly “interface for collaboration, knowledge creation, and student interaction” and allow “the development of content specific websites while other tools”—such as blogs—“tend to be chronologically structured compositions.” Groups of learners can create, revise, and comment on a single page where “the result is immediately obvious (and not hidden in a thread of a forum or blog)” and instructors can “insert feedback at the point require so the wiki facilitates timely and specific in-task guidance” (Su & Beaumont, 2010).

Su and Beaumont found that the public nature of the wiki and the open editing process promoted responsibility, authorial identity, and academic integrity, as students put careful thought into what they posted, fiercely defended their own work, and policed the work of others (2010). In their study, Wheeler and Wheeler also found that students “took greater care in the referencing of their work, and were more fastidious in checking the veracity of their sources” (2009).

Students also learned to modify their feedback based on the feedback they witnessed from instructors. They learned how to organize their writing and construct better arguments by observing their fellow students and working to avoid the mistakes that others had made. Su and Beaumont believed that the wiki improved not just students’ writing, but also students’ ability to collaborate, think critically, and provide constructive criticism (2010).

The very features that make wikis so powerful also have some drawbacks. For example, the very public nature of the writing on wikis can intimidate students for whom writing is difficult. Su and Beaumont, for instance, found that writing for a public audience was intimidating to students with dyslexia (2010). Students may also be reluctant to write openly. Wheeler and Wheeler found, for example, that some students were “cautious about offending their peers, and reported that they wrote in a restrained manner, or deliberately avoided writing content about contentious issues” (2009).

Wikis can be used for any number of assignments in your online course. They can be used for collaborative writing, as a knowledge repository, a project management tool, a collaborative writing project, a reference guide, a literature review, or a glossary.

When planning to integrate a wiki into your course, keep in mind the following things:

1. **Number of users**: wikis are better suited to large group or class projects than for small group work. This is because wikis require a “critical mass of users” to be effective (Choy & Ng, 2007).
2. **Authentic tasks**: students will only fully contribute to wikis that they feel are an authentic part of their course learning, rather than a tacked on assignment (Choy & Ng, 2007).

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3. **Instructor as facilitator**: the successful development of a wiki depends, in large part, on the skill of the instructor at “promoting group collaboration… creating the course conditions and climate for establishing an online community, and… ability to engage students to be active participants and favour student led activities” (Choy & Ng, 2007).

4. **Providing templates**: giving students the templates for the various types of documents and formats you expect them to create helps them to focus on their content and writing, rather than stressing over the presentation (Su & Beaumont, 2010).

5. **Providing guidance**: ensure “ease of access, good navigation, help facilities, clear expectations and induction to the system” (Su & Beaumont, 2010).

**Blogs**

According to Walker Rettberg (2008), a blog is characterized by the following traits:

- A frequently updated web site with entries listed in reverse-chronological order (so that the most recent is at the top of the page).
- Written from a personal viewpoint, often in the first-person, with a personalized interface.
- Social, offering visitors the ability to comment and containing links to blogs and sites on similar topics.

Blogging can take several forms in the academic context. De Andres Martinez, citing Campbell, offers the following typology:

- **Instructor blog**: providing access to course information and a place to connect, asynchronously with the instructor.
- **Learner blog**: “offering a free-formatted space for individuals to express themselves creatively” or practice writing and editing.
- **Class blog**: “a collaborative space to conduct specific tasks” or project-based learning (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

Blogs differ from wikis in that they promote a more reflective style of writing. The ability to record, reread, rewrite, and rethink past experiences or expectations promotes the acquisition of reflective skills and provides the evidence to assess such skills (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

Blogs also give students their own unique space to express themselves. This can provide a less intimidating medium in which to work than in a collaborative space, such as a wiki, and can empower nervous or shy students who otherwise might not participate. Additionally, the “interaction affording by a blog’s comments among peers provides [students with] a sense of ownership and control often lacking from other learning activities” (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

When planning to integrate a blog into your course, keep in mind the following things:

1. **Importance of interaction**: blogs shouldn’t exist in a vacuum—“the comments received from peers and teachers to the posts was an additional driver of learning and a prominent motivating factor” (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

2. **Establish ground rules**: students need to be given specific guidance “about constructive feedback, respect for privacy and… the professional values of collaboration, acknowledgement, authorship and copyright awareness” (de Andres Martinez, 2012).
3. **Organization and maintenance**: plan in advance how you expect posts to be organized, categorized, or tagged, and then take into account the amount of time it will take to make sure this organization is maintained (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

4. **Assessment**: if writing on the blog is going to be graded, think about how you will set a deadline, if needed. This could involve revoking writing and editing permissions from blog users after the due date, or creating a mirror of the blog that can be used only for assessment purposes (de Andres Martinez, 2012).

**Work Cited**


