

ROUND-UP: BLOGGING WOMEN'S STUDIES

Last year, *Feminist Collections* published “Blog This! An Introduction to Blogs, Blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere,” by Vicki Tobias (v.26, nos.2–3, Winter–Spring 2005). That article is online at <http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fc/fcblogs1.htm>.

Now we offer a follow-up piece that looks more pointedly at incorporating blogging and other new “e-formats” into the classroom — particularly the women’s studies classroom — with a round-up of ideas from instructors who are actually doing it.

We invite instructors who have used blogs, wikis, or social networking software in other creative ways to contact us about contributing to future round-ups.

ASSIGNMENT: “WHAT IS A FEMINIST (BLOG)?”

by Mary Thompson

In the spring semester of 2006, I introduced for the first time an assignment that asks “Introduction to Women’s Studies” students to cross-examine several self-identified feminist blogs in order to produce a definition of contemporary feminism. I acknowledged immediately that, given the exclusivity of the Internet, this exercise would only produce a limited definition of feminism not reflective of feminists who cannot or do not access the Web.

Students followed three blogs for four to five weeks before organizing their observations into a four-page paper. Although students could obtain permission to work with blogs of their selecting, the assignment suggested a list of blogs from which they could choose, including many sites listed in Vicki Tobias’s recent *Feminist Collections* article.¹

In preparation for writing the assignment, the class discussed the suppression and dismissal of women’s writing.² We looked at zines such as *Bitch*, *BUST*, *HUES*, and *Hip Mama* as contemporary strategies for overcoming the silencing of feminist voices, and watched Kara Herold’s film *Grrly Show*³ for its discussion of zine culture and the “do-it-yourself” ethic. The class applied these concepts to the context in which blogs are produced and speculated on the positive democratic potential of the Internet as well as the relative absence of women in computer science and technology as a potentially negative factor.

In their essays, students reported being impressed by the amount of research/reading that most blog authors put into their posts. Most students wrote about the recurrent themes of reproductive rights, gender equality, sexuality, and popular culture. Some students observed the feminist practice of authors intertwining their political observations and their personal lives (particularly concerning motherhood). Students also remarked on the way in which many blogs were intertextual, and they compared and contrasted the feminist strategies of collaborative blogs and personal blogs. As a class we discussed the issue of anonymity and the authors’ motivations (harassment, jeopardizing of jobs) for remaining unnamed. In addition to observing the content, students also noted such stylistic elements as the design, the use of graphics, the tone of the posts, the in/formality of the language, and the use of humor. Generally students believed the use of wit was engaging and a positive counteractive to media representations of feminists as humorless.

While their definitions of feminism differed, students consistently described blogs as platforms from which feminist voices can raise awareness and speak against the absent and/or negative representations of women and feminists in other media. In the future I plan to revise the premise of this assignment to require students to reflect more on the feminist voices they did not seem to hear: non-U.S. women; women of color; working-class women; and non-heterosexual women.

Notes

1. Vicki Tobias, "Blog This! An Introduction to Blogs, Blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere," *Feminist Collections* v.26 nos.2–3 (Winter–Spring 2005), pp.11–17; online at <http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fc/fcblogs1.htm>

2. See Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); and Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

3. *Grrlyshow*: 18 mins. color. 2000. Filmmaker: Kara Herold. Distr.: Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, New York, NY 10013; phone: (212) 925-0606; fax: (212) 925-2052; email: info@wmm.com; website: <http://www.wmm.com>.

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To JOIN THE FEMINIST BLOGOSPHERE, CLICK HERE!

by Natalie Jolly

Blogging in the women's studies classroom opens up new pedagogical possibilities and offers unconventional ways of teaching and learning about feminism. I have infused my women's studies classes with a variety of blogs, message boards, and other web technologies in innovative ways. Moving all or part of the class discussion to an online format allows students the luxury of considering their responses before engaging in the conversation. In my classes, this has resulted in a richer, more nuanced discussion that is — surprisingly — often more respectful and responsive than the face-to-face exchanges. In particular, online dialogues have helped defuse the tensions that can often attend "controversial" topics such as abortion and welfare, and students are much more able to value the differences of opinion that can occasionally derail an in-class conversation.

Encouraging students to participate in a class blog also allows quiet students who dread mandated face-to-face participation to contribute in a more comfortable environment. After weeks of silence, students often surprise both their peers and me with their insight and eloquence on the web. In addition, blogs make evaluating course participation more transparent — students can be assessed based on the contributions they make to the conversation, the ways in which they support their positions, and their ability to make connections to other course material. As we all continue to search for ways to open our courses to a variety of different learners, blogs seem to offer a format that truly supports this diversity.

Most importantly, I believe that by using blogs, message boards, or any other Web-based component in our courses, we are teaching our students that feminism (as a movement, a theory, and a practice) is thriving in the digital age. Gaining familiarity with new technologies is an imperative for students, and in many ways their connection to feminism depends on our ability to integrate it into their (increasingly) virtual realities. In one assignment, my students contact local pharmacies to see whether prescriptions for the morning-after pill can be filled there, and then blog their findings on our class website. Our local chapter of Planned Parenthood is now using the data that students have collected to make recommendations to their clients — one small way that Web technologies can be used to connect individual action with the larger project of feminist activism and teach all of us about the power of grassroots (or “netroots”) mobilization.

The possibilities for marrying feminist pedagogical strategies with the Web are limited only by our willingness to embark upon the sometimes daunting task of navigating new technologies. The boundaries continue to recede as more classes move beyond their brick-and-mortar walls and enter cyberspace. The next generation of feminists will undoubtedly be virtual — let’s give them the tools they need to make the next wave of feminism digital.

[Natalie Jolly is a doctoral candidate at the Pennsylvania State University in the Departments of Women’s Studies and Rural Sociology. She has recently developed an entirely blog-centric women’s studies course using open-source software and is teaching it with wild abandon.]

THE PERSONAL CAN BE FEMINIST: BLOGS IN A WRITING COURSE

by Caroline J. Smith

In the themed, first-year writing course that I teach at George Washington University, peer review is often a requirement for each writing assignment. I frequently pair the students in one section with the students in another section in the hope that being unfamiliar with the writer of a paper will foster more objective and, ideally, more constructive feedback. Frequently, when I make these assignments, I hear students whisper to one another, “Do you know so-and-so from her morning section?” And, even more frequently, the reply is, “No. Why don’t you look them up on Facebook?”

Students’ preoccupation with sites such as Facebook and MySpace, which encourage users to become what Emily Nussbaum in her article “My So-Called Blog” deemed “compulsive self-chroniclers,” provide an easy entryway into the not-so-far-removed world of blogging.¹ Though many students do not keep individual blogs, they immediately connect with blogging since they themselves often update their Facebook or MySpace profiles, photos, and comments on a daily basis. Although blogs can provide students with examples of (in)effective argumentation in the writing classroom, they can be an even more useful teaching tool in the feminist classroom. Examining personal blogs written by women opens up discussion about the genre of personal writing — a form that has long been associated with women writers. Blogs, then, can become an effective way to contextualize the struggles of women writers, prompting an examination of how personal writing has been consistently devalued and exposing the challenge that many women writers face in having their voices heard.

This semester, I began using blogs in my composition class to teach the personal narrative, my final writing assignment of the semester. I had students construct their own blogs under pseudonyms, using such sites as Blogger, LiveJournal, and Xanga. They then responded to a series of writing prompts, recording their own personal observations and commenting on the work of their classmates. The blogs became the raw material from which they produced a polished, finite personal narrative. Currently, I am adapting this assignment for a course I will be teaching next spring, entitled “I Am Me’: Writing about Women’s Autobiographies.” In this course, we will interrogate the term *autobiography*, looking at more traditional autobiographies alongside diaries, confessional poetry, songs, documentaries, and blogs. In addition to reading blogs kept by fictional autobiographers like Jennifer Weiner and Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, students will track the personal blog of their choice, using Vicki Tobias’s article, “Blog This! An Introduction to Blogs, Blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere,” to familiarize themselves with such personal blogs as *Brutal Women* and *Gender Geek*.² As with my other course, students will create their own blogs, recording their observations about class readings. Blogs, then, in this context, will not only teach students about the genre of autobiography, but will also serve as models for their own writing, showing how personal writing can be an effective means of public — and often feminist — communication.

Notes

1. Emily Nussbaum, “My So-Called Blog,” *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 11, 2004, 6.1, p.33.
2. Vicki Tobias, “Blog This! An Introduction to Blogs, Blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere,” *Feminist Collections* v.26 nos.2–3 (Winter–Spring 2005), pp.11–17; online at <http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fc/fcblogs1.htm>

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THE STUDY-ABROAD CLASS BLOG: CHRONICLING STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AND INDIAN FEMINISTS’ EFFORTS

by Carolyn Bitzer

During Winter Session 2006, ten female University of Delaware students chronicled their daily study-abroad activities in India through a course blog. Their blog posts, from the first University of Delaware’s Women’s Studies program to South Asia, revealed the students’ personal and collective transformations and also crystallized numerous Indian feminists’ perspectives on diverse women’s issues. Blogging helped capture the students’ experiences, observations, and emotions, which might remain otherwise private, lost, or unexplored. Three students wrote the following excerpts in the class blog:

I also began to see that women who were completely covered in their burqas were standing next to men in western clothes. Or even more interesting, women in burqas who were wearing stilettos.

Our whole trip so far has been visiting feminist organizations and seeing their impact on women.

My previous thought processes were childlike.

The first part of this trip has opened my eyes so much that I don't know if they can get any wider!

I asked the women what they had learned from their experiences, hoping to understand how HIV had shaped them.

The class blog archived the intensive, seven-credit, three-course, month-long program. The blog guidelines stated that students should reflect on their raw personal journal entries, read the other blog posts, consider the audience, write about one page, and post one day each week. Blog topics varied from India's history, the exoticized East, human rights, sexualities, caste, feminist filmmakers, sari shopping, mehendi, and toilet paper to rural livelihoods. To maximize cybersafety, blog access was restricted to enrolled students, and entries were emailed to a carefully limited and selected list of family and friends. The emails allowed about a hundred readers to travel vicariously along as events unfolded thousands of miles away. The group assumed full responsibility for managing the website, posts, and emails.

The blog project achieved many of the desired objectives in a women's studies classroom: amplifying the students' voices, highlighting India's diversity and Indian feminist efforts, and providing collaborative opportunities and raising gender awareness to those on the email list. Also, students now have not only a record of their experiences, but also multiple reflections and summaries. In the future, the blog project will be strengthened by including pre-departure discussions of privilege, gaze, gender, and intersections of difference.

[Carolyn Bitzer is an adjunct women's studies instructor at the University of Delaware.]

BLOGGING AS A CAPSTONE AND CONTINUING PROJECT

by Samantha A. Morgan-Curtis

Tennessee State University's interdisciplinary minor in women's studies was formally launched in January 2005. Thus, in September 2005, when graduating senior Cassandra Vick said to me, "I don't want to do the same type of project that I've done for you before" as we sat discussing her capstone project for our minor, I gamely replied, "What did you have in mind?"

Cassandra, a top student who had previously completed a sophisticated Web page for my "Jane Austen, Film, and Culture" course, had taken several other courses with me, so I knew the exceptional nature of her intellectual and technical skills. Cassandra's brainstorm included taking her feminist discussion and analysis of adolescent literature and creating it as a weblog, or blog. Cassandra was to be only our third graduate with the minor, which requires a capstone project that brings the lenses of women's studies to bear on some issue within the student's major program. Cassandra, an English major,

wanted to look at literary texts that had been significant in her childhood, so she turned to L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series.

Since neither of us knew much about "blogging," our learning curve was steep. Cassandra created <http://sunnysspace.4t.com/wmstblog.html> as part of her overall project. However, she still gave me written reports and did other, "more traditional" writing for me and spoke to our upper division adolescent literature course about her project to fulfill her course requirement. Thus, I evaluated her overall project with the blog functioning as merely more written material instead of as a separate medium that required its own criteria. Though I felt I was not pushing Cassandra enough on the digital aspect, we were both learning.

In the spring of 2006, Laurel Kilbourn began her capstone project, initially researching and analyzing the origins and effects of patriarchy on theology. After a campus visit from Dr. Sheila Radford-Hill, who spoke about starting a new wave of activism in feminism, Laurel came to me with a new plan: to begin a grassroots organization devoted to promoting discussion of and educating people about women's issues. I recommended she create a blog to facilitate her dream of activism in a truly twenty-first-century forum. With the collaboration of a technologically savvy friend, Laurel launched <http://www.womentalking.org/>. For this project, Laurel still produced some "standard" written assessments and submitted some other reflective writing, but eighty percent of her work was loaded onto the blog, her central forum. More importantly, this blog began as a "school" project, but Laurel is committed to continuing and growing it. I evaluated Laurel's work as both affective and effective scholarship with a world-wide purpose and as an ultimate example of what a university course is supposed to do: take the student beyond the classroom and into the "real world."

In the spring and summer of 2006, we will continue our use of the new technologies as I load MP3 files created from projects in my "Introduction to Women's Studies course" onto our Web page. Thus, the voices of even more of our students can share what they have learned with the world and start folks talking.

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BLOGS, WIKIS, E-ZINES, AND WOMEN'S HERSTORY

by Jennifer Nelson

The final project for my "Third Wave Feminism" class, one of the core courses in the Women's Studies curriculum at University of Redlands, was a feminist zine. During the semester we looked at feminist zines, particularly e-zines online, and discussed this popular method for the dissemination of feminist thought. One of the differences between the "Third" and "Second" waves of feminism (I continue to use these terms, although I understand they are both contested and problematic) is the increasing use of computer technology as a political organizing tool. The Internet is something that young people use with abandon. Given their facility with technological innovation, I suspected that

students would really like to post their zines and make them interactive — one of the terrific benefits of Internet technology. Indeed, the students were enthusiastic about creating their e-zines. They could decide whether they wanted to create a group blog or an individual one.

I decided to have students use the blog format (see <http://www.blogger.com>) for their online magazines because it was not only interactive — allowing them to post articles (both their original work and published articles), stories, pictures, and website links that other students could comment on — but also allowed them to document their work over time. In order to take advantage of both of these facets of the blog, students were asked to post content (articles, stories, pictures, etc.) over the course of the semester. All students in the class were also required to visit other sites and comment on what was posted. Most students posted new material every week or so, and everyone visited each other's sites regularly. As a result, students were able to have conversations about a variety of subjects that evolved out of the original posts. Topics that students focused on included birth control, sexual identity, "slut bashing" and the "double standard," anarcha-feminism, Latinas and feminism, women and music, beauty standards, women and politics, and media representation of S&M relationships. The other advantage of the blog was that we could limit the readership of each student's zine to people enrolled in our class. Given the controversial nature of some of the topics, I didn't want outsiders to be able to sabotage these blogs.

Students had a lot of fun with this project. They created online identities for themselves and continued to visit each other's blogs through the finals period. I think the best comments resulted from the more personal posts. The blog dealing with women and politics was very content-heavy, focusing on facts and statistics about women in mainstream politics. Students were less able to get into a conversation about this particular topic, which makes me think that this tool works best when you are trying to facilitate interaction about topics that are not predominantly fact-based. A controversial issue that students can debate or weigh in on personally works best.

Next semester I plan on using "wikis"¹ in my "African American Women's History" course. Students will be asked to choose group topics — for instance, women and slavery or women in the civil rights movement. They will then each identify a few people, places, terms, or historical events that relate to this topic and research them. Members of each group will be asked to review and edit each other's work. (I'm hoping this process will be a clever way to get students doing peer reviews of each other's writing.) They will also create links to each other's pages. Through this process our class can build an online encyclopedia of people, places, events, and terms that are relevant to African American women's history.

Note

1. "A **wiki**...is a type of website that allows users to easily add, remove, or otherwise edit and change some available content.... This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring." See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

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