

# **Reporting Contemporary Issues: Use of Ohio Northern University English Department's Wireless Computer Classroom**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the implementation of a new mobile, wireless computer classroom in the English Department of Ohio Northern University and the development of an advanced journalism class to employ that technology. In addition to the conventional reporting techniques used in the class, the students created and maintained their own individual web log sites and reported on stories occurring on campus as well as reacted to events of the day occurring around them. The introduction of this form of personal journalism was made possible by the availability and transportability of new laptop computers hooked into the World Wide Web via a wireless network connection in the English Department. Creation of those individual "blog" sites and the advantages they brought to the teaching of journalism made the new course both enjoyable and profitable for both the students and the teacher.

## **Reporting Contemporary Issues: Use of Ohio Northern University English Department's Wireless Computer Classroom**

Over the course of the 2002 school year, Ohio Northern University's English Department proposed the creation of a mobile, wireless computing classroom to be used by students taking writing classes. As envisioned, the mobile classroom would double the number of students who could have access to computers at any one time within the department. In reality, the procurement would have a greater multiplying effect by turning each of four standard classrooms into computer labs. ONU's administration agreed to the proposal and 26 Dell Inspiron laptop computers, a recharging cart to house them, and a wireless network to support the system were purchased and installed in the English Department.

In order to maximize the exposure of the students to these new platforms faculty members in the department sought ways to incorporate the new technology into existing classes. In the journalism major (one of five the department offers) the arrival of the wireless system coincided with the launch of a new course offering for the 2002-03 academic year: Reporting Contemporary Issues.

Reporting Contemporary Issues is an advanced reporting class that takes students outside the classroom, into the surrounding community, and ultimately out onto the Internet to research and develop more complex, in-depth news stories. These stories are then posted to each individual student's own weblog (blog) page along with continual updates as their stories progress. This upper division course offers students who are already familiar with working on the campus newspaper, the Northern Review, an opportunity to explore other emerging forms of journalism, along with honing their on-line reporting techniques.

Students were assigned a laptop for each class period. Because ONU has created a campus-wide network of servers that house folders for each student it was not necessary to have dedicated machines on which to maintain personal data files and research tools. Over the course of the quarter, students created extensive "favorites" lists using Microsoft Explorer and archived these sites to their network folders in order to create their own personal "journalism specific" browser tool. The students used the laptops in the classrooms as well as signed them out for evening assignments involving coverage of speeches, meetings, interviews, and cultural and sporting events in the surrounding community. Additionally, classes occasionally meet at a local coffee shop, Northern On Main, and utilized the Internet connections located along the walls in the café's restaurant area. From here, students were able to create and file stories to their Internet blog pages.

With the arrival of wireless computing capability in several other on-campus buildings, including the Heterick Memorial Library, the laptops could be deployed to virtually anywhere on ONU to assist the reporters in covering stories. Because functionality of the wireless system in the English Department is not limited to the first floor of Dukes Memorial (in actuality the signal covers the building's entire three floors) students are able to operate from any classroom or office to conduct interviews or do research. This capability permitted students to set up functional mini-news bureaus at sites outside the classroom.

The learning objectives for the class involved four components:

- Student familiarization with a computer other than the standard desktops.
- Introduction to Web publishing software.
- Introduction to creation and maintenance of a personal Weblog (blogging).
- Ease of use, as well as care and maintenance of cutting edge reporting tools.

The initial vision for using the mobile classroom in this course was as an adjunct research and repository tool for students to use in order to gain real-world, hands-on computer assisted reporting experience. More importantly, the new technology served as a motivational aid in stimulating the students to have fun and get excited about the prospect of doing the same kind of instantaneous, world-wide reporting in which their professional colleagues are engaged.

### **The Concept of Blogging**

Every day thousands of people, known as bloggers – creators of online journals called Weblogs – fill cyberspace with everything from analysis of the news to the most intensely personal observations. Although this blogging community has grown enormously, it has only recently been discovered by the mainstream news media. There, it has been either dismissed as the latest Internet fad or heralded as a force that may ultimately transform everything from journalism to the nature of the Internet itself. For those in the first category who dismiss the practice, blogging is synonymous with a “virtual water cooler” around which others with similar interests or attitudes gather to discuss the day’s events. Others in this group have described the phenomenon as akin to a bunch of students "passing notes in class." However, those who espouse the later view of its significance say that blogging is taking the Internet to the next step of instantaneous communication. They cite the tendency of bloggers to create new and vital Internet content, seemingly at a moment’s notice, and note that more importantly, that content is free and accessible to all who surf the Internet.

At the heart of this emerging debate is the blog itself. Just what is a blog? It is simplicity itself, operating within a complex system, the World Wide Web. Weblogs generally cover a particular person's life or a particular subject matter and are frequently updated by their author several times during the day. Weblogs consist of short journal entries (usually a paragraph or two) on a webpage. Each weblog entry (also known as a post) will typically contain one or more links to related material being discussed in the entry. There are also weblogs that are maintained by a team of people (collaborative blogs) and open-system blogs, which allow anyone to contribute to the blog with a moderator weeding out inappropriate posts. Often weblogs include a homepage containing the most recent entries and an archive section containing older entries. Weblogs can cover a single specific topic or simply be regular entries about the person creating the weblog, similar to an online journal. For topic-oriented weblogs, the diversity is enormous. There are quite literally hundreds of thousands of blogs already online, covering such diverse topics as politics, war, Africa, science, technology, the Internet, books, space exploration, medicine and academic life. Despite all the recent media interest, weblogs really are not all that new; they have been around since the late 1990s. However, the appearance of user-friendly software and Internet hosting sites have made blogging much easier, and led to the resulting weblog explosion.

The appearance of free, automated publishing systems on the Web has lowered the threshold of knowledge required to publish and now virtually anyone can produce his or her own version of “News You Can Use.” While the precise number of bloggers is elusive, the Blogger.com Webpage claims over a million accounts have been established and it is not the only on-ramp to the Internet for aspiring bloggers.

There are indications that blogs are also finding their way into mainstream media operations. According to media reports blog traffic soared in the days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, in many cases because bloggers were frustrated by the performance of the mainstream media and wanted to grab control of the information flow. In those confusing days, amateur journalists could go toe-to-toe with professional journalists because blogs gave them the opportunity to self-publish at little or no cost without relying on the media's gatekeepers.

Some weblogs could be considered a new kind of journalism. Many times, the entries in a weblog will discuss a news article found elsewhere and contain a link to that article. In this way, weblogs act more like the editorial section of a newspaper than the straight reporting most often associated with a traditional news article. Weblogs have been referred to as amateur journalism, and the jury is still out on this point among journalism educators. Regardless of the debate, however, some of the more popular weblogs can direct a considerable amount of traffic to newspapers by linking to individual articles. In this way, weblogs actually benefit the journalism profession by increasing traffic to the most interesting and/or well-written articles. Conversely, reporters who are interested in a specific subject matter often frequent weblogs covering the topic, in order to stay informed. At the very least blogging and journalism appear to be entering a symbiotic phase in which the best (and at times the worst) of both can speed the flow and quality of information.

As a tool in the classroom blogs offer four important elements to the emerging journalist:

- **Creative freedom.** Part of a blog's allure is its unmediated quality. The writer thinks it, writes it, and puts it out to the world.
- **Instantaneous publication.** With a Weblog, the writer hits the send key and the information is published.
- **Interactivity.** It is satisfying for a writer to get feedback from a new audience and finding his or her own site linked to others.
- **Absence of marketing constraints.** The audience finds the writer who satisfies their need for information about subjects in which they are interested.

### **How to Start a Blog?**

Fortunately, there is no enormous technological hurdle that one has to overcome before he or she can build a weblog. If someone can navigate the Web fairly easily and fill out an online form, then he or she should be able to start his or her own weblog. To create a weblog one may simply use an existing blog hosting service such as Antville, Blogger Pro, ManilaSites, Pitas.com, or Weblogger.com, which does all the work of formatting, hosting and archiving the site. The largest and oldest of publishing services is the previously mentioned Blogger.com, a Silicon Valley firm that first developed the application for internal use and released it to the wider Web world. At [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) anyone who wants to create a blog simply logs in,

chooses a password and picks one of several pre-formatted page designs. The service is free, if the user agrees to have advertising sold by Blogger.com displayed on his or her page. However, an ad-less blog is available for a fee of \$15 a year. Once the site is created, when the new blogger finds something interesting to post or wants to add commentary to his or her page, it's simply a matter of typing it onto their page, clicking the publish button, and instantly updating their blog.

Blogs are not just for the amateur. Newspapers, magazines, and other media increasingly use blogging techniques to provide information in new ways and not only extend their reach to broader audiences, but also bring new and different voices into their circle. Serious writers have begun to use blogs as independent platforms for their ideas, uncensored by publishers and other intermediaries. Among the most notable are: former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan [<http://www.andrewsullivan.com>], new technology thinker David Weinberger [<http://hyperorg.com/blogger/>], law professor and commentator on current affairs Glenn Reynolds [<http://www.instapundit.com>], and futurist and libertarian Virginia Postrel [<http://www.dynamist.com>]. Finally, for the student of on-line journalism, Matthew Drudge's Drudge Report [<http://www.drudgereport.com>], in which the Monica Lewinsky story was first reported, is in reality a weblog. As an extra inducement to visit their sites each of these well known bloggers has in turn provided a list of other blog sites which they think their readers may find interesting.

### **Swimming in a Sea of Words**

As the number of weblogs increases, many directories and search tools have emerged to help people locate blogs on particular topics. Some of large blog directories include: Weblogs.com [<http://www.weblogs.com>], BlogHop [<http://www.bloghop.com>], and the Open Directory's weblog links [[http://dmoz.org/Computers/Internet/On\\_the\\_Web/Weblogs/](http://dmoz.org/Computers/Internet/On_the_Web/Weblogs/)]. There also topic-specific weblog directories such as NYC bloggers [<http://nycbloggers.com>], Boston blogs [<http://www.bostonblogs.com/>], blogs by women [<http://bonni.net/blogsbywomen>], and library weblogs [<http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html>]. A list of directories can be found in writerswrite.com's new blogging section [<http://www.writerswrite.com/blogging/>]. In the search department, DayPop.com [<http://www.daypop.com/>] is a useful search engine that can search weblogs and their contents. DayPop can also list the day's most popular articles to which weblogs are linking. BlogTracker [<http://www.dansanderson.com/blogtracker/>] and Weblogs.com [<http://weblogs.com>] help readers kept track of recently changed weblogs.

Several search engines and ranking systems specialize in Weblogs: MIT's Media Lab maintains Blogdex [<http://blogdex.media.mit.edu>]. Blogger.com [<http://www.blogger.com>] has a search engine for blogs created by its software and/or hosted on its site. Eatonweb [<http://portal.eatonweb.com>] organizes Weblogs by subject and has a keyword search system. Finally, Blog Finder [<http://www.blogfinder.com>] has a portal arrangement, by clusters of subjects, as well as a search engine.

### **Final Thoughts**

Blogging is definitely a new and interesting way to convey information. Audiences like it because weblogs are easy to read and they can find information very quickly. For student writers, blogging can provide the additional benefits of new and interesting ways to publish and help them realize that an audience exists for their writing. As more media companies create weblogs or specialty sections, there will be more work for journalists and writers. Even if writing teachers or those in the communication arts do not start blogging themselves, they should read some blogs and become aware of this new growing on-line format. For those in the field of journalism, they must follow and understand this new trend. Eventually, the fervor over blogging will fade, but it is likely to continue to remain a popular format by writers and the media for presenting information and a convenient tool for readers who enjoy summaries of the day's news with commentary, and those who just enjoy reading views other than that of the mainstream media.

Weblogging is changing our view of the world because people are now writing about their own views. Instead of accepting the media edited version, bloggers are taking the time to collect, rearrange, codify and publish their own version of what they see and hear.

### **Lessons Learned**

The Reporting Contemporary Issues class proved successful with the students. Its success was not, however, because of reliance upon new technologies; rather its success was the result of stretching the boundaries of what students may have come to expect from a journalism writing class. Here they had immediate gratification from knowing the work they produced was published and immediately available to a potentially greater readership than they had ever imagined. By writing everyday, a student's writing improves, their thinking improves, and more importantly so do their critical thinking skills. The lure of blogging in the classroom is that it offers a return to a time when the written word was supreme in the dissemination of information. Here is a media form that lets anyone write at any length about any subject they care deeply about. Technology simply opens that door for the student journalist and the world beckons them forward.

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