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Blogging in a Study Abroad Class to Promote Active Learning and Student Engagement

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Abstract

Blogs have become a popular tool to improve learning and enhance student engagement. The process of creating information when writing a blog and reflecting on others' ideas when commenting work together to help students engage in reflective learning. While there have been studies considering the value of blogging in traditional and online classes, this paper explores the benefits of incorporating blogs in a study abroad class. Outlining the experiences from teaching two study abroad literature classes, the paper summarizes the program design, details creating blog assignments, explores the benefits and challenges unique to study abroad students and blogging, and examines tips and suggestions for incorporating blogs in future study abroad classes.

Introduction

Today's traditional college student has grown up in a world of technology. The need for newspapers to find news feels archaic to students who have not known a time without online news sources and Google to provide instant access to information. The students have grown up accustomed to going online to get information. If they have a question, they don't head to the local library; instead they grab their phone or their computer and they use that technology to find the answer. That constant access to technology has changed what students expect from their professors and their educational experience as a whole. Students who are entering college straight from high school expect to use Web 2.0 technology and other e-learning approaches to be incorporated into their learning experience (Newland & Byles, 2014). Web 2.0, a term made popular by Tim O'Reilly,

incorporates various technologies that allow a more interactive experience, including, but not limited to, wikis, podcasts, video sharing, shared document creation, blogging, and a variety of other interactive technologies that allow users to interact via the internet. Interaction is key when considering what qualifies as a Web 2.0 tool. Users read, comment, change, and help form the content found in Web 2.0 technologies, making the user an instrumental part of the final product. Web 2.0 is more than a technological shift; it is a social shift incorporating technology to communicate and interact (Bates, 2011). Instead of having one author or creator of a webpage or other internet-based document, Web 2.0 technologies have users who participate in the creation and the development of the final product by commenting and becoming part of the conversation or even serving as co-authors. The collaboration makes the Web 2.0 technology the breeding ground of a living document that is transformed as new users read, comment, and make adjustments.

Blogs

Blogging is a perfect example of a tool that embraces the social shift seen with Web 2.0 technology. An online blog, often called a weblog, allows users to create posts that many consider parallel to an online journal. The blog posts can include pictures, videos, and links to other websites or blogs, but the content is not what makes the blog part of the social shift that is encouraged by Web 2.0 technology. The blogs include a place for people to provide comments, providing a social construct in which people can asynchronously have discussions about topics and situations without making face-to-face contact or even being in the same geographical area. The discussions are not limited to the original author and a single

reader; instead, readers of the blog may have a conversation between themselves without the original author providing any input other than sharing the original blog post. The comments eventually become an archived part of the blog that allow the original author of the blog and other readers to refer back to. Because the blogs allow for others to comment on them, they encourage authors of blogs to do more than just post new and updated information; rather, blogs are designed for authors and readers to exchange ideas through comments and online discussions, making the blog a live, interactive document that explores opinions, thoughts, and perspectives.

Another key component of blogs is the order of the entries, which are displayed in reverse chronological order with the most recent post displaying first. This order is important because it is one of the elements that distinguishes blogs from static webpages, which are displayed in an order defined by the webpage developer and often not by the timeline in which the pages were created. In addition to not being organized in a chronological manner, webpages do not always archive material. Instead, they often have old material replaced by new material making it difficult or even impossible to find the older webpages that have been replaced with new information. Blogs, on the other hand, keep the old material as new text is added, creating an archive of entries and information posted over time that can be referred back to and used for engagement, reflection, and growth.

Effectiveness of Blogging and Learning

In recent years, blogging has become increasingly popular as blogging sites have developed user-friendly interfaces. Tumblr, one of the most popular blogging

sites, has almost 426 million blog accounts (Statista, 2018), and Statista (2018a) estimates that by 2020, there will be 31.7 million bloggers in the United States alone. While not all those blogs are active, it is clear that blogging is a popular way for people to share their personal journeys, hobbies, and business adventures. The impact of blogging is not limited to professional and personal settings; it is also reaching the classroom. One reason we are seeing an increase in blogs as a tool for teaching is because blogging supports four specific types of knowledge: factual, procedural, conceptual, and metacognitive (Bower, Hedberg, & Kuswara, 2010); in addition, the discussion format of the blogs encourages active participation and promotes community among the students, both in the classroom and through the blogs themselves (Kang, Bonk, & Kim, 2011). Proponents of blogging as a pedagogical tool argue that the asynchronous construction of blogs and the process of creating a blog post, commenting on other students' blogs, and responding to comments on both the individual's and other students' blogs provides the ideal environment for reflective learning (Bower et al., 2010; Duffy, 2008; Wheeler, 2010). After looking at the use of blogs in a semester-long classes, researchers found that the blogs helped improve students' reflective thinking skills (Osman & Koh, 2013; Xie, Ke, & Sharma, 2008). The ability to use blogs to increase reflective learning is important because it is one way that blogging supports and encourages active learning, which combines student activity and engagement to stimulate reflection and improve learning (Fink, 2013; Prince, 2004).

Of course the questions instructors ask include how much students benefit from creating and responding to blogs as part of course requirements and whether

learning is enhanced when blogs are incorporated into the course design. Several case studies and research studies have found positive results when using blogs in the classroom to enhance learning and encourage collaboration (Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006; Hernández-Ramos, 2004; Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Samuels-Peretx, Dvorkin Caniel, Teeley, & Banerjee, 2017). For some students, reading their peers' posts and responding to classmates was more impactful than writing their own blogs (Ellison & Wu, 2008). While the reason isn't clear why responding to blogs is so influential, the researchers argue that it is probably because responding to their classmates' blogs forced the students to consider different perspectives. It is not only instructors who find improved learning when incorporating blogs into their classes; research has shown that students also find benefit when using blogs as a learning tool. When students in a large lecture class were assigned blogs to encourage reflective learning, the majority reported positive experiences, with most indicating that using blogs in the classroom enhanced their learning, primarily by making them reflect on the course material and concepts outside of the classroom discussions (Halic, Lee, Paulus, & Spence, 2010). Students also reported that the use of social media platforms including blogging made learning easier and helped them learn the material better, as well as increased enjoyment and engagement in the course material (Samuels-Peretx et al., 2017).

Blogging in the Study Abroad Classroom

When I was given the opportunity to teach two literature courses as part of Georgia's European Council Study Abroad Paris Program in the summer of 2018, I knew I wanted to engage the students and promote active learning in a way that

encouraged students to consider the impact of the trip through a variety of lenses. After reviewing the literature on the benefits of blogging, I decided to use blogs in my study abroad class. I found that blogging provided extra benefits for the study abroad students.

Program Details

The European Council's Summer Study Abroad Program is divided into two parts. The first part commenced with a face-to-face meeting for each class, which is mandatory for all students. During that meeting, students meet their professors, the course objectives and course expectations are outlined, course policies are defined, and the initial class lecture is given. Faculty are encouraged to have students complete up to 50% of their final grade between the first class meeting and leaving the country approximately five weeks later. I approached the class as a hybrid class, with the first half of the course taking place online and the second half taking place face-to-face in France. The first five weeks focused on foundational material, such as key literary terms, how to properly analyze literature, understanding the role of the war on American literature, and the connection of political events to literary movements. During that online portion of the class, students completed weekly assignments, discussions, reflection papers, and research papers. The weekly discussions took place though the Learning Management System , in this case D2L, which is also where all course materials were housed.

The second half of the classes took place in France for five weeks. Classes met for two hours twice a week and had excursions once per week. Each week, we had

a theme that we explored both during the class meetings and the excursion. The class meetings, which were a combination of lecture, discussion, and student presentations, allowed us to discuss the different components of the course and the connection to the weekly field trip. It was during the time in France that I assigned blogs for the students. The blogging portion of the class required students to write one blog entry for each week we were in Paris exploring the field trips, the connection of the excursion to the literature we were reading, and the significance of the works in their original time period and in today's world. The students wrote the blog posts after we completed the field trips, using photos from the field trips to enhance their blog content. I was very specific when assigning dates for the blog posts; students were required to post a blog entry within 36 hours of the field trip, although most posted their entries within a day or two noting that writing the blogs soon after the field trips made it easier to remember and connect the ideas. I wanted the students to create the entries after the fields trips so that students would incorporate both the field trip and the course content, specifically the literature, authors, and events we were studying.

The blogs were a combination of a journal and an explanation of the relationship between the excursions and the class concepts. For the journal-like portion, students were asked to provide personal reflections on the meaning of the works, connect the author and/or work to the time period it was written, and explore the relevance of the author and/or work today. In addition to the text portion of the blog, each blog post required students to incorporate photos from the field trips. Students were instructed to post only pictures that they took, and they could not

have pictures of classmates without permission, although students readily gave permission to have photos of themselves included. While they were not allowed to copy pictures from other websites, they were allowed and encouraged to provide links to other sites that might provide additional information and reflection. The links proved to be very useful as students were encouraged to find one element of the excursion that intrigued them and that they could research after the field trip was over and share on their blog, providing content in their blog that all students could benefit from. As the students did the research, they would provide a general summary of the information and a link for more information; the students reported that they found the links helpful and interesting as they read other students' blogs and they enjoyed learning about their classmates by reading what research each classmate incorporated into their blogs.

While I did require students to share their blogs with the class so that others could read and comment on the posts, I did not require the students to set their blogs to public. The platforms the students used (primarily Blogger or WordPress, depending on student preferences) defaulted to public viewing, so the blogs would be visible to anyone and had the potential to be found through search engines. Most students changed the privacy setting to private, which prevented the blogs from appearing in a Google search, but allowed the students to share the link with those they wished to have access to the blog. There are debates for both private and public blogs in post-secondary classrooms. Requiring students to write in a public format provides an enhanced learning opportunity that private writing fails to provide (Walker, 2005) and gives students a voice as experts and makes them more

committed to their topics (Costello, 2015). But there can also be long-term ramifications of a public blog, especially for young college students who are often tackling complex issues and considering their personal viewpoints regarding those issues for the first time, especially since the blog can be connected to the students permanently and could negatively affect the students' future job searches and careers (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Making a blog public can also inhibit students in their writing process (Walinski, 2005). Several go so far as to argue for the use of pseudonyms when having students create blogs to protect privacy (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Witte, 2007; Yang, 2009). Personally, I found that giving students the option to have their blogs either public or private allowed them to create an online writing environment that they felt most comfortable with and let them feel in control of their writing.

Benefits of Using Blogs for Study Abroad Applications

In addition to the benefits of blogs in traditional classrooms, I found several benefits of blogs that are specific to study abroad programs. One benefit is that the blogs encourage students to reflect on the field trips and connect the trips to the course material. Blogs are known to promote reflective thinking. Students reflect not only on the material they include in their own blogs, but they also reflect as they read and comment on their classmates' blogs, which some argue is where the most learning occurs (Ellison & Wu, 2008). But even before students started creating their blogs for each excursion, they worked to ensure they fully understood the connection between the course material and the field trips, especially after the first week with the first blog assignment. Prior to departing for the excursions, students

would talk in small groups and consider what they expected to get out of the field trip and how they thought it would relate to the course readings. They realized the importance of making connections and worked to identify potential connections as we were preparing to leave instead of seeing the field trips as independent elements of the course. The discussions continued as we went on the excursions, where the students would engage in conversations about the material they wanted to add to their blogs and how best to link different ideas and concepts. The requirement to incorporate photos from the field trips in their blogs only further encouraged the students to make connections.

Another benefit of blogging that was highlighted in the study abroad classes was that students would come to class having spent significant time considering the course material. While I don't have data exploring how prepared the blogging students were compared to students in classes without blogging, I noticed throughout the course that students would bring the discussions started in blogs to the face-to-face discussions during class meetings. The students did not write their blogs and then forget about them; instead, they wrote their blogs and then returned to comment on their classmates' blogs and to read the comments that were posted on their blogs. This process of returning to the material presented in the blogs kept the course material in their minds. They were continuously reflecting on the ideas and reviewing the course materials without even realizing it, instead of forgetting about the class until the next meeting. This benefit is not limited to the study abroad classroom, but I argue that it is more impactful in study abroad programs where

students are often enamored by the new environment and spend their free time exploring without thinking of the classes they are taking.

For students who shared the link with their family and friends back home, which students were encouraged to do but not required, the blogs also provided a connection to loved ones. Family and friends were able to comment on the blogs and share thoughts on the adventures the students were experiencing, which gave the students one more way to communicate and connect with people from home. In addition, the students' family members, especially the parents and others who helped finance the trip, had access to more than social media pictures depicting the students seeing sights with little or no reference to learning. Parents who followed the blogs got a clear view of the learning and educational aspect of study abroad that social media does not always portray.

Challenges of the Project

The biggest challenge of using blogs during the study abroad program was not blogs themselves, but the lack of reliable internet access. The facility we used for classes did not have internet access that the students could use, which meant the students could not work on the projects before or after class at the site. Instead, they had to go to their lodging facility or another location that provided internet when they wanted to work on their blogs. The program's housing accommodations had internet, so the students had access when they were in Paris, but they were forced to post their blogs and respond to their classmates when they were away from the classroom, which cause a few complaints. Many students found it frustrating because they wanted to be able to work between classes and were not able to. The

limited internet did prove to make things more difficult, but it also served as an advantage. The process of reflection was emphasized by the lack of instant and constant access to the internet. Students were forced to take time between the class discussions and when they posted their blog and their comments. This time provided a chance for reflection and a deeper consideration of the blog content and how that content related to the excursions and the overall experiences the students had while on the study abroad program.

Another challenge came because one student chose not to bring a laptop. During the initial course meeting (five weeks prior to departing for France), students were instructed to bring laptops with them to Paris; it was clearly indicated that laptops were not optional and all students were asked to confirm that they had a laptop they could bring. All students except one brought a laptop, with one student deciding that she could use her phone as if it were a laptop. Unfortunately, using the phone did not work well and proved to be more difficult than she had hoped. She was able to access the necessary sites, but she struggled to upload photos and videos to her blog and she commented several times that it was too difficult to do the work on her phone and was very frustrated at the extra work she felt she had to do because she only had her phone. While this situation is isolated, it does highlight the fact that instructors must be very clear about the need for the proper technology to do the work while abroad.

Adjustments to Future Classes

Although I feel blogs enhanced the classes I taught in France, I would make adjustments if I were teaching another study abroad class. First, I would start the

blogs earlier, if possible. Because the European Council Study Abroad Paris Program requires classes to start prior to departure for France, I would require blog posts and comments to classmates' posts during the time between the first class meeting and leaving the country. During that time, we had online work including D2L discussions each week, which I had hoped would help build community and let the students get to know each other prior to departure. But the discussion posts were very guided and, as one student commented, felt more like homework without a purpose. The blogs, on the other hand, were accepted by the students in the classes, possibly because students are accustomed to the blogs and they feel comfortable with them (Newland & Byles, 2014). I think the blogs would work better than D2L discussions for a couple of reasons. First, blogs are shown to build community in online classes (Boulos et al., 2006). Using blogs before departing for the foreign country will allow students to better get to know the other students and form initial relationships, which is important, especially for those students who don't know anyone else on the program or who are traveling for the first time.

The second reason I would start the blogs immediately after the initial course meeting is to help meld the class. One comment that students made is that the online work felt disjointed from the face-to-face portion of the class that took place in France. The students felt like the online portion, while connected, was not as important or as meaningful as the portion of the class that was spent together in Paris. While I disagree that the online portion wasn't as meaningful, I do agree that the online portion of the class was not as engaging as the face-to-face portion. I would argue that incorporating blogs into the online class would improve

engagement as students would be able to take a more active and creative approach to the blogs. Instead of posting only texts, the students could share photos, links, and even videos to help explore the foundational course concepts that were covered during the initial five weeks of the class that took place online.

Finally, having blog posts that were written and analyzed prior to the trip abroad would allow students more time to benefit from the blogs. The students would be able to build their blogs over a longer period of time, which would give more substantial material for reflection. Rather than limiting the reflection, which is so essential in active learning, to the time spent overseas, students would be able to reflect on the changes in their perspectives prior to, during, and after the trip. That extended time would benefit the students as they consider how the trip changed their attitudes towards the literature and other course concepts. The additional time on the blogs would also potentially increase the sharing of the blogs with their family and friends who might want to follow the students' stories as students are likely to mention the blogs when they are talking to others at home.

Students were also encouraged but not required to add new information that required additional research outside of class. The students were to asked find something unique on each excursion, do some online research, and provide a summary and a link to the research on their blog. For example, at Sacré-Cœur Basilica the students were asking about a mural. I asked the students to research the story behind it before the next class period. They did and they were able to share the story on their blogs and then provide the connection between the mural and the works we had read. In a future class, I would make the additional research a required

element of each blog post. The students found it helpful when learning about new areas, and it provided a way to share information that otherwise may not have been viewed by the others in the class.

Strategies to Use Blogs in Study Abroad Classes

For those faculty who are uncertain about using blogs in a study abroad class, I offer the following tips and strategies.

Make a Sample Blog

Students will benefit from specific examples of what you are looking for in both the blogs and the comments. While it seems that blogging has become ubiquitous in today's web-based society, there is a good chance that you will have students who have only read and never created a blog. Those students will appreciate a sample blog to help identify the key elements, such as photos, hyperlinks, and videos, as well as the best way to incorporate those elements into a blog. In addition, many students may find the idea of writing a blog for an academic class a little intimidating, even those who have experience writing a blog. To help assuage their concerns, provide a sample blog that you update throughout the class. In your sample blog, highlight the different features you want students to utilize in their blogs, providing specific examples of what you are looking for in the student blogs. The example also helps instructors connect to the students during class when students talk about the challenges of creating their blogs and the instructors can respond with personal examples and advice from their own blog.

Clearly State Your Expectations for the Blog

When creating a blog assignment, you must have clear expectations for both the blog posts and the comments, and those expectations should be clearly outlined and accessible to the students. Since many students will not have experience writing a blog and those who do have experience will likely not have experience writing a blog for an academic class, it is essential that you make the assignment requirements clear, including how long you expect the posts to be, what type of content you are looking for, how often students should post and comment, and any other expectations you have. Explaining the purpose of the assignment in relation to the course objectives helps students see the value of the assignment.

Set Clear Expectations for Comments

One of the benefits of blogging is the reflection that takes place as students comment on their peers' blogs and as they read and respond to comments on their own blogs. The challenge comes when students post simple comments that don't add to the discussion. Comments such as "I agree" or "Great post – thanks for sharing" will be common if you do not set clear expectations for the comments. Because one of the most important parts of the learning process is asking questions that promote critical thinking and analysis (Diamond, 2008), I like to require students to ask at least one question a week in their responses to their classmates. To help students ask quality questions and form quality comments, I have students to reflect on different perspectives and ideas present in the original blog post, and then consider how those perspectives are different from their own. From there, students form questions to add to their comments. As they comment on their

classmates' posts, they should reflect on the deeper meaning and consider the connection of ideas that were presented throughout the class instead of just the current subject matter of the blog post.

Monitor the Blogs

Monitor the blogs and the comments to ensure that there are no rude or inappropriate comments and to coach the students on how to improve on those comments or posts that are not developed or substantial. It is especially important to monitor the blogs and the comments if the students have their blogs set to public since it is possible to have some aggressive comments appear on blogs. To prevent the students from posting inappropriate or inconsiderate posts, I provided a list of netiquette rules that I reviewed the first class period and also posted in D2L. Fortunately, I did not have a problem with students being disrespectful at all, but I have heard stories from faculty who did. If you do not catch and respond to those comments quickly, it can escalate, so it is essential that faculty are active with the blogs by checking in often, reading the comments, and making posts to let students know that you are reading what they are writing.

Stagger the Due Dates for Postings and Comments

Because students are going to comment on the blogs, you do want to have students post their blogs and comment on other students' blogs on the same day. However, I take it a step further and require students to comment on their classmates' blogs over time instead of having them post all their comments on a certain date. For example, my students were required to post half their comments by Tuesday and the remainder comments between Wednesday and Friday, allowing the class

more time to reflect on the topic and encouraging the shift from independent ideas to discussions between the students. As the students start to engage in dialogue, they reflect on their opinions and perspectives and consider why they have those perspectives and how their opinions compare to other people's ideas.

Allow Private Blogs

Personally, I believe that students should have the option to set their blogs to private if they wish because it is imperative that we respect students' desire for privacy, and pushing students to create public blogs has the potential to make some students feel uncomfortable or even alter what they write. While doing so will limit some of the public interaction, for this class I was focused on interaction between the students, not between the students and the general public. I also had a considerable number of the students make their blogs private, which indicates that for me, the students felt more comfortable with the option to post privately. Two students who choose to make the blogs public at the beginning of the course talked about adjusting the blog settings to private, commenting on the personal pictures that were on the website.

Conclusion

While my experience is anecdotal, there is evidence that blogging is beneficial to students. The process of creating a blog and reading and responding to other students' blogs is indicative of reflective learning and helps improve retention of course concepts. Many of the benefits of blogs in a traditional class are transferrable to the study abroad classroom. These benefits include, but are not limited to, lively and on-going discussions, connections to family and friends back home, and a

deeper understanding of the connection between the course material and the country

students are visiting.

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