

16

BLOGGING AS DIGITAL CITIZENS IN AN ONLINE COURSE

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Faced with a global pandemic in March 2020, schools in North America and many other countries moved their courses online. The midsemester pivot from in-person to online course delivery opened a floodgate of questions on pedagogy: Would an online course delivery alter the course objectives? How would students and faculty recreate a flipped classroom in a virtual setting? What would synchronous class discussions mean for students living in different time zones or in spaces not conducive to a nurturing education environment? As the Fall 2020 semester began, the pandemic was still surging in the United States. It is imperative for educators to reflect on how online courses can best facilitate student learning as an integral part of education under COVID-19 and in the post COVID-19 future.

An online course cannot replace the vibrant physical setting of an in-person classroom, and the absence of human contact can easily frustrate students. Even with these challenges, an online course can develop unique skill sets that an in-person course cannot. For instance, online courses can equip students with proficiencies like digital awareness or utilizing technology in responsible ways in an increasingly interconnected world. An online Asian history course, done correctly, can effectively weave together global and digital awareness, transforming students into responsible digital citizens who are aware of global cultures and are trained to use social media in sensible ways.

In Spring 2020, the South Asian History course I was teaching pivoted online. I revised the course assignments to emphasize a new course goal: training students to be responsible digital citizens. To that end, I canceled the midterm paper—in its

place, I designed two blog assignments. These blogs required students to read the book *I Am Malala* and carry out online research on the book's central characters. Blogging prepared students to use their readings to retrieve factual information from online platforms. Students also had a chance to comment on each other's work, engage in virtual dialogue, and learn as a community.

I Am Malala is a fascinating account of activist Malala Yousafzai's relentless struggle to secure education for women in Pakistan.¹ Cowritten with Christina Lamb, the autobiographical work is a glimpse into the world of Pashtuns who live in the picturesque hills of Swat Valley. High school and undergraduate students find the autobiography a captivating read for the vivid details it provides of lively Pashtun customs and festivals that Taliban invaders muzzled in the 1990s. What is specifically noteworthy about *I Am Malala* is the way in which the book provokes discussions on global inequalities while revealing the power of young people as changemakers.

The first of the two blogs I assigned was a think-through character blog. Students had to understand the perspective of any one character in the book and review a current social or political event from that character's point of view. The blog required students to step outside their own frames of reference as they analysed various social, economic, and cultural factors. Additionally, students carried out online research and listed hyperlinks that they thought would be of interest to that character. The second blog, a courage activism blog, required students to connect the text with the world in which they live. The blog made students reflect on social injustices in their immediate world—racism, gun violence, climate change, immigration curbs, and so on—and weigh in on their role as potential changemakers.

Blogs and Gen Z Learners

A recent study carried out by Meghan Grace and Corey Seemiller on Gen Z learners offers crucial insights on how Gen Z learns in the classroom.² The book argues that our pedagogical practices are not in sync with the needs of Gen Z learners. Most classroom pedagogy is tailored for millennials; Gen Z learners have a whole new set of attributes and learning skills that remain unaddressed in the classroom. For example, millennials value lectures, but Gen Z prefers flipped classrooms. There are also significant differences in their approach to social media. The authors describe social media as a double-edged sword. Social media can provide a wealth of information for educators to stay relevant. At the same time, Gen Z views certain platforms, such as Twitter, as a safe space away from the scrutiny and judgment of authority figures where they can freely express their views. It is important that instructors respect students' sense of safety and use social media in responsible ways.



Figure 1: Malala Yousafzai is a campaigner who in 2012 was shot for her activist work. As part of WOW 2014, she talks about the systemic nature of gender inequality and bringing about change. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Further, Gen Z regards higher education as a worthwhile experience, but they are also concerned about the cost of education. Students naturally have very high and specific demands for their college or university experiences. They question whether higher education can sufficiently prepare them for a professional career. They want more experiential or problem-based learning that yields real-life experience.

A blog can meaningfully connect classroom instruction with real-world experiences. When blogging, students get a chance to connect the readings with their own lives and also connect dots between the past and the present. While making connections between their own world and the reading, students can choose to keep their personal space intact—they have the power to decide on ways to engage with social media that are within their comfort zone. Blogging is an excellent option for those who want to remain anonymous even when engaging with social media. Students can decide whether their blog will be public or anonymous, moderating their interactions accordingly. For instance, they can create a username that only the teacher knows (so that the teacher can give credit for participation) but others in the class do not know. This anonymity builds a virtual space where students who are generally quiet or who hold alternative or minority perspectives feel more comfortable articulating their views.³

Finally, blogs benefit students who do not have the physical space conducive to participating in synchronous discussions. Intrusive parents, sick family members, or another sibling attending a class in the same room can curtail their participation. Blogs can generate asynchronous dialogue between creators and visitors, including those in different time zones. They reply to their followers' feedback and comments when they want to do so. Besides, blogging is a fun and innovative process where students can creatively express their views. In addition to regular writing, blogs enable students to think creatively and develop unique and original content through new themes, headers, layouts, designs, and images.

Think-Through Character Blog: Becoming Digital Citizens

One of the key pedagogical goals in reading a book together is building community. While some students are familiar with the geography and traditions of South Asia, others are learning about these for the first time. As a community, students can assist each other to deepen their knowledge of South Asia. In a face-to-face class, community building is easier as students interact in person. In an online course, building community can be tricky. Technical malfunctions and the lack of human contact can make it difficult to shape community consciousness.

Blogs are asynchronous conversation boards that allow students to engage in dialogue with each other. These conversations do not happen in real time, but they shape a meaningful discourse on course topics. Student conversations become even more instructive when they are asked to represent a perspective different from their own: a think-through character analysis blog does exactly this. It requires students to identify any one character from the book and use that character's perspective to create a blog.

In my spring 2020 course, students used the websites Wix and Squarespace to create their blogs. Both websites offer an easy interface to integrate texts with images. Students wrote at least 300 words for this blog. To guide them through the initial steps in writing the blog, I provided a note-taking assignment. Several platforms like Google Docs, Notejoy, and NoteLedge can make online note-taking easy and fun. With Google Docs, one student started the document and shared it with the class. In the document, the students drafted preliminary notes on characters in the book. Some notes were simple descriptions of a character, including who they interacted with and how their character grew through the story. Some provided critical analysis of what was missing in the book, strengths and weaknesses of characters, and comparisons between them. Other students then added additional notes in tables designated for each character. The table guided students as they developed good note-taking strategies. Other students used NoteLedge, which gives students many nontextual note-taking options, including drawing and mapping. Students were able to record audio when taking notes, and



Figure 2: Go Big Read Display for “I Am Malala.” Source: Wikimedia Commons.

a web clipper option allowed them to add elements from the web to the notes (video clips or animation). Still other students worked with PDFs, highlighting and annotating and linking important facts from multiple PDFs and organizing them in their notes.

In addition to promoting critical thinking skills, blogging hones skills like digital communication, curation, critical evaluation, and visual literacy. Reading and writing online is not linear. Students in my class threaded together information that was fragmentary and hyperlinked, like pieces in a puzzle, sharpening their analytical abilities and improving problem-solving skills.

The spring 2020 blog assignment required outside research to facilitate critical thinking. Students were asked to include a sidebar with at least three links grouped around a theme of interest to that character. The blog required them to find a photo of the character with a brief description of his or her role, relationships, goals, location, and other characteristics. These tasks pushed students to reflect on ways to navigate the extensive information available online to find the most trustworthy facts. In addition, a retweet sidebar assisted students to further hone their critical thinking skills. For the retweet option, students were asked to read about current social and political tweets and suggest what the character they represented would retweet and what additional comments they would include in that retweet.

One Twitter account my students followed was the South Asia Center of the Atlantic Council.⁴ Many of these tweets link to published opinion pieces. I invited my students to reflect on each publication by asking a series of questions: Who is the author? Can there be biases? Is there anything missing in the opinion? Students were asked to think about what comments Malala might post if she retweeted this, or what her mother would retweet and why. A think-through character analysis blog allows students to comprehend, empathize with, and demonstrate a nuanced understanding of divergent worldviews.

Commenting on each other's blogs, students were able to replicate the in-person discussions of the physical classroom. At the same time, online learning provided opportunities for interaction, participation, and collaboration. Retweeting perspectives empowered them to recognize how ideas, events, and actions in one location have consequences elsewhere. Retweets with comments assisted students in understanding power inequities among different cultures, societies, countries, and regions in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Courage Activism Blog

Students grasp readings best when they collectively live the text. Students who identify with the protagonists of a story are transported to countries and cultures different from their own. Furthermore, sensory details and relatable vulnerabilities make students more invested in matters of global justice. In an online course, where instructors only see the virtual students, it is difficult to determine whether students make an emotional connection with the reading. This connection is absolutely necessary to make students reflect on their identity and understand their role in the community and the wider world. For instance, students reading *I Am Malala* often assume that they cannot be global changemakers. Many students point out that they lack the courage to fight the Taliban like Malala did; others say that they want to fight injustice but do not know how.

The second blog assignment I used in spring 2020 was a courage activism blog, helping students become aware of their power to initiate change. A courage activism blog has two steps. In the first step, students were placed in small groups where they brainstormed ideas. Both WebEx and Zoom have “breakout group” options. Students were then asked to reflect on school and community-based political issues—such as the need for new facilities or gender-neutral spaces on campus—or wider issues like climate change or gun violence. After selecting one specific issue to address, they carried out online research to find one news article on the topic. When deciding which article to select, I encouraged students to reflect on a few questions: What kind of digital news forum is this? What is the author's background in this subject? Who is the intended audience? Is the author being objective or subjective? Is the author stating fact or opinion? How well are

the author's opinions supported? Does the tone of the writing suggest that the author may be biased?

The class later reconvened and each group had five minutes to summarize their findings. Following this, students were asked to carry out a similar activity on their own and write a blog on a social justice issue that they felt required immediate attention. Their blog had to reference a web article that best explained the issue. They had to think critically and explain why they selected this issue over others and why they picked a certain web article. A carefully selected image at the center of the blog attracted the reader's attention to the topic. Next, the blog laid out an action plan for justice. In the blog that I assigned, students were asked to reflect on resources to which they have access (owing to nationality, class, gender, and so on) that Malala did not have and, through this difference, review their identity and place in society.⁵

Critics often claim that social media activism is a tool for mobilizing protesters for an immediate cause but that it fails to build long-term relationships. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter spread and receive information, but conversations on those forums are brisk. Clearly, these fora favor broadcasting over deep conversations. However, as professor Clay Shirky argues, social media can be utilized for long-term goals of strengthening civil society and the public sphere.⁶ The courage activism blog can inspire students interested in social media activism to remain engaged beyond the semester. By introducing students to resources such as Affinity.works, which facilitate the organization of social movements online, educators can help students' long-term relations with other activists.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a paradigm shift in the way students learn at a time of anxiety and loss. Instructors acclimated to face-to-face instruction are quickly encountering the challenges of online teaching. Their communications with students across continents and time zones are complicated by technological glitches and government censorship. Yet, the use of technology to facilitate learning can be effectively woven into course goals. Blogs can be one of the many tools to help students become digital global citizens as they navigate through our socially distanced world.

Notes

¹ Malala Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (United States: Little, Brown, 2013).

² Meghan Grace and Corey Seemiller, *Generation Z Goes to College*. (Germany: Wiley, 2015).

³ A. F. Pearson, “Real Problems, Virtual Solutions: Engaging Students Online,” *Teaching Sociology* 38, no. 3, 2010, 207–214.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/acsouthasia?lang=en>.

⁵ Both blogs were graded on form (use of headings, subheadings, images, font, takeaway points, and so on), content (analysis of topics, personal views, fact-based examples, critical thinking, questioning web-based materials), and originality (What new topics did their blogs add to the course themes?).

⁶ Clay Shirky, *Planning for Web Services Obstacles and Opportunities* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2002).