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Blogs Sidestep Classroom Constraints

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Alexander Halavais is the graduate director of informatics at the State University of New York's University at Buffalo and studies how new communication technologies facilitate large-scale interaction. Here are excerpts from a conversation about blogs:

Why did you start using blogs in your classroom?

I wanted students to read each other's work and not get pulled off into threads. Threaded discussions are great for some things, but they tend to easily take separate tangents. Second, I wanted our discussions to be very public. This can be done with a discussion board, but . . . a blog worked better. . . .

The first semester I used a blog, one of the authors of the work we were reading, an Australian academic, ran across our discussion on the Web and commented on it. This is not uncommon.

Why do you think blogs are so beneficial in the classroom?

I think the most important [thing] is removing the temporal and spatial constraints of the classroom. Learning is more easily integrated with students' lives and with a larger public discussion. In some cases, the blogs also outlast the course in which they are offered.

How do you use blogs in your classes?

I've used them in a variety of ways. I've used single blogs that a number of students contribute to. I'll probably be doing this in the new year with a course. But these days, I generally have every student keep their own blog. I'm teaching a large course this semester, "Cyberporn & Society," with over 300 students blogging.

I use an aggregator (a Web site that collects individual entries from each of these blogs in one place) to track what the students are writing about. . . . I think students learn a lot more from reading each other's work than they would by writing just for me. I've also found, over years of using blogs, that students are likely to write much more carefully for an audience of their peers than they are for the professor alone.