
Blog. The word is almost old-fashioned. In February 2010, a Pew report (Lenhart et al., 2010) indicates that fewer young people (if Americans are typical) have or comment on blogs, while more older people are blogging than just a few years back. And yet, a few years back, every time I wrote one of these up-with-blogs! pieces (I wrote several from 2005-7) I had to spend the first few hundred words trying to describe what one is. Well, perhaps that has not changed. Another Pew report in 2005 (Rainie, 2005) indicates that although the kids now find blogs so 2006, most Internet users still do not know what one is.

At any rate, it is 2011. Can I come up with anything more up-to-the-minute than blogging? What about something like: “Tweeting the Truth—Everything You Wanted to Know About Philosophy in 140 Characters or Less but Were Afraid to Ask” (whew, that is already 114 characters. Tough crowd).

Let us try another angle. This follow-up to my original piece could also be considered a retrospective on a decade spent trying to use IT to just plain do a better job teaching, in particular, teaching large classes (500 in the first semester, 300 in the second semester for my introduction to philosopher module). Next semester, I am handing off the reins of my large introductory module to a colleague eager for the challenge. I will retire—contented—to the world of smaller modules, in which I am planning on rediscovering the more spontaneous joys of the whiteboard and marker.

Of course I would never again consider not having a module blog, to which students are required to contribute no matter how small the module. That would be sheer folly, in this day and age.

Let me take that last point, then work up to more ambitious, future-looking stuff, which my colleague must now worry about (but all of us really should be).

Blogs (pardon me, I am just going to assume you know what I am talking about; if not, go find out) are helpful, efficient ways of conducting discussions in groups of students of any size. More generally, since blog posts and associated comments constitute a permanent, reviewable, consultable record of sorts, the blog archive—with its categories and chronology—can serve as a substantive organisational component for the module as a whole.

Blogging does not necessarily add a great deal of value when class size is small. Blogs do not allow you to do anything that you cannot do in person if the group is say, 24 students or less. But mandatory blogging, as a module component, still makes clear sense because frankly, the cost to the instructor—the logistical and labour cost of set-up and maintenance—is negligible. You do not have to do anything you were not going to do anyway in effect, and there is some benefit, so you might as well.

Let me review a few (fairly obvious) pedagogical points that fit in here: you learn by doing a little, and doing it regularly. Our assessment schemes are often a bit out of joint that way, encouraging—by permitting—long periods of slack, punctuated by bursts of frantic activity. You would not try to learn piano by putting it off for 11 weeks, then playing your fingers to the bone for 10 straight hours. But many of our students do take something like that approach—pulling all-nighters before the project is due or before the exam.

Of course we do not encourage any such thing, but sometimes I think the end-of-semester project and exam model of assessment—which has its good points—is unavoidably too permissive of bad study habits. Requiring students to leave regular comments to regular blog postings is a good way to enforce good habits without unduly burdening the instructor enforcement-wise; and without treating students as children (officially, they no longer are). Requiring only that students think of something to write up, on a regular basis, still leaves them plenty of latitude to pursue their own intellectual development (we are not just rapping their knuckles with daily quizzes or any such thing).

It is easy to keep track of students’ comments, in a bare did it/did not do it way. Mostly the instructor’s labour—priming the blog pump—consists of writing your own brief thoughts about the week’s work and, of course, you have to do that anyway, since you have a lecture to deliver. And if students see you, thinking more informally—working stuff out, maybe saying the wrong thing and correcting yourself—they are only encouraged to do the same. Also, students are better at writing than speaking—theyir mouths do not come with preview boxes, you see. So the quality of discussion in the comment box is typically higher than that in the classroom. Last but not least, students really need to work on their writing even if they are better at writing than speaking.

To repeat: blogs work for small modules because they provide some real value—organisationally, pedagogically, socially—without generating a lot of extra overhead, logistics or labour. Of course things can go wrong (anything can go wrong) but there are no inherent drawbacks to this approach.

All this is even clearer for large modules. I am not sure at what point the threshold is
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*smarter, better-rounded and more critical.*

It is you majored in. As a university graduate, you are assumed to be somehow your first job out of university bears no very tight, self-evident relation to whatever are an economics major actually being hired to do economics, but in most cases, prospective employer probably will not have a very definite idea of exactly what it a higher wage. This is a bit of a miracle, from your point of view, because your stamped “university graduate”, which will, other things being equal, entitle you to... You know what you are doing or you do not. Presumably the latter, since you are... And so forth is a general degree, so you should major in what you like and what you are good at. This is perfectly true, but a bit of a cliché. Then I say look, either you know what you are doing or you do not. Presumably the latter, since you are asking me. So the answer is: when you get out of here in four years’, you will be stamped “university graduate”, which will, other things being equal, entitle you to a higher wage. This is a bit of a miracle, from your point of view, because your prospective employer probably will not have a very definite idea of exactly what it is that you have been up to that makes you worthy of this premium. Possibly you are an economics major actually being hired to do economics, but in most cases, your first job out of university bears no very tight, self-evident relation to whatever it is you majored in. As a university graduate, you are assumed to be somehow smarter, better-rounded and more critical. *Something.* But beyond that, if you asked 10 employers *exactly* what they think they are buying when they pay that university premium, you would probably get 10 different answers.

So, given that no one else seems to know *exactly* what you are supposed to be learning, yet everyone seems to think it is *good*, you really might as well suit yourself. For the next four years, you can swim in this slipstream of strange ignorance. Study German phenomenology or ancient Chinese Oracle Bone inscriptions, game theory, the 19th century British novel or whatever lights the little light upstairs. At the end of it, go out and get a job in marketing or insurance. Oddly, that first thing will be assumed to constitute wholly sensible preparation for the second.

I do not mean to encourage skepticism about the value of a university education or laziness in telling my students these things. I mean to encourage intellectual autonomy and a sense of unique opportunity. If you work in finance for several years, *then* declare that you want to go off and study the hydrodynamics of Polynesian longboats for four years—because it sounds “interesting”—this view will not be shared by your employer, who certainly will not promise to give you a raise when you return. So you really ought to seize the opportunity to study something that interests you *now.* Not everyone who enters university has sufficient intellectual autonomy to find something and really *study* it of course; but I am quite sure they *ought* to. Quite possibly, that is even the thing those employers are looking for (although I cannot be sure).

But now let me flip this point around. No one needs to lecture university academics about the virtues of intellectual autonomy. No one needs to tell us twice to suit ourselves. And yet, that assumption employers make about graduates—namely, that the four years at university have done them good—is just as much an assumption about instructors as about students. Everyone seems to think we university professors are basically doing our jobs, which is very gratifying. But no one out there—or even in here—seems to agree about *exactly* what it is we are doing for these students. Is it about making them more critical or just teaching them to write? I have to ask, as a philosopher: is this trust *justified?* Can I be sure that, just by suiting myself as a teacher, I will be suiting other people as well? And suiting them as well as they can be suited realistically?

Rather notoriously, academics tend to give very generous self-assessments of their abilities as teachers (Illusory superiority, n.d.). And yet, we academics seldom watch our colleagues teach, or receive substantive peer feedback on our own teaching. We are like professional athletes who have not been coached for years. So even if we have reason to believe that we have an aptitude for it, we hardly have good ground—most of us—for assuming that we are doing an optimal job. Yes, the public seems generally happy with the job we do, but what does the public know about how we are doing, and how much better we might be doing? For that matter, what do we know?

I am not working up to the hint that academics have too much intellectual autonomy. I do not think that is the case. There is no model of how the university can possibly run that does not leave these highly trained individuals to look after themselves pretty much. But I do think academics ought—autonomously—to consider seriously whether things might not go more better, in their classrooms, some other way.

Obviously I am winding up to dropping the heavy hint that teachers ought to use blogs and as much IT as possible—even if they do not feel this “suits them”. They
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one who can do all that is likely to be a terrible teacher of their subject—granted. I expect the reason academics tend to assume, so strongly, that they are good teachers is that they tend to think they are good researchers. Here, at least, I suspect they are on more solid ground and less solitary ground. Their research is rigorously peer-reviewed in ways their teaching is typically not.

The end result is this: philosophy professors tend to think they understand philosophy very well; economics professors think they understand economics. And then, a gear slips and the economist concludes that just because she is surely better at teaching economics than a philosopher (a historian, an English professor, a journalist) would be on average, therefore she is probably a better-than-average economics teacher (I do not mean to insult the reasoning power of economists in particular; I think we all may tend to commit this sort of self-flattering fallacy, we academics). But teaching really is different from researching philosophy or economics. It is also different from researching teaching, for that matter. It is a combination of performance and management, with its own demands, its own skills, its own perennial blind spots.

Of course, one reason we teachers do not very readily take seriously the possibility that we do not know what we are doing as teachers is that we have spent most of our lives in school. We are school-lovers; that is how we got into the business. We were in classrooms for years, then chose never to leave. How could we fail to understand, intuitively, deeply, what can and should be done in a classroom? (The fish may or may not be the last to know he is in water. But once he knows, he will be very skeptical that he needs swimming lessons).

But of course, the nature of the medium is changing as media possibilities evolve and open up. To adapt Gibson again, the future of teaching is already here, it’s just not widely distributed. Being a teacher means not just understanding your subject, but being an expert distributor of it. In an age in which you really must decide which media is best for relating to students because there are more practical choices than ever before, and being a good teacher means understanding and choosing what works best. It means it is my job, not no one’s job, to consider that my job might actually be a different job than I thought I knew it was.

And if I am pretty sure I have a handle on it?

This is fair, but I am still very inclined to emphasise the skeptical point because I think, in fact, academics are not much inclined to mistake the medium for the message. They are not likely to be hired if they are ignorant, or think that they can teach something they know nothing about, if only they set up a blog to help them do it, and an audio recorder to preserve the evidence of their efforts as a podcast. Yet, they are inclined to think that their innovative, original research efforts—the freshness of their personal approaches to their subjects—will naturally tend to translate into optimal distribution.

I think there is little reason to suppose that is the case, and good reason to suppose it is not.

So my advice for my colleague taking over my large introductory module, and all my other colleagues and myself, is not to start a module blog and arrange for webcasting (although I heartily recommend both), but to think the following thought on a regular basis: I am probably not doing as good a job as I could be, because technology is advancing so quickly, and I am so caught up with the hard work of being a good researcher, that it is hard to keep up with all the possibilities for being a more effective distributor of what I know. Given the way the university works, and I work, it is unlikely that any administrator can or will effectively compel me to improve my teaching in some methodologically innovative way. But that just means it is my job, not no one’s job, to consider that my job might actually be a different job than I thought I knew it was.

References

