

## **Extending the Classroom: Using Online Platforms for Student Writing and Reflection**

*by Rebekah Johnson*

Hybrid courses make use of online platforms to extend the classroom and allow students to continue collaborative work outside the physical space. Students can collaborate by posting assignments for classmates to see and comment on; in addition, the collection of assignments over the course of a semester can serve as an archive of their coursework. Most important, writing systematic reflections throughout the course can serve as an ongoing “learning narrative” and can help both students and teachers see what students are grasping or struggling with, what subjects they want to explore further, and what class activities the students feel they are getting the most from.

### **Online Platforms**

Web 2.0 platforms for such virtual work include ePortfolios, blogs, and course management systems (CMSs) like Blackboard. Not only can blogs and ePortfolio systems be used for individual student work and feedback, but they can also be used as CMSs that can take the place of platforms like Blackboard. Using online tools helps students build their technological literacy as well as their academic literacy and writing skills.

ePortfolio systems are often purchased by an institution as closed systems, not open to the public; one such system is from Digication (<http://www.digication.com>). Blogs are available online for free and can be shared, searched, or viewed by anyone. One easy-to-use blog is Blogger by Google (<http://www.blogger.com>), which I have used in many of my classes, including academic ESL courses. Other popular free platforms include WordPress (<http://wordpress.com>) and Tumblr (<https://www.tumblr.com>). Many students are familiar with blogs or blogging and most already have Google email accounts.

### **Reflective Writing**

Reflective writing has been shown to enhance learning behaviors and critical skills, as well as to integrate various types of knowledge (Bass & Enyon, 2009; Jenson, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Peet et al., 2011; Rogers, 2002).

The ongoing “learning narrative” of students is documented through their introductions, reflections, and final project posts. Such assignments can include an autobiography or an “about me” page; reading journals, essays, and reflections about their processes throughout the semester; and their final projects. Student work throughout the semester is therefore archived digitally.

### **Tips for Using Online Platforms**

Managing peer feedback online takes practice. Students must be encouraged to offer some critique while being professional and not rude. Giving them particular parameters for comments yields better results (e.g., “Respond with one thing you like about the post, one thing the writer could improve, and one question you have for the writer.”). In some cases, students will not post comments unless you assign them to groups and have them comment on the posts of group members.

It is helpful to have a computer lab during part of your class time to facilitate posting, reading peer posts, and commenting on peers' work. In my experience, participation is much higher for classes with computer lab access during class time than those where students do all online work outside of class.

It can take quite a bit of time to set up such systems, but then they function well throughout the semester. If you set up a course on a blog, an ePortfolio system, or a CMS, you can then transfer the structure and assignments to future classes.

The other activity that takes time is giving feedback online. Research shows that students value using online platforms more when the instructor gives them feedback on their posts. Sometimes peers can give feedback, while at other times, particularly for staged assignments and reflections on the content of the course, the instructor should give the feedback.

### **Student Engagement**

To get a sense of how students viewed using blogs in ESL writing courses, here is a student reflection about using blogs (which were posted on their class blogs):

*Student 1:* Blog was very new for me. I have learned a lot from the blog. Now, i know how to work on my own blog. I can post my blog work and i can see other students work on the blog. I spent the entire of time on the blog posts outside of the class. Everyday i open my blog account and find what is new. Blog is the another way to express your idea and expression. In that case we can say blog is one kind of art. My favorite activities on the blog is giving commands on others blog and also getting some commends from somebody. If somebody commends on my blog so i can know how i am working.

And here is a student reflection on using the ePortfolio for bilingualism and linguistics courses, respectively:

*Student 8:* This class was very interesting where I learned a lot of things in regards of the origin of the words, their structure studied individually and in groups. The textbook was very well detailed where the information was clear and easy to understand. However, the lectures we received in class were very useful as a way to grasp smoothly the material and be able to get the knowledge about this subject.

The most interesting online activity was the part of the class where we used the technology and displayed our work in ePortofolio. This method was very well incorporated with the lectures in class assignments.

### **Conclusion**

The use of online platforms in hybrid language education courses for students to post assignments and to reflect on their own learning is very valuable and extends the classroom beyond school and home. In addition, reflective posts document a student's ongoing narrative about his or her individual experiences and learning processes throughout the course and give valuable information about learning and students' perceptions.

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