

# BLACKBOARD OR BLOG? SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT CREATING AND ASSIGNING ON-LINE COMPONENTS IN COLLEGE HISTORY COURSES

Julie A. Hofmann  
Shenandoah University

## Introduction

As colleges and universities have adopted course management software such as Blackboard and WebCT, more and more history faculty have added on-line discussion components to their face-to-face classes. There are many reasons for this, not least a perceived need, expressed by many administrators and legislators, for more flexible class schedules, and a desire to fulfill that need by replacing traditional contact hours with hybrid and on-line courses. Some faculty have turned to weblogs, or "blogs," as alternate locations for collaborative classroom assignments. On-line formats can offer rewards, but they also present challenges for both students and faculty. For example, some institutions require that blog assignments be placed on private or password-protected domains in order to protect student privacy, whether or not the assignment is deemed to fall under the broader umbrella of FERPA regulation. Others regard blogs as a sort of presentation open to the public, where students learn to write for audiences beyond the classroom. There are advantages to both approaches and ultimately the decision rests in the hands of the institution.<sup>1</sup> Apart from technical and legal issues, using any sort of on-line discussion requires different pedagogical strategies, some of which are addressed below. Despite these challenges, blogging offers ways to engage students and to access and incorporate different media into student presentations that require the same levels of academic rigor as traditional printed and oral presentations.

This paper grew out of two panels presented at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2006 and 2007.<sup>2</sup> The discussions at those panels encouraged me to experiment with blogging in my own courses. What follows is a description of challenges and issues presented by incorporating such assignments, including getting students to participate, expected (and real) learning outcomes, assessing student work, and overall student/faculty response. In the end, I will offer observations on creating assignments that make the best use of blog technology.

---

<sup>1</sup>The most popular blogs are Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>), Typepad (<http://www.typepad.com>), and Live Journal (<http://www.livejournal.com>). All three allow password-protected communities and the ability to limit visibility.

<sup>2</sup>"Weblogs and the Academy: Internet Presence and Professional Discourse among Medievalists (a Roundtable)," 41<sup>st</sup> International Medieval Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo (2006), and "Weblogs and the Academy: Pedagogy, Professionalism, and Technical Practices (a Roundtable)," 42<sup>nd</sup> International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo (2007).

### Why On-Line?

Before beginning, it is important to ask why one might want to incorporate new technology. The answer seems obvious—our students are Internet-savvy and we want to tap into their interests. On-line assignments offer both faculty and students many new options for coursework. They also can help to address information and technology outcomes that many colleges and universities now include in general education requirements. Moreover, on-line discussions are sometimes easier for introverted students or for those who believe they are less able to “think on their feet” and prefer an asynchronous approach. They also allow students a place to refine or reconsider their ideas and arguments and to continue conversations that ended with the close of class.

Although many students have accounts at social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, the idea of an on-line discussion or blog as a workspace is often alien to them. The relationship of the students with the Internet for academic work is frequently passive; students use the Internet to get information, but they seldom see themselves as contributors or participants in a wider conversation. Even students who are expert at using social networking sites can be less comfortable with what they see as “forced” interaction with other students outside the classroom. Although “class participation” is something to which most students are acculturated, some consider outside collaboration an infringement on private time. To faculty, on-line collaborative assignments are a form of ongoing group work, but many students cannot see the communal aspect, instead dismissing such assignments as mere “busy work.” For them, the on-line classroom is a burden, not “a world in which students live.”<sup>3</sup>

Students respond much better and appear to get more out of on-line discussions when guidelines for assignments and their assessment are clear and assignments are built around open-ended questions. Faculty participation is also important: regularly addressing student comments, either by asking follow-up questions or offering positive, constructive criticism to reinforce the idea that what students have to say counts. A faculty presence also reminds students that on-line discussion is still coursework that matters. It is therefore important to remember that adding an on-line component can also significantly increase the amount of time a faculty member spends on the course. However, such assignments have their rewards: they can empower students and help them realize their own potential as writers and researchers.

### Types of Assignments

---

<sup>3</sup>Allen Scarboro, “Bringing Theory Closer to Home Through Active Learning and Online Discussion,” *Teaching Sociology*, 32:2 (April 2004), 226. Scarboro’s view of the student relationship to “new-age media” presents the best possible case, but not, unfortunately, a universal one.

Based in part on my own successful experiences using both Blackboard and WebCT discussion boards in my classes, in part on the experiences of colleagues at other institutions who enjoyed success with blog assignments, I compared three different types of on-line class assignments over one academic year. I had used Blackboard discussion boards successfully for several years in survey courses, so I continued to use that feature for survey classes. The other assignments used two different blog formats in two different upper-division courses. Each class received a set of assessment guidelines via Blackboard and I posted grades on a bi-weekly basis. Credit for on-line contributions ranged from ten to thirty percent of the overall grade, with students expected to post their own work and to comment on the posts of others.

### **Outcomes and Assessments**

For these on-line assignments, the listed outcomes were the same as those for face-to-face classes. Students leaving the course should demonstrate that they had acquired some ability to “think historically,”<sup>4</sup> developed and used critical thinking skills and expressed those thoughts orally and in writing, learned to “do” history, at least to some extent, and, as a secondary outcome, finished the course with a better understanding of information technology than when they entered. In my courses, this means explicitly and implicitly helping students learn to see societies of the past not only for what they were in historical context, but also to recognize and avoid presentist interpretations. This is not only necessary for good historical thought, but it also is a way of thinking that helps students understand the complex global interactions and clashes of value systems that affect their daily lives. Obviously, none of these outcomes makes sense without including some mastery of content and a general narrative.

Assessing on-line assignments is both simpler and more difficult than it looks. The simple part is quantitative: did the students make the required number of log-ins and posts? The qualitative assessment of student contributions is somewhat more complex, but using a set of guidelines or a rubric is an obvious way to deal with this challenge. I set minimum standards for number and frequency of posts and distribute guidelines for good, thoughtful, constructive contributions to on-line dialogue. Ideally, students should respond directly to questions or comments raised on the board, use specific examples from primary and secondary sources, tie responses to previous conversations, start new discussion threads that provoke further discussion, and help peers understand the material. Because the primary purpose of discussion is to encourage students to engage with the material and enter into academic discourse, students who demonstrate even a moderate level of engagement have little difficulty in earning at least a B to B+ grade on each assignment.

---

<sup>4</sup>For one of the best recent discussions of what it means to “think historically,” see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

## The Assignments

### Blackboard for Surveys

For World Civilization surveys, in the first semester, I assigned a standard discussion board and required students to post a minimum of three times over the week. I posed open-ended questions designed to help students integrate readings in the textbook with primary source readings, class lectures, and discussions. The questions were primarily thematic and often reached back to include topics we had already covered. For example, when discussing European voyages of exploration and the Columbian Exchange, I asked how European societies saw non-Europeans, following up with questions about how Muslims in Africa saw Europeans, how members of contemporary Asian empires saw outsiders, and how differences in reactions might be explained. To answer, students needed to reflect on primary source readings I assigned over several weeks. Some students were resistant to the idea of class discussion outside scheduled class time; they complained that it was "busy work." Based on student evaluations of the assignment, I modified the format for the second semester. The minimum number of posts remained the same, but students initiated their own discussions based on what they believed were the "muddiest" points for them over the course of the week.<sup>5</sup> In both semesters, students who participated in the on-line discussions also performed better on in-class essay examinations and the sections with higher participation had better exam and overall grades.

### Live Journal for Upper-Division Courses

For two upper-division courses, one on twentieth-century Europe and one on East Asia, I set up two different kinds of blogs. I chose Live Journal as the platform, because it is easy to use, access to the posts can be limited to members of the community, and basic accounts are free. Although the Live Journal format threads discussions, that was a secondary consideration. Because these were upper-division students, I wanted to see how blog technology might be used to provide a space for student presentations as well.

In the fall semester, students in the European history seminar used our class blog in two different ways. For the first seven weeks of the course, assignments focused on thinking critically about resources on the Web. Most of the assignments required a combination of reading primary sources and examining images or entire websites,

---

<sup>5</sup>I used a modification of a technique discussed in Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson, *Effective Grading* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishing, 1998), 5-6.

evaluating them, and discussing them. The first substantive assignment,<sup>6</sup> an evaluation of a website devoted to World War I,<sup>7</sup> drew several responses to the questions, "Would you use this site for a class? Why or why not?" But there was little conversation between the students. One of the few examples was this trio of posts:

Student One: I would say that this site is quite useful for a class to use. It is full of insightful information such as maps, timelines, and historical information on numerous topics pertaining to WWI. The only discouraging thing that I could say about a site like this is that in order for one to be a good historian and/or teacher one should get their information from numerous sources. A site like this one being so convenient could cause one to stop their continued search for information.

Student Two: I agree with [Student One's] comment totally! The maps provide visual concepts to go along with the texts that you can read. I think that this site is also very convenient for someone looking for either quick information to get background on a subject or to look in depth at an issue as well.

Student Three: That's a good point about this site having so much info that someone might just stop at this one source.

Student Two's response was typical of comments students made to each other's posts. They did not engage with or write for each other at first; they wrote for an audience of one—the professor. Over the next few weeks, however, students' reactions to readings became more sophisticated, although they remained reluctant to critique each other's comments or respond in any but a positive manner. The next assignments also indicated that students who regularly discussed controversial or sensitive topics in class often were less willing to take a stand in a more permanent setting.

As part of our discussion of the Holocaust, the class read Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *Maus*.<sup>8</sup> I also asked students to look at several websites on the *Bund der Vertriebenen* (Federation of Expellees), an organization that seeks recognition for the plight of ethnic Germans, primarily in areas under Soviet control, driven from their

---

<sup>6</sup>The first actual assignment required students to set up their accounts and then join the community I created. Since this required some web expertise, I spent time in class walking through the technical details.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Duffy, "First World War.com," <http://www.firstworldwar.com>.

<sup>8</sup>Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. I: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

homes after World War II. The students read through various articles, representing several points of view, and evaluated them for bias, accuracy, and intent.<sup>9</sup> I then asked students how (or whether) they thought the inclusion of expellees in the larger discourse might affect views and interpretations of the Holocaust over time. The students each contributed fully to the first part of the assignment, but not the second. Their comments indicated that they judged all of the sites of equal accuracy.<sup>10</sup>

This led to an unplanned assignment in which I asked students to re-visit some of the Wikipedia pages they had selected. Each Wikipedia article comes with a complete history of all edits and a linked discussion page where authors explain and argue the merits of those edits. Students were to examine the article history and several pages of discussion for at least one of the articles in question and comment on what they found. Although the students appeared to have read the discussions, none connected the often virulent disagreements about issues and article content that had gone on behind the scenes to the finished product. I followed up on discussion in class, going over some of the articles with students. Again I posed my initial question on changing interpretations of the Holocaust. The answers were illustrative of how, at least for this group, the discourse had already changed. For them, the Holocaust was horrible and atrocious, but they saw it against the background of other genocides in their lifetimes. The topic was clearly a difficult one for the students, who seemed more comfortable discussing it together in class than on-line, perhaps because they were more able to gauge the tone of the conversation.

In the second half of the semester, students used the blog to support major class projects. The projects consisted of three parts: a blog post on their presentation topics that incorporated links to background reading; a twenty- to thirty-minute presentation with a question-and-answer session; and a review essay that underwent a group peer

---

<sup>9</sup>“League of German Expellees Unwilling to Investigate Own Past,” *Deutsche Welle*, 14.08.2006, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2135984,00.html>; John Dornberg, “Germany’s Expellees and Border Changes: An Endless Dilemma?” *German Life*, June/July 1995, [http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1995/9506\\_01.html](http://www.germanlife.com/Archives/1995/9506_01.html); Geir Moulson, “Planned Berlin Memorial for WWII Expellees Triggers Eastern European Unease,” United Jewish Communities website, July 13, 2003, [http://www.ujc.org/content\\_display.html?ArticleID=80896](http://www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=80896); Luke Harding, “PM attacks German president over expellees,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/secondworldwar/story/0,,1864246,00.html>; Ian Traynor, “Polish war dead log challenges Germany,” *The Guardian*, September 5, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/secondworldwar/story/0,,1864876,00.html>; Wikipedia, “Heimatvertriebene,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heimatvertriebene>; Wikipedia, “German Exodus from Eastern Europe,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_exodus\\_from\\_Eastern\\_Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_exodus_from_Eastern_Europe); Wikipedia, “Expulsion of Jews after World War II,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expulsion\\_of\\_Germans\\_after\\_World\\_War\\_II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expulsion_of_Germans_after_World_War_II).

<sup>10</sup>The ability of students to evaluate accuracy of sources is discussed in detail in Samuel Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 28:3 (Autumn 1991), 501-502.

review before completion of the final version. Comments on the posts were not required and very few were given. What was surprising was the range of posts. I asked students to provide links to scholarly source materials or to websites they judged trustworthy. Their selections ranged from a bibliography of ten scholarly articles that one student placed on reserve in the library to several lists of links to Wikipedia. Only two students linked to non-Wikipedia websites, while one linked to Wikipedia and to several scholarly articles she had downloaded and posted to her own domain. The repeated use of Wikipedia was discouraging, especially after repeated class discussions regarding its reliability.

The final assignment required each student to post short essays on either what they thought was the most important issue in twentieth-century European history or the issue they thought was given too much importance by historians or in popular conceptions of history. Most of the earlier assignments did not always meet the target of two to three comments per student, but this one averaged over five each. The comments were mostly supportive, but there were also a few questions and criticisms. I attribute this change in part to having spent several class hours on group peer reviews of the students' final papers. Whatever the reason, it was surprising that students remained uneasy with questioning each other or offering criticism in writing. These were upper-level students, mostly history majors, normally articulate and opinionated in class. It was also a contrast with my experiences with simpler discussion boards, where freshman and sophomore-level students had regularly engaged with each other on-line.

In the East Asian history course, blogging assignments took a different form. Since the students had little or no background in the subject, we focused on narrative and issues in class and used the blog for document analysis that usually takes up about a third of class time. After students had set up their accounts, I posted two texts for them to read, asking them to choose one or the other for a collaborative analysis.<sup>11</sup> I also gave them a set of questions to answer. No single student was responsible for answering all of the questions, but all questions required an answer. The questions were straightforward:

- What kind of text is this? What is the intended audience and purpose?
- Who is the author? What was his or her position in society? Might that position reflect a certain bias? How?
- When was the text written? What events were taking place at that time? How might a historian use these events to place the document in context?

---

<sup>11</sup>“The 17 Article Constitution of Prince Shotoku,” trans. W.G. Aston, in *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, 2 vols. in 1 (London: Kegan and Co., 1896), vol. 2, 128-133, <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/CONST.HTM>, and “The Taika Reforms,” in Aston, *Nihongi*, 197-227, <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/TAIKA.HTM>.

- Choose one or two specific examples from the text and explain how you think a historian might use them to explain something about the society that produced the text.

Students answered the first three sets of questions immediately, but when they attempted to answer the last question, they paraphrased more than analyzed. We discussed their answers in class and worked on ways of framing answers that showed reasoned conclusions rather than simple paraphrasing and synthesis of information. Those classroom lessons did not always translate directly to the on-line environment. When students began to post individual document analyses, their posts ranged widely from a simple restating of document contents to more sophisticated levels I had seen in class discussion. The comment threads showed more serious attempts to analyze the texts themselves and some attempts to expand upon and critique the initial posts. Students also used the comment function to ask questions. For example, the first individual student post was an analysis of a series of texts on estate management in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japan.<sup>12</sup> A widow had won a lawsuit that confirmed her inheritance not only of her husband's fief but also of his office. A student asked, "As far as women go, how would Yoshikane's widow deal with his military obligation?" This question resulted in conversation between the students, some of whom did extra research to try to answer the question, before I was able to provide a more direct answer.

After the first student post, I reviewed the assignment in class. I suggested that a way of making sure that the focus of the analysis remained on the text itself would be for students to use a formula to frame their ideas such as "The text mentions A and B, from which a historian might conclude X." This helped some students. Two weeks later, one wrote about a letter sent by the first Ming emperor to the Byzantine emperor:<sup>13</sup>

Aside from providing this background the author also provides the reader with a reason behind why the past governments (Sung, Yuan, etc.) failed. This failure in government as the document states was attributed to their fall from Heaven's grace due to "misgovernment and debauchery." The document continues to draw on these past governments' mistakes and makes the claim that the Ming rule came into effect due to their "patriotic

---

<sup>12</sup>Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Anne Walthall, and James B. Palais, *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 216-217.

<sup>13</sup>Chu-Yuan Chang, "Manifesto of Accession as First Ming Emperor, 1372 C.E." in F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Shanghai & Hong Kong, 1885), 65-67, edited by Jerome S. Arkenberg, Department of History, California State University Fullerton, at Paul Halsall, "East Asian History Sourcebook," <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/eastasia/1372mingmanf.html>.

idea to save the people.” .... This document tells us numerous things first and most importantly the continued tradition of the “Mandate of Heaven.”

Responses included comments on the idea of the Mandate of Heaven and on how the text revealed the importance of tradition in Chinese society. There was discussion over why the Ming Emperor would write to the Byzantine Emperor and whether—and how—the Chinese would have known of Byzantium’s fall to the Seljuk Turks. Conversations like these were one of my goals for the assignment. They also encouraged a different kind of participation on my part. Rather than asking additional questions or pointing students towards aspects of the texts I thought important, I used blog comments to give more positive feedback. I also used those conversations to begin class discussions that helped students grasp broader themes and make specific connections to information they had already learned.

Whether or not the initial “analysis” post met the assignment’s requirements, the discussions showed that students were thinking about the texts and relating them not only to class readings and lecture but to their own experiences. In comments to a post on two documents from seventeenth-century Japan that severely restricted interaction between the Japanese and Europeans,<sup>14</sup> students discussed the effects Jesuit missionaries had on trade and relations between both Japan and China and Europe, drawing comparisons to other documents they had read. Responses to this post were typical in the way they reflected students’ attempts to connect the past to their world:

Student One: This seems so foreign to us because we are so used to our freedoms. We often forget that the history of other countries were [sic] definitely more severe, and in the case of Japan they felt they had to be.

[The student poster] sums up these two documents rather nicely. The Japanese government from these two documents was not open to outside influence of any kind. Whether it was “Southern Barbarians,” Christianity, or a restriction of certain goods the Japanese believed that in controlling these areas their culture and traditions would remain safe.

Student Two: Although we know now that Japan will eventually grow into an industrialized nation and some would easily say a world power, you have to wonder if the leaders in Japan were concerned about being left behind. In a time of expansion when the rest of the world is exploring and expanding borders, Japan is forcing itself to stay within itself. Do the

---

<sup>14</sup>The Tokugawa Shogunate’s “Closed Country Edict” of 1635 and a further edict excluding the Portuguese in 1639 are available in many sourcebooks and on several websites. The edition most of the students used is Sarah Watts, “World History,” [http://www.wfu.edu/~watts/w03\\_Japancl.html](http://www.wfu.edu/~watts/w03_Japancl.html).

leaders not fear being behind in development and power, or are they that self-assured that they are so superior that such expansion is unnecessary?

Comments such as these demonstrated that students had begun the process of “thinking historically.” Although no student posted as often as I had hoped, most students met or exceeded minimum posting requirements every week. As in the twentieth-century Europe class, students seldom offered criticism of each other’s analyses or comments, but they did clarify points and answer each other’s questions. Moreover, some students posted voluntarily on issues we had not had time to cover in class. In terms of fulfilling the intended outcomes, the second blog was much more successful. The students’ work showed that they were learning the material and, more importantly, learning to approach the material with a historian’s mindset. When I asked students about the blogs, however, those who had been in my survey class and used the discussion board preferred the East Asia blog to the discussion board, but those who had taken the twentieth-century course preferred the assignments from that course. When I asked them why, they said that they thought that they had more freedom and ability to be creative in the first semester.

### Conclusions

My students made an interesting point that revealed a different understanding of the course learning outcomes. To them, “doing history” meant “finding information from multiple sources and presenting it in a coherent fashion.”<sup>15</sup> The first blog had allowed that, but despite a clear feeling on the students’ parts that it was a better learning experience, the second blog was clearly more successful in terms of getting students to understand and use the texts. The problem lies, I think, in tailoring assignments to the technology. The assignments for the second blog could have been completed as easily on the Blackboard discussion board or in the classroom. Using blog technology for the assignment did not add any significant value—the blog was merely a location. Moreover, in the classroom, the discussion would have been focused and students might have felt freer to disagree with or critique each other’s interpretations. This is not to say that blogging doesn’t work, but as with any technology, the best assignments should take advantage of the unique strengths of the medium. The greatest strength of the blog environment is that it allows one to write essays that link to on-line articles, images, and other media. Blogs are built for the kind of creative assignment that students in the European history course found more

---

<sup>15</sup>This is akin to the “FAQ” model described in James Strickland, “Just the FAQs: An Alternative to Teaching the Research Paper,” *The English Journal*, 94:1 (September 2004), 23-28. As Strickland noted, the vast amounts of information available on the Web are conducive to this sort of presentation, but I would argue that well-constructed assignments and judicious use of the comment function can produce essays and research projects that contain the well-argued thesis most historians expect.

fulfilling and motivating,<sup>16</sup> and an astute faculty member can create essay and presentation assignments that require appropriate academic rigor and citation. Doing so can give students new opportunities to enter into the larger academic conversation that exists beyond their password-protected classroom, while being true to the historian's trade.

---

<sup>16</sup>For one discussion of the importance of autonomy on student learning, see, Gad Yair, "Reforming Motivation: How the Structure of Instruction Affects Student Learning Experiences," *British Educational Research Journal*, 26:2 (April 2000), 191-210. Yair's study includes an assessment of the part played by student perceptions of autonomy and challenge in their motivation, which in turn affects their success in learning.