

Blogs and Written Business Communication Courses: A Perfect Union

ZANE K. QUIBLE

Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK

Blog, blogging, blogger. These three words made their first appearance in 1999, according to the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2004), when Brigitte Eaton, the proprietor of the EatonWeb, referred to Web logs as blogs. Perseus (2004, ¶ 3) estimated that 10.3 million blogs would be in existence by the end of 2004, a phenomenal increase from the 23 known blogs that existed at the beginning of 1999 (*Rebecca's Pocket*, 2000, ¶ 1).

The terms *Weblogs* (or Web logs) and *blogs*, the shortened version, are often used interchangeably. However, technically speaking, a Web log can also refer to the usage data collected when a Web site is accessed (number of times accessed, day and time accessed, duration of time viewed, or identity of the Internet Service Provider used by those who access the site).

Blogs differ from Web sites in two ways. First, Web sites tend to be static in that their content does not change often. Blogs, on the other hand, are dynamic and were developed to facilitate and accommodate frequent changes in content, particularly giving readers the opportunity to comment on the primary messages that appear on them. In most instances, readers will be able to place their comments (secondary messages) on a blog without

ABSTRACT. One of the newest Internet applications—the Weblog, or blog—is rapidly increasing in number as well as expanding in use. Blogs are used in various segments of society, including the business and educational worlds. They are a perfect fit for use in written business communication courses because of the ease with which writing examples illustrating various components of business messages can be made easily and readily accessible on the Internet. These writing examples can be used in a variety of ways to help students improve their writing skills.

needing authorization to do so. A second difference is in the ease with which content can be placed on a blog. The creator of the message prepares the content without having to be familiar with special coding and uploads the message to the blog by clicking on the “Publish” button. Conversely, the content of a Web site requires the use of special coding such as Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML. Using special software such as File Transfer Protocol (FTP), the author can then upload content to the server on which the Web site resides.

Some definitions and descriptions of a *blog* or *blogs* include the following.

1. “a frequently updated Web page consisting of brief, dated entries, with new ones pushing the old to the bottom of the page” (Morris, 2001, p. 52).

2. “Blogs—Web logs with news, opinions, and other information” (Much Ado About Blogs, 2004, p. 19).

3. “amateur websites that provide news, information and, above all, opinions to rapidly growing and devoted audiences drawn by nothing more than a shared interest or two and the sheer magnetism of the editor’s personality” (Grossman, 2004, p. 65).

4. “valuable knowledge management and communication tools in companies” (Rosencrance, 2004, p. 23).

5. “a type of frequently updated online journal” (O’Shea, 2003, p. C3).

6. “a Web diary.” (White, 2003, p. 10).

Various Uses of Blogs

Blogs are used in a variety of ways, with new applications being discovered regularly. According to Richardson (2003), they “are as diverse as their creators” (p. 39). The very nature of blogs provides their creators with a “virtual reality printing press” (Cowen, 2005, p. 16). Initially, individuals use blogs to express their viewpoints (i.e., as an electronic-based opinion piece or editorial) either as a primary message or as a reaction or comment to someone else’s message. Their use is currently “morphing” at a fast rate, including an ever-increasing presence within both the business and educational worlds.

According to Cowen (2005), "There are now blogs of every kind; politics blogs, law blogs, psychology blogs, literary blogs, and science blogs" (p. 16). They have become such a common part of the life of many that the University of Minnesota announced in April 2004 that it planned "to offer free blogs to the university community" (Albanese, 2004, p. 18).

Personal/Family Blogs

Blogs are used by increasing numbers of families as an electronic newsletter, and depending on the software used to create them, family photos can be uploaded. For example, blogs have been used by families to plan annual reunions, to keep family members abreast of developing wedding plans, and to share genealogy information. Currently, a soldier in the U.S. Army stationed in Iraq uses a blog (<http://bootsonground.blogspot.com/>) to keep his family and others abreast of developments occurring there. An examination of this blog reveals that new content is added nearly every day, which is one of the primary characteristics of this electronic communication tool.

Depending on the software used, blog access can be restricted to family members; otherwise, they can be accessed and read by anyone. For some blog owners, the ease with which their blogs can be read by others is the very reason they create them. The most popular blogs are accessed hundreds of thousands to millions of times each day. For example, the Drudge Report (<http://www.drudgereport.com>) is currently being accessed more than 8 million times every 24 hours. Because of the ease with which the content of blogs is updated by their owners, some blog readers return to their favorites several times each day to peruse the material posted since their last viewing.

Blogs in the Business World

In the business world, blogs are used in an ever-increasing number of ways, including (a) "for communication and collaboration for a distributed team" (Herman, 2003, p. 21), (b) as "a powerful tool for reaching out to a customer

community" (Herman, 2003, p. 21), (c) "as a way of managing projects" (White, 2003, p. 10), (d) to "quickly communicate information such as project updates, research, and product and industry news both inside and outside the business" (Rosencrance, 2004, p. 23), and (e) "to manage and improve the flow of information among employees" (O'Shea, 2003, p. C3).

Because the content of blogs is updated regularly (in some cases, several times each day), staying abreast of the changes is simplified using a news feed. Real simple syndication (RSS) is a feature that lets the subscribers to a blog know that the content was updated. On the one hand, an RSS news feed distributes recent additions to readers. On the other hand, an RSS aggregator collects information from other Web sites to which a blog creator has subscribed and streams it onto the blog. Syndic8 (<http://www.syndic8.com>) compiles Web sites and blogs and has more than 17,000 news feeds currently available for subscription. Individuals and companies will likely find the incorporation of news feeds into their blogs more useful than instructors will for their classroom blogs.

Blogs in the Classroom

According to Richardson (2003):

While Web logs are common to the Internet, they are still unusual in classrooms. Happily, a small but growing number of educators are starting to buzz with the promise of Web logs in their teaching. I am one of them, as I have seen the positive effects of instant publishing and online community on my students' ability and willingness to read, write, and converse about the world around them. (p. 40)

The slowness with which blogs are being integrated into the classroom is probably not a result of instructors' reluctance to use them; rather, the slowness is more likely a result of instructors' unfamiliarity with blogs and their almost unlimited use in the instructional process.

Creating a Blog

To create a blog, one must either purchase the "tool" (actually a software program) to create a blog or subscribe to a free blog service, a process that takes

just a few minutes. The free services provide limited features and generally support themselves by selling advertising banners.

By contrast, the premium services give *bloggers*, or blog users, access to a greater number of features on the blog. Premium service blogs range in cost from \$4.95–\$39.95 a month, depending on the amount of storage space needed, the bandwidth desired, and the number of features incorporated into the blog. Some of the features available on the premium service blogs are the ability to create multiple blogs per account, to upload images, to run a spell check on written work, and to track the number of visitors who access the blog to limit access to specific viewers.

To illustrate the use of a blog in written business communication, I used a free subscription to create a blog. A portion of the blog is illustrated in the Appendixes A-C, each showing a different use of blogs in written business communication. I obtained the blog from Blogger.com (<http://www.blogger.com>) and created it using three easy steps: (a) Create an account, (b) name the blog, and (c) choose the template. After following the steps, in just a few seconds, the blog can be ready for the publishing of a primary message. When published, the blog message is available for others to view and subsequently facilitates the publishing of their reactions or comments (secondary messages).

Blogger.com recently added another feature, called Audioblogger, that enables one to record a voice message on a blog using a standard telephone. Although a long distance toll charge may be incurred in "recording" the message, voice messages are free on blogs hosted by Blogger.com. Google, which currently owns Blogger.com, has incorporated another useful free feature. Bloggers can download a button from Blogger.com that puts the "BlogThis!" symbol on the Google toolbar. This symbol enables one to respond to any blog simply by clicking on the button that opens a dialog box to facilitate the creation of the message. The ability to record video blogs, also known as video logs or vlogs, is also possible (Ressner, 2004, p. 98).

Uses of Blogs in Written Business Communication Courses

Blogs have a variety of uses in written business communication courses. Those who incorporate them into their courses will undoubtedly continue to discover new applications. However, some will likely have a one-time use, largely because they did not produce desired results. The three uses discussed below are illustrated in the blog (<http://bcm311.blogspot.com>) created for this article.

Blog Use No. 1

I use blogs in three of the writing units constituting my written business communications course, including the units involving request letters, good-news letters, and negative-news letters. Once each of these writing units is completed, the blog is used to provide students with an additional situation similar to those they worked with in each of the three units. Several students are asked to create various sections of a request letter, a good-news letter, and a negative-news letter. An example of such a blog is accessible using the URL mentioned above. To view the writing samples, click on "Comments." The primary message is identified as "Situation." The secondary messages appear as nine posted comments.

Appendix A focuses on the use of a blog to provide students with additional writing experience involving a request letter. The blog is used in the same way for a good-news letter and a negative-news letter at the conclusion of each of those units.

Blog Use No. 2

Another use I make of blogs is to display a few sentences found in many of the business messages my students prepare. Following the students' submission of their work, I quickly scan it to identify a few sentences that contain one or more errors (grammar, punctuation, writing style, violation of business communication concepts). I then post these sentences to the blog prior to the next class period so students can view them before class. Example sentences are illustrated in the blog (<http://bcm311.blogspot.com>)

and appear in the "Comments" section. Appendix B provides additional information about how the blog is used in this manner.

Blog Use No. 3

The blog created for use in a written communication course can also display a situation for which a specific type of letter needs to be prepared (such as a negative-news letter). Then, an ineffective version of the letter is created that incorporates a number of different types of errors, including grammar, punctuation, writing style, and violation of business communication concepts. For example, the letter might lack you-attitude (i.e., focus on the reader), thank the reader in advance, contain a number of wordy expressions, misuse words (e.g., substituting "that" for "which"), as well as contain a variety of grammatical and punctuation errors. An example of such a letter is found as a comment in this section of the blog (<http://bcm311.blogspot.com>). Appendix C provides additional information about blog usage in this manner.

Advantages of Blog Usage in Written Business Communication Courses

The following are some of the advantages of using blogs in written business communication courses.

1. Students are able to become familiar with yet another Internet application that has powerful communication capabilities.
2. Information is shared with students electronically, which makes it available to them more readily and easily than if it were given to them in hard-copy format.
3. The class administration cost is reduced by not having to prepare hard copies for distribution to each student in the class.
4. Examples of students' writing are easily and readily shared with others.

SUMMARY

The use of blogs in the educational world will undoubtedly continue to

expand rapidly. As instructors begin to use them and determine how they can be used effectively to augment their current classroom activities or to create new activities, blogs will become a rich educational tool. As the technology develops and as new features are added to the free-subscription blogs or to fee-based blogs, incorporating them into written business communication courses is indeed worthwhile.

I have created a blog specifically for those who find this new communication tool exciting and who wish to share their blogging experiences with other instructors who teach written business communication courses. The URL is: <http://wbcinstructors.blogspot.com>. To sign in, the user name is *wbcinstructor*; the password is *ourblog*. Instructors who create blogs for use in their written business communication courses are encouraged to share not only their ideas but also their materials with others who make use of this exciting new technology.

If you wish to learn more about blogs in general, the following Web site contains a wealth of information: <http://weblogs.about.com>.

REFERENCES

- Albanese, A. (2004). UM Library offers free blogs. *Library Journal*, 129(9), 18.
- Cowen, T. (2005). The new world of blogs. *Freeman*, 54(2), 16-18.
- Grossman, L. (2004). Meet Joe Blog. *Time*, 163(24), 65-68.
- Herman, J. (2003). Blogs for business. *Business Communications Review*, 33(4), 20-21.
- Morris, H. (2001). Blogging burgeons as a form of Web expression. *U.S. News & World Report*, 130(2), 52.
- Much ado about blogs. (2004, April 20). *PC Magazine*, 19.
- O'Shea, W. (2003, July 7). The online journals known as Web logs are finding favor as an efficient way to communicate in the workplace. *The New York Times*, p. C3.
- Oxford English Dictionary, Online Version*. (2004). Blog. Retrieved July 13, 2004, from <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/search>
- Perseus. (2004). *The Blogging Iceberg*. Retrieved July 13, 2004, from <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html>
- Rebecca's Pocket*. (2000, September 7). Retrieved July 15, 2004, from http://www.rebecca.blood.net/essays/weblog_history.html
- Ressner, J. (2004). See me, blog me. *Time*, 163(19), 98.
- Richardson, W. (2003). Web logs in the English classroom: More than just chat. *English Journal*, 93(1), 39-43.
- Rosencrance, L. (2004, January 26). Blogs bubble into business. *Computerworld*, 38, 23.
- White, M. (2003). Web logs: Moving beyond cool. *EContent*, 26(12), 10.

APPENDIX A

Blog Use Number 1

The use of a blog as explained below gives students additional opportunities to compose sections of business messages and to receive feedback on their work. The blog is used to provide students with a situation for which they can compose a message.

The following outlines the specific steps for Blog Use Number 1.

1. I ask three students to write the opening paragraph for the situation that appears in the blog. They submit their work to me via e-mail within 24 hr, which is copied from their e-mail messages and pasted into the blog. An alternative is to allow the students themselves to post their own work to the blog, although some students might decide to misuse the blog by posting an inappropriate message under a phony name. The material prepared by these three students appears in the blog as the first three items listed as "Opening Paragraph," along with a number to identify each student. Examples are illustrated using the following URL: <http://bcm311.blogspot.com>.

2. At the beginning of the next class period, I access the blog using an Internet browser and display the three paragraphs using an LCD projector. I solicit student feedback about each, after which the class selects what it considers to be the best opening paragraph.

3. I then assign three other students the responsibility of preparing the middle section of the message to accompany the content of the opening paragraph chosen by the class as the best of the three. These students also submit their work via e-mail within 24 hr, and it is copied and pasted into the blog. I display these three paragraphs using an LCD projector at the beginning of the subsequent class period. The same in-class procedure is followed for this section of the letter as was discussed above for the opening paragraph.

4. Following the selection of the best middle paragraph, I assign three more students the responsibility of preparing and submitting within 24 hr their closing paragraphs, which are posted to the blog for viewing the next class period. Once the closing paragraphs have been reviewed in class and the best of the three identified, the entire class reviews the situation for which the paragraphs were prepared to determine whether those selected for each section of the letter are complete or whether additional content needs to be added to improve the effectiveness of the message.

The same process is used for preparing the good-news letter and the negative-news letter. Depending on the specific circumstances, adjustments may have to be made in the number of students assigned to prepare each section of the message as well as the number of sections composing a specific message.

Decisions about the following will likely need to be made:

1. Whether the identity of students is revealed in the paragraph header that is posted to the blog. I prefer using a code to identify individuals who created each paragraph, which enables them to remain anonymous. For example, I will list "Opening Paragraph: Student 908." Thus, only the student and I know the true identity of the creator of each paragraph.

2. Whether the work created by the students is a component of their course grade or whether it counts as extra credit. In either case, submission of a paragraph should probably count as a set number of points, and the students whose paragraphs are selected as the best of those submitted for the sections composing a specific message can receive additional points.

3. Whether to delete the sample paragraphs from the blog at the end of the unit, at the end of the course, or maintain them for use in subsequent semesters. When used in subsequent semesters, the sample paragraphs will primarily function as content to be reviewed or discussed.

Shown below is an abridged version of the blog's appearance for Use Number 1.

Blog Use No. 1: Request Letter

The Situation: You have been invited to Baltimore for a home-office visit for a management trainee position at Datrix Corporation. You don't know much about Baltimore except that you've heard about the wonderful seafood served in its restaurants. Your father has a college friend living there (John Brown, 2882 Greenwich Street, Baltimore, MD 01283). You met Mr. Brown about eight years ago. Your father has suggested you contact him to see whether he might be able to show you around Baltimore the morning of July 10 or the afternoon of July 11. You will be arriving in Baltimore the evening of July 9, and your first office visit is scheduled for 1 p.m. on the 10th. You will continue your office visit the morning of July 11 and have plane reservations to leave

Baltimore at 6:30 p.m. on the 11th. Lodging reservations have been made for you at the Baltimorian Hotel, located at 1 Main Street in Baltimore.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

Opening Paragraph: Student 908

My father has suggested I contact you regarding my upcoming visit to Baltimore in a few weeks. Over the years, he has mentioned the good times you and he had in college.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

Opening Paragraph: Student 1021

I am writing this letter to request a favor of you. You and I met about eight years ago when you visited my family in Atlanta. I still remember some of the things you and my father talked about regarding your college days.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

Middle Section: Student 192

While I am excited about the possibility of getting a job offer to work as a management trainee at Datrix Corporation, I know very little about the Baltimore area. Being able to see some of the sites around Baltimore would be invaluable in helping me become acclimated.

Current plans are to arrive in Baltimore on the evening of the 9th, and I have my first office visit beginning at 1 p.m. on the 10th. The second office visit is the morning of the 11th. If you could show me around Baltimore, I'm available the morning of the 10th and the afternoon of the 11th. My flight leaves Baltimore at 6:30 p.m. on the 11th.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

Closing Section: Student 1121

I look forward to the possibility of seeing you in a few weeks.

APPENDIX B Blog Use Number 2

Following is an explanation of how I use the blog to review sentences found in the work created by students.

1. The sentences I wish to review in class are put on the blog. To facilitate our discussion, I display them using an LCD projector. Early in the course, I sometimes identify the nature of the error(s) found in specific sentences. Later in the semester, when students' writing skills have improved, I generally let the students identify the nature of the error. In either case, when the sentences are viewed in class, I ask for volunteers to state how the error(s) can be corrected.

2. To get students to take this exercise more seriously, I sometimes identify a few sentences for which students are asked to prepare a written revision. These papers are collected and may earn a few extra-credit points.

Some students are sensitive to having their work displayed. When you teach multiple sections that prepare writing assignments, the students in one section can view the work of students in another section without revealing student identities. Also, additional errors can be incorporated into the sentences, giving you an opportunity to review additional writing concepts other than the actual error(s) that were made in the sentences you post to the blog.

The following illustrates an abridged version of Blog Use Number 2.

Blog Use No. 2: Sentences/Paragraphs to Edit

The following sentences/paragraphs were contained in a claim letter that denied the customer's adjustment request. Identify the nature of the error in each sample; rewrite the sentence/paragraph if you are asked to do so.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

1. Opening paragraph: Johnson Company regrets to inform you that it must deny your request to return the electric saw. (Lacks a buffered opening)
2. Sentence: If you will simply read the warranty information on the back of your

user's manual, you will quickly discover that the warranty on the saw expired five months ago. Therefore, we are not obligated to provide you with a new saw or to repair your saw. (Has a curt, belittling tone; contains an explicit refusal)

3. Sentence: Perhaps the saw has been misused that is creating the problem with the motor.

Appendix C **Blog Use Number 3**

An explanation of Use No. 3 is as follows.

1. I ask students to access the blog that contains the ineffective letter. I then assign them to work in small groups, either face to face or electronically (such as via e-mail), and they are asked to identify the errors in a certain section of the letter. Each group transmits its list of errors to me via e-mail and, subsequently, I post the composite list of errors to the blog.

2. Either using the same small groups or forming new small groups, I assign each group the responsibility of examining the posted lists of errors, after which the group will prepare a new version of the letter that is submitted via e-mail. I post these letters to the blog for subsequent viewing by all students in the class. When I have multiple sections of the same course, I have the students in one section select what they consider to be the best message prepared by the small groups in another section.

An abridged version of Blog Use Number 3 is illustrated below.

Blog Use Number 3: Letter to Critique/Edit

Following is the body of a claim letter prepared by a customer who recently purchased a digital camera from the company for which you work. In the letter, the customer is asking your company to replace the camera because it is not functioning properly. Prepare a critique of the claim letter; then rewrite the letter.

BCM 311 Blog said . . .

1. The camera I recently purchased from you is nothing but a piece of junk and I am asking that you replace it with a new one that works properly. One should be able to expect that a camera used only six months should be able to give its owner good service.

The first 200 or so digital photos I took with the camera were clear with realistic colors. But the last 50 or so I've taken seem blurred and the colors are not accurate. Also, the images have a grainy appearance.

I purchased this camera to be able to provide lasting images of several upcoming family events. The way the camera is working now, I would be very foolish to use it for these events. My 15 year old inexpensive 35 mm camera produces better photos.

Given the cost of this camera, I deserve better than what it is currently providing. That is why I'm requesting that it be replaced immediately so I have a working camera in time for an important upcoming family event.

I await your reply.

Copyright of Journal of Education for Business is the property of Heldref Publications. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.