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Twenty X

Blogging to Learn: Educational Blogs and U.S. History

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Social studies teachers assess their students in a number of ways. Among these are formative assessments, authentic assessments, and summative low-level multiple-choice tests. Summative standardized tests receive a lot of attention, but of equal importance are the measures that get at students' in-depth thinking and formative attitudes about learning. Unfortunately, some teachers feel so much pressure to cover content and prepare students for the multiple-choice, objective test questions, that they often make curricular tradeoffs that result in less time integrating computer technology in the classroom.[1] Low performing and high risk students often fare worse. Their access to technology and creative, project-based curriculum is often limited by well meaning teachers who focus instead on remedial skills.[2]

Our experience breaks with the conventional wisdom to demonstrate that teachers can engage low achieving students in the history classroom through the use of multimedia and Web 2.0 technologies. Working with two classrooms of low-achieving U.S. history students, we compared student experiences in traditional units to those in units that integrated an educational blog.[3] At the end of each unit, we collected information using various assessment measures. Students took a multiple-choice test, they were assessed for their depth of knowledge, and they were interviewed about their attitudes toward learning. We designed the blogging activities for this project to address in-depth thinking and students' attitudes about learning. We hoped that students who completed the blog activities would perform at the same level on multiple choice end-of-unit tests as students who received traditional instruction, and this proved to be the case.

Through other forms of assessment, we found that the integration of blogs into instruction was more responsive to the learning styles of the students by providing access to tactile and visual materials.[4] Students seemed to participate more actively in the blog-based units and found a "voice" in this online environment.

Context

The classrooms in which this study took place were labeled "academic" (the lowest track below "honors," advanced placement (AP), and international baccalaureate (IB) U.S. history classes). These classes were made up predominately of junior and senior students, ranging in age from 16–20 years. The majority of students were "at-risk" for dropping out of school and for low achievement. The cumulative class average was 69% for class 1 and 78% for class 2 during the time of our research project. Both classes were predominately African American (class 1: 65% and class 2: 64%).

Previous to this study Mr. Jones[5] had integrated technology into his daily classroom activities in order to make the subject matter relevant to his students. He believed the integration of technology helped his students increase their retention level and perform better on standardized tests. With the help of a grant from the SAS Institute, he and his colleagues frequently integrated computer-based lessons into the curriculum. His classroom was equipped with 21 laptop computers and wireless access to the Internet. In a typical lesson, his students would use the laptops to complete guided reading activities that included both primary and secondary sources.

The Blog Assignment

Building on his previous use of technology, two university researchers collaborated with Mr. Jones to integrate a Web 2.0 application—an educational weblog—into his instruction. We used the criteria for authentic intellectual work, including the construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and relevancy beyond the classroom, to guide the development of the blogging activities.[6] We blended this approach with our understanding of multiculturalism and learning styles to design activities that included engaging content.

We chose two units in the U.S. history curriculum. In the first unit, which was on the Progressive Era, class 1 completed the blog activities and class 2 received traditional instruction. In the second unit, on the 1920s, class 2 worked with the blog activities and class 1 received traditional instruction. We used Edublogs.org (www.edublogs.org) as the application to build our Web 2.0 activity because it was free and accessible through the county schools' Internet filter. Using Edublog's

template we created our own classroom site: http://digitalhistory.edublogs.org/.[7] Each day we added a series of self-contained, historical learning activities that focused on content from the standard course of study and integrated primary source materials, including audio files, texts, and images. We asked students to complete a variety of questions, ranging from basic to more sophisticated levels of historical analysis. The historical sources we included in the activities were drawn from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic contexts. In an effort to broaden the cognitive reach of the activities, we included textual and visual content, while also planning for each student to have access to the laptop computers. Mr. Jones led the classroom instruction, and the university researchers offered technical support and recorded observations. At the end of both units, the students took a multiple choice unit test that included questions similar to those that would appear on the EOC test. We also interviewed the teacher and a sample of students about their experiences.

Based on our observations, an analysis of student work, and the student interviews, we were able to make conclusions about the affordances of integrating the Web 2.0 units in this U.S. history classroom. It was immediately obvious that the blog facilitated a greater level of student participation in the class activities. There were an increased number of student "voices" represented by comments on the blog compared to the more traditional classroom instruction. In the traditional lessons, the teacher did the majority of the talking; in the blog activities, a majority of the students participated. The students reported that the technology was easy to navigate and that they felt confident in the online setting. They also found the information in the learning activities to be very informative about the past.

The blog activities seemed to match the unique learning needs of the students. They reported that they were able to work at their own pace and felt the primary sources provided more "specific" information about the past. Kai (an English language learner) and his classmate, Phil, explained:

Kai: [The blog] gives more specific information. Is easy to understand and quicker.

Phil: Yeah, you can go at your pace. You don't have to keep up with everybody or if you are going too fast you can just keep going because you work until you're done.

Kai: It is easier for me to do it by myself because I am slow and some people are fast and easier to understand.[8]

In general the students favored the activities that included historical photographs or images. For instance Kai reported: "The pictures can tell more specific information in there."[9]

These student experiences are fairly typical of low achieving students. According to Honigsfeld and Dunn, "Students who do not respond to traditional teaching are likely to be engaged by hands-on, activity-oriented lessons."[10] Our findings suggest the potential for blog-based instructional activities to differentiate the curriculum and provide more opportunities for students to exercise their "voice" in the classroom, thus facilitating "equity pedagogy."[11]

In terms of content knowledge learning, we found that the students' comments in the blog entries were accurate and reflected a basic comprehension of the material. In general, the comments seemed to meet the minimum standards of the assignment. For instance, on Day 1 the students were given the following prompt: "You are a muckraker assigned to investigate conditions in the tenement houses of NYC. What are the conditions like for people living there? What suggestions do you have for reform?"[12] Following this post was a series of four primary sources (two images and two text-based excerpts) for students to analyze. They were also directed to find one to two additional resources to support their responses. For this post, 15 students wrote comments (three of these were posted "off-line" in a text document). The comments ranged from 25 to 134 words (with an average of around 76 words per student comment). Representative of the comments students posted, Lee[13] wrote: "The conditions in the cities are poor. People live the worst often being cramp and dirty. The city planer and the city boss should inforce [*sic*] laws that protect the people" (Edublog comments, 3/23/09). As Lee's response illustrates, student responses were accurate but did not reference the primary sources directly or delve deeper into the primary and secondary information provided by the blog. Students also did not comment on each other's posts—missing a unique opportunity for interaction afforded by the blog format.

Across the study all of the students had a marked decrease in scores on the Progressive Era unit test and improvement on the 1920s unit test regardless of whether they used the blog or were in the traditional class (see table 2 and 3). It appears that the test scores for the Progressive Era were generally lower than the students' course averages and EOC test scores. While we proctored a pretest for the Progressive Era, we feel the results were unreliable. To do "damage control"[14] to prepare students for the tests in both classes, Mr. Jones provided students detailed study guides of the factual content that would appear on the test and highlighted key concepts in an oral review. These review activities would likely have impacted student test scores and made it difficult to accurately conduct a pre and post test comparison. While it appears the blogging activities did not harm nor help student outcomes on the unit test, we initiated this study in an effort to develop a learning activity that could successfully meet teachers' need for coverage while also providing an authentic experience for students.

Although the blogging exercises were a success, we think that modifications to the blogging activity could enhance students' experiences. Our first suggestion is to be deliberate in terms of the content that students engage on the blog. By

using a content blueprint, the teacher can trace the key content that will appear on assessments and insure that this content is addressed in the blogging activity. Also, we would include more scaffolding with the blogging assignments.[15] Such scaffolding can support students as they construct their own knowledge. This requires direct instruction, intervention, and encouragement. For example, although we introduced students to historical inquiry and blogging, it seemed we needed to offer more sustained and consistent scaffolds to students as they worked through the activities, particularly to support interaction and discourse between classmates. We also see a need to activate students' prior knowledge, and use the blog activities to build on prior conceptions and address misconceptions. For example, the blogging activities on the 1920s included an activity for listening to blues and jazz recordings. We only discovered later in the student interviews how many of the students were familiar with this musical genre from their home life. Although we designed the blog activity to merely expose students to this music, we could have solicited their prior knowledge more overtly and built on it to help students develop more critical understandings of the Harlem Renaissance.

We plan to conduct further research to explore the relationship between educational blogging and student learning in the U.S. history classroom. In our second round of this study to be conducted in spring 2010, we will conduct pre and post tests that include both multiple choice questions representative of those found on the EOC and open-ended questions. In order to more accurately assess student learning, we plan to also conduct think-aloud activities with students.[16] Finally it will be imperative to track student exposure to the content in both the traditional and blogging lessons to validate our use of quantitative test data.

Overall our experiences demonstrate that blogs have unique pedagogical affordances that allow teachers new ways to teach content. Our study revealed some of the benefits of integrating a blog-based Web 2.0 application for low achieving and at-risk students. The blogging activities engaged these students in class activities in ways that the traditional instruction did not. Using blogs we could differentiate content instruction based on student learning styles, increase student participation, and authentically assess students' in-depth thinking.

Notes

1. Adam M. Friedman, "World History Teachers' Use of Digital Primary Sources: The Effect of Training," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 124-141.
2. Andrea Honigsfeld and Rita Dunn, "Learning-style Responsive Approaches for Teaching Typically Performing and At-risk Adolescents," *The Clearing House* 82, no. 5 (May/June 2009): 220.
3. Web 2.0 technologies include online social networks, blogs, podcasts and is characterized by the user's ability to create, share, and interact, see Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes (2009).
4. For research on other efforts to address learning styles

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see Karen Burke and Rita Dunn, "Learning Style-Based Teaching to Raise Minority Student Test Scores," *The Social Studies* (July/August 2003): 167-170; Honigsfeld and Dunn, 220-224.

5. The teacher's name has been changed to a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.
6. Research conducted by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Minnesota, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research demonstrates increased achievement among students who engage in authentic intellectual work in the social studies. See Fred Newmann, M. Bruce King, and Dana L. Carmichael *Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Common Standards for Rigor and Relevance in Teaching Academic Subjects*, (Des Moines, Iowa: Iowa Department of Education, 2007). Available at www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/meetings/auth_instr_assess.pdf.
7. All student names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
8. Ibid.
9. Student interview, 5/6/09
10. Honigsfeld and Dunn, 2009, 221
11. James Banks, *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson, 5th edition, 2006).
12. Edublog post, 3/22/09
13. Note that Lee (class 1) dropped out of school before the study ended.
14. Teacher interview, 6/2/2009
15. Tom Brush and John Saye, "A summary of research exploring hard and soft scaffolding for teachers and students using a multimedia supported learning environment," *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 1, no. 2 (2002): 1-12.
16. Gabriel Reich has demonstrated through think-alouds that although students may accurately answer multiple choice questions they may not understand the underlying content or be able to accurately explain factual information. See Gabriel Reich, "Testing Historical Knowledge: Standards, Multiple-Choice Questions and Student Reasoning," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 37, no. 3 (2009): 325-360. See also Samuel Wineberg for an example of the think-aloud strategy in research. Samuel Wineberg, "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of Cognitive Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83, no. 1 (1991): 73-87.

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help them get started on their projects. Investment of teachers and students' time and energy into documentary making offers big dividends. Students engage in meaningful and memorable work that will be viewed by their peers, thus spurring them to do their best. Most will be proud of their work, and many will want to share it online with viewers worldwide. Teachers will enjoy using documentary making to enrich and diversify students' experiences with history, while taking them way beyond show and tell.

Notes

1. Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda S. Levstik, "Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Movie Making," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 4 (March/April 2007): 17-20; Mark Hofer and Kathleen Owings Swan, "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Action: A Case Study of a Middle School Digital Documentary Project," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2008) 179-200.
2. Swan, Hofer, and Levstik, 17.
3. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43-49.
4. Cecilia O'Leary, "Connecting to the Public: Using New Media to Engage Students in the Iterative Process of History," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1398.
5. Michael Coventry, Michael Felten, David Jaffee, Cecilia O'Leary, and Tracey Weis, with Susannah McGowan, "Ways of Seeing: Evidence and Learning in the History," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1374.
6. Ibid., 1371-1377.
7. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), 34, 82, 133-144; National Center for History in the Schools, *National History Standards: Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), 59-75.
8. Ibid., 59.
9. Sergei Eisenstein, Film Sense (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 4-11.

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