

eTools: Google Blogger as an Online Discussion Tool

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Introduction

Although most learning management systems such as Blackboard or D2L come with a built-in discussion board, these boards are not always designed in a way that facilitates engaged and continued conversation. Blogs, on the other hand, often can facilitate a community spirit between bloggers and commenters. Utilizing a free blogging tool such as Google Blogger allows instructors to capture that spirit for their own classes, which can be used either as the main engagement space for an online course or as a supplement to conversations in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

What is Google Blogger?

Traditionally, blogs are spaces for people to self-publish short essays on a wide variety of topics. Google Blogger (www.blogger.com) is an online blog site that contains a dashboard that allows authors to create or post blog posts. These posts can be simply text or can include links, pictures, or embedded video. Readers of the blog can then discuss the initial post in the comment section or comment on the posted content.

Google Blogger has an array of options in regards to privacy and access to different parts of the blog. Blogs can be public or private. If a blog is private, students can be invited to the blog via e-mail. Instructors can also choose if students are blog readers, authors, or administrators. Authors can create their own blog posts.

Administrators have access to a wide variety of tools including inviting other readers and authors, controlling the design of the blog, and accessing usage metrics. The site is adaptive with both full screen and mobile versions of the layout.

How can I get Google Blogger for use in the classroom?

To access and use Google Blogger, both instructors and students will need to create a gmail account by going to www.gmail.com. Students should choose a professional sounding e-mail address and create the account under their name as it appears on the course roster. Within the gmail account, users access the Blogger dashboard through a link in the Google Apps icon (currently in the top right corner of the screen). For private blogs, instructors will need to invite students to the blog and students will need to have a gmail account to receive and accept the invitation. If your institution uses Google Apps for Education, students can use that account instead of a gmail account.

How can I use Google Blogger in the classroom?

With a little creativity, the Google Blogger platform can be used in a variety of ways to increase students' engagement with their instructors, the course material, and each other. Specifically, Google Blogger can be used for:

1. *blogging assignments*. Students can be assigned to blog publically or privately about course material. Although blogs are essentially small essays, publishing them in a blog format allows students to engage in each other's work in a way that does not occur

when essays are only submitted to instructors. Students can either create their own blogs or the class can create a shared blog together.

2. *a discussion board.* Instructors can post discussion prompts as a primary blog and allow students to respond in the comment section, which allows comments to be directly responded to and provides coherent conversational threads. Participation can be easily graded by using your browser's search function to search by student name for specific contributions, which is why it is important for students to create their account under their name that appears on the course roster.

3. *conducting online seminars.* Blogger can be adapted to conduct online graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar courses. (To do this, students first must be granted authorship privileges in the blog.) Instead of being responsible for leading discussion as they might in a seminar course, students can prepare a discussion prompt for the class as a blog post. This prompt can contain analysis of the readings, discussion questions, or links to additional material. The discussion then takes place in the comment section where the instructor and the student discussant can guide the discussion.

4. *a repository for additional materials.* Either the blog post functions or the comment section can serve as a space where students and instructors can post additional materials that are related to the course. The blog post function allows for links and embedded images and video. These materials enables students to enhance

their course experience on their own and instructors can review the materials students post during face-to-face meeting times.

5. *peer review*. Students can post drafts of essays and other assignments on the blog and review each other's work either as a formal assignment or as an informal process.

Conclusion

Using Blogger as a pedagogical tool can help create spaces where the conversation regarding the course is not just instructor-student but also between students themselves. This framework allows instructors to select the level of engagement and responsibility that is appropriate for their particular course. Although the tool is specifically designed for blogs, thinking creatively about how to use this online space can help instructors meet learning goals in new and interesting ways.