

The ToolBox



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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University

Web-Based Assignment Venues

Surveying the Techno-Landscape

Within the past few years, the technological landscape has been dramatically altered through the proliferation of *open content*, *blog*, and *social network* sites. This new genre of techno-communities has gained a significant level of acceptance and use by millennial students. College faculty would be well advised to take advantage of yet another learning opportunity in the realm of the Internet.

Open content refers to is any kind of creative work published in a format that explicitly allows copying and modification by anyone who has access — even those not necessarily within the organization of origin. A classic example of an open content site is the collection of articles found on Wikipedia (i.e., Yes, that same “Can we use Wikipedia as a reference in our research paper?” site). As of December 2007, Wikipedia had approximately 9.25 million articles in 253 languages, comprising a combined total of over 1.74 billion words.

A *blog* (short for weblog) is a web site that allows contributors to share their thoughts and feelings on one or more topics or questions. There are blogs devoted to countless topics and issues of concern. Comments are posted in reverse chronological order (i.e., the most recent entry is listed first) and can be read by anyone who has access and logs on to the site. According to www.technorati.com, there are currently over 70 million blogs with estimates that this number will continue to double every six months.

Yet a third venue on the technological horizon is the social *network* world of Facebook. A staple in the lives of college students, it is estimated that approximately 85% of students in supported colleges have an active profile on Facebook — an estimated 3.85 million students. It has also been reported that roughly 60% of these students log in *daily*, 85% log in at least once a week, and 93% log in at least once a month (www.techcrunch.com).

Consider the Differences

As we think about the variety of technological options that can be used to engage students in their own learning, there is also a need to think about how these various venues might be used appropriately. Each has a series of relative advantages and limitations. Consider, for example the differences that exist in the process of writing a note to a friend using a pen and paper, sending an email, creating a blog entry, and writing a research paper. Each of these varied types of writing have unique characteristics that allow them to be used for very specific purposes and audiences, and with differing expectations:



A personal note, written with a pen and paper, is most often intended to communicate personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas to one individual. The writing process generally requires a high level of planning before actually putting pen to paper.



communication.

Emails have greatly impacted our styles of written communication. They are often written quickly and spontaneously (and sometimes regrettably) and are directed to one or more individuals of interest. Punctuation and wording styles are often victims in this quick mode of



communication.

Blogs provide a forum for chronologically sequential communication on topics of interest. The writing on blogs can range from lengthy essays to quick, brief responses to the work of others. Quite often, bloggers will use specialized and commonly known abbreviations to express their ideas.



The research paper is, by far, one of the most formal forms of writing. The content is gathered from a variety of sources and organized in response to specifically defined topics. The writing is presented in a manner that complies with conventions regarding organization, sentence structure, tense, syntax, punctuation, and reference citation.

Options for Wiki, Blog, and Facebook Learning

Maximizing Wikipedia

Wikipedia is often identified by faculty members as the "source that cannot be used in the creation of research papers." This pronouncement is made because of the general perception that the information shared on open content sites simply cannot be trusted (i.e., there is no oversight in regard to the accuracy of the information shared).

One way of turning the tables in this situation is to challenge your students to create one or more Wikipedia sites around the content of your course. On their web site, the sponsors of Wikipedia provide specific directions for creating a new article on a new topic. Students could be asked to generate a series of topics that are related to course content and worthy of their investigation. At the end of the semester, they could be evaluated on the quality and organization of their Wikipedia article. As another approach, teams could be asked to develop their own article *and* serve as constructive critics for other groups. This interactive dialogue should increase student involvement and, ultimately, the quality of their work.



Check it out:

[www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Your first article](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Your_first_article)

Blog About It

Students often spend great amounts of time reading and responding to the information found on blog sites. Likewise, many faculty members sponsor their own blogs as a means of expressing their own thoughts and opinions on a variety of topics.

In one class offered this year, my students were asked to select and read an article on an Internet web site related to the topic of the course. They were then asked to log on to a blog site designed specifically for the course and record a response to the article that they had read. The depth of the responses was far deeper than I had expected or observed on previous assignments. I have a working hypothesis that, on some level, the blog is one of the most comfortable writing venues for millennial students—compatible with their dominant forms of communication. Blogs do have limitations but can serve as a place for recording thoughts and feelings in an informal format.

Set-up is quite easy. Check out:
<https://www.blogger.com/start>

Face(book) Realities

As a recent Facebook convert, I must admit that I am impressed with the level of participation engendered by this social network resource. For example, within 12 hours of registering with Facebook, I received my first response from a former student. She was enrolled in a class that I taught in China last year. She was requesting to become one of my Facebook "friends." A friend is a Facebook designation that can be granted to another person. Through this approval process, that person then gains access to the information on your home page. It was quite an eye opener to observe how this network extends around the globe with lightning pace.

The registration process for Facebook is quick and simple and can be completed in a matter of minutes. After that, you are able to search for friends, family, students, and long lost acquaintances. It is surprising to see the range of individuals who are using this mechanism as a means of communication and networking.

In the classroom, Facebook can be used as a means of communicating with students about upcoming events and assignments and serve as a forum for dialogue on relevant issues. Facebook has a mechanism that allows users to create "groups" around common interests. You could create a group and invite members of the class to participate. It would be an optional experience but would also provide one additional way to connect with students and to engage them in the process and content of your course offerings. Check it out: www.facebook.com

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