

Social Courseware: Using Blogs and RSS Feeds to Manage Online Course Material

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Introduction

Social Courseware is a term I use to describe the use of social networking tools to organize, manage, and deliver course content, and to facilitate online interaction among students and the instructor. While many universities have adopted dedicated *learning management systems* (LMS) systems, and such systems provide generally well-integrated tools for creating, editing, uploading, and linking to course content, web usage is undergoing fundamental change away from the type of hierarchical organization and delivery used by most LMS systems. In the place of these hierarchies, an ever-expanding world of *Social Computing* has firmly taken root. The *blog* and *RSS feeds* illustrate a new form of organizing course materials and delivering them to the student.

Social Computing

Social Computing, like many popular culture buzzwords, can have a variety of meanings. Social computing is sometimes referred to as part of *Web 2.0* to denote its paradigm-shifting potential (although some technology professionals use Web 2.0 more specifically to denote a new breed of enterprise applications). In its most simple form, social computing refers to using software tools to support social interaction among a number of users. It is an outgrowth of social networking, the once and still physical activity of actively seeking out other people who share similar social, professional, or personal interests. While blogging is a common social computing activity/tool, most people think of specific web sites and applications, such as MySpace™, YouTube™, Flickr™, Wikipedia™, and Facebook™. All of these sites are designed to allow for the general public to post information and media, and through the use of “favorites” lists and “tags” (keywords) to connect users with similar interests and tastes.

An Introduction to Blogs

The *blog* (short for Web log) is one social computing tool, and its use is growing to the point that many people no longer have traditional web sites organized into a home page and tree of related pages—they only have a blog. Blogs developed as online diaries, with users creating an online account of some aspect of their professional or personal life. A typical blog allows a user to post web entries in a journal or diary format, with each new entry inserted at the top of the blog page and all past entries following in reverse chronological order. (Entries beyond some calendar period, usually a month, get archived.) Users most often focus on a limited topic area (often themselves). When the subject matter ranges across a variety of topics, categories and *tags* (keywords) are used to allow for aggregation of entries that share a topic (electronica, for example, or a specific artist like Aphex Twin). From the perspective of creating a web site, *blogging* and *tagging* allow for a simpler workflow when posting new material. New entries

combine with old entries, without the need for creating new pages, or editing old pages, and uploading the result. The creator does not have to create new static hierarchies (folders and subfolders) whenever a new topic is created, because all information is stored in the same database. Tags are used to view appropriately grouped information without the *blogger* (web log author) having to manually generate web pages containing the result, or physically changing storage locations for that information. Multiple tags for a single item can be used for entries that encompass more than one topic, which doesn't force a blogger to make an arbitrary decision about what one folder to use to store a file.

An author (instructor) usually posts to a blog through a web-based interface. The interface resembles a form with text boxes to fill out, but offers application-like text-formatting features and tools to upload media content. Each entry will have a title, which is the part that users will see in the RSS feed (see below), the body of the entry (text and graphics), one or more categorizations, and tags that can be used as easy search terms. As mentioned above, the main page of a blog will have all the entries up to a certain point in time on one page, with older entries grouped on previous pages. A blogger can choose to have the main page display all of each post, or just a certain number of lines. Clicking on the title of an entry will take you to a page with just that entry and (usually) all of the comments on that entry.

RSS Feeds

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds provide an exciting tool for delivering content to users, as RSS feeds provide a mechanism for the blogger to notify a reader that new material has been posted without the reader having to navigate to the site and look for new or modified web pages.

RSS in a variety of forms has been adopted by most major web sites, including news sites, professional organizations, and advocacy groups. RSS is also an integral part of the blogging experience. RSS feeds deliver constantly updating article titles and links to current content on a given web site. Users can collect RSS feeds with a dedicated program, called an *aggregator*, or use a web browser to collect feeds. Most modern browsers (Firefox, Safari, Internet Explorer) include the ability to bookmark RSS feeds. The convenience of RSS feeds for the user is that users do not have to navigate to each site, have it download, and look for new content in all the many areas that might be of interest to them. (I think we all know how hard it is to get students to check a course web site daily for new posts, especially when new posts are only added two to three times a week.) RSS feeds “come to the user,” showing headlines in their toolbar. Users can easily see if something new has been added without navigating to the site, and click the feed headline to go directly to the new material. With most blogs an RSS feed can be created for each category, so for a class web site students can easily find new assignments as opposed to new lecture notes. A feed can even be created for comments on posts.

A Blog as a Tool for Organizing Discussion

Since blogs provide a means for readers to post their own comments on an author's posts, a blog can be used a tool for organizing discussions, much like a web-based bulletin board with *threaded* topics. In threaded discussions users post replies or comments to posts that are listed hierarchically underneath the original post. Users can follow an original question through all

answers in one organized unit. Blogs work in a similar way. Readers can post comments to an entry, and all comments appear along with the original blog entry. Related to teaching, an instructor can have students ask questions about a lecture or assignment by commenting on the blog post. As opposed to an email communication between student and teacher, the question is public. Other students can see what questions have been asked, what has been answered, and whether the answer came from the instructor or another student. (In my teaching so far, students have never answered another student's question.) And as mentioned above in the section on RSS feeds, comments can be subscribed to as a feed. Using this feature makes it easier for instructor and students to see when new questions have been asked and answered. Even without using a RSS feed for comments an instructor can usually set up a blog to send an email notification to a primary email account whenever a comment has been posted.

Limitations of Using a Blog as a Learning Management System

While blogs can be a very useful tool for organizing content and communications for courses, blogs do have certain limitations compared to systems like Blackboard™. Blogs lack some of the specialized education functions, like a grade book feature. Blogs handle access control differently as well. With WordPress™, you can create a private blog, which will only grant access to specified people. However, people can only be specified if they have a WordPress account (free). You can set your blog to be public, but only allow comments from registered WordPress users. In this case, the first time a user posts a comment you are asked to *moderate*, or approve the comment, before it becomes public. In general, I would not recommend allowing any reader without a WordPress account the ability to post comments. There are too many people using blog comments as a way to advertise. While blogs do have spam protection, you still could have people at large posting anything to your class site.

If you use a free blog service, like WordPress, having your students register an account in order to communicate with the instructor is an added burden. I have found that unless I make an assignment for students to register and post a comment to the blog, they will not do it. Once I have pulled them into the blog, however, they usually continue to comment. It is possible to download and run WordPress and other blogging software on your own server, which could be integrated into your university computing structure.

Conclusions

From comparing page view stats from when I used to place course materials on Blackboard, with blog view stats now that I use WordPress, that students are using the blog to view online course material with much greater regularity than they did on Blackboard. With Blackboard, less than half the class viewed the course site with any regularity, and even then they did not look at all the material that was posted. Using the blog, more students are accessing online course material, and with greater regularity. Even more encouraging, students are posting questions related to assignments.

Blog Providers (not exhaustive)

- *WordPress* (wordpress.com). This is the provider I use for my teaching and personal blogs. It allows for a great deal of customization of layout, offers a dashboard that allows you to track your viewer stats, and has overall worked well for me. You can create blogs that allow for multiple authors, and even create static web pages that can serve as your personal web site.
- *Blogger* (www.blogger.com). Blogger is part of the growing Google assortment of web-based applications (Blogger and Blogspot are now one service).
- *TypePad* (www.typepad.com). TypePad charges a subscription fee, but offers more features designed for a professional blogger (greater storage, bandwidth, etc.).

Tips and Other Bits of Advice

- *If you want to blog, start the process by finding out if your campus offers a blog server.* On-campus tools will generally be more accessible to you and your students. If your campus doesn't have a blog server, see if they will install and maintain one.
- *If you need to use an off-campus solution, investigate your options.* Set up accounts on different services and see for yourself what it is like to setup and post entries. How are comments managed? Does the blog provide you with suitable formatting options? How much space and access is allowed?
- *Keep your teaching blog(s) and personal blog(s) separate.* I have a personal blog that I use to talk about topics that interest me. Sometimes the topic is me, or more specifically, my work. A lot of times I post on interesting things that I see from my web travels. The intent of my personal blog is still educational, but it isn't directly related to any of my classes, so I keep the content separate. If your personal blog is truly personal, intended for friends and family, you should really keep it separate. Don't even link to it from your teaching blog.
- *Depending on how much material you have to post, and how much students will post, consider using separate blogs for separate topics.* I have not done this yet, but I can see the usefulness of it. Right now I prefer to let my students wander around the various subjects I teach. (core music theory, basic to advanced computer music)
- *Create an assignment that forces your students to use the course blog, and do it early on in the term.* Students may be technologically proficient, but they are also a bit lazy when it comes to incorporating new technology practices.
- *Don't go overboard with columns and widgets/add-ons.* Keep the focus on the text of the materials, not a bunch of sidebar links. I have found that a two-column setup (one for body text, one for a sidebar) works best for me.