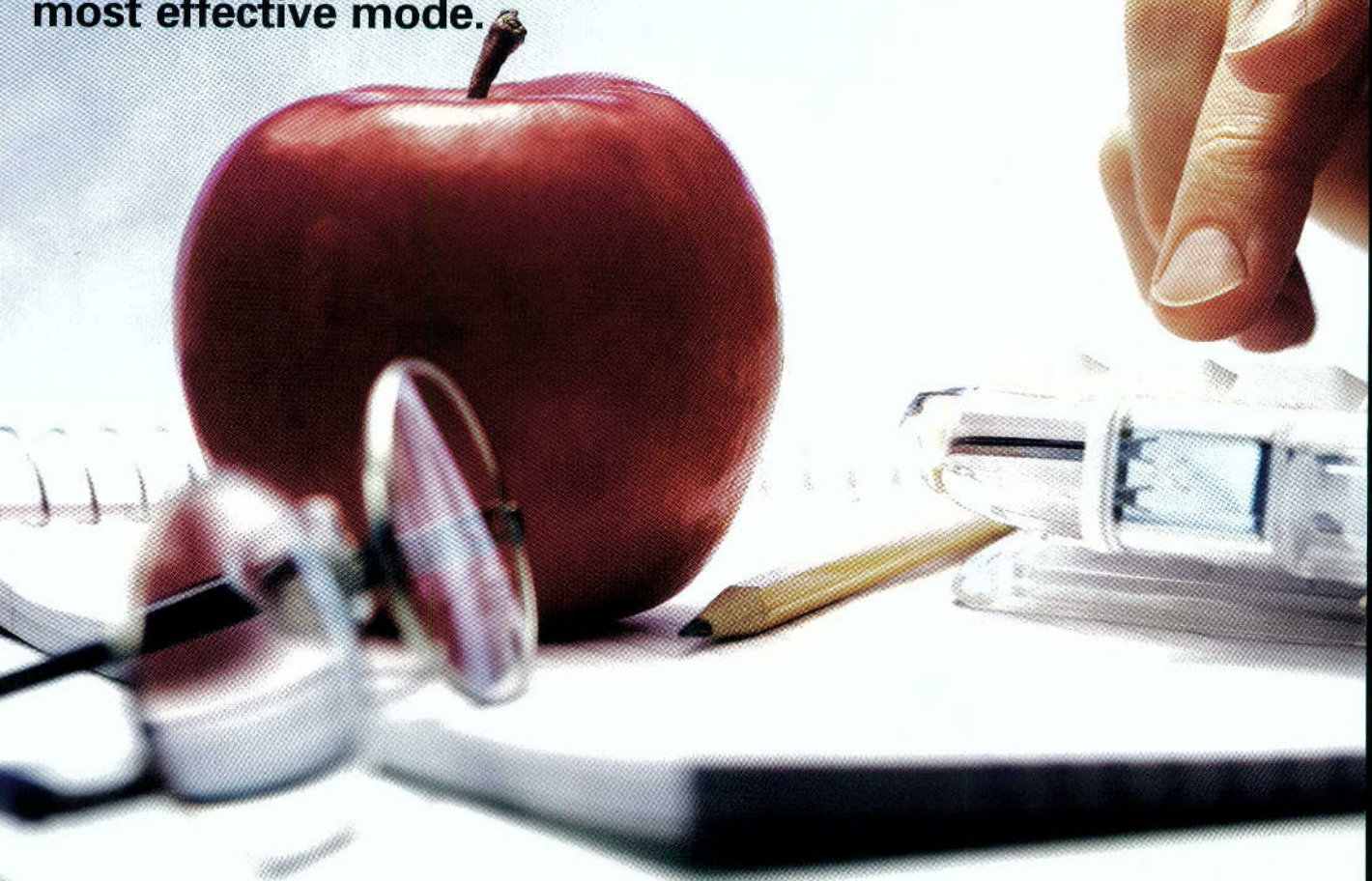


# The New Student-Teacher Channel

If self-disclosure between teacher and student can boost learning outcomes, **blogging** may be its most effective mode.



BY VERNON B. HARPER JR.

**T**he Web is no longer a novel ingredient in the learning experience; it is intrinsic and constant. In fact, a host of new technologies has sparked an age of inexpensive, effortless, and universal Web access in the classroom, while wireless devices and protocols have steadily moved downstream and down the socioeconomic ladder. With this incredible availability, educators and learners are brought together in common effective, intellectual, and pedagogical planes that have never existed before.

Blogging, of course, is one of the Web's

more recent developments. In *The State of Blogging* (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005, [www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_bloggin\\_data.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_bloggin_data.pdf)), Lee Rainie explains that over 32 million Web users now read blogs regularly, a 58 percent jump from early 2004. Extremely popular with journalists and media watchers, blogging can be thought of as an unfiltered perspective on countless topics. Consisting largely of personal commentary, blogs are available to anyone with Internet access. Once posted online, practically anyone is free to "post" a response

to the "blogger." And although blogs are often confused with listservs, threads, and bulletin boards, blogging software offers more control over the path of the Internet dialog, and it is this distinction that has exponentially driven blog popularity.

So, it should come as no surprise that educators have begun to consider blogging for classroom purposes. Some believe that the blogs open an avenue of student self-disclosure that was previously inaccessible, and many argue that self-disclosure is an underutilized tool in the repertoire of most modern educators.





Photo by Lloyd Sutton/Masterfile

disclosure is the norm reciprocity, which is a feeling of obligation “to reciprocate with our own disclosure when another person reveals himself. . . .”

Yet, although using disclosure to forge a bond with students echoes common sense, educators often avoid personal revelations in the classroom because they can be quite unpredictable. For example, Valerie Downs, Mitch Javidi, and Jon Nussbaum, in “An Analysis of Teachers’ Verbal Communication Within the College Classroom: Use of Humor, Self-Disclosure, and Narratives,” (*Communication Education*, 1988), explain that instructors often use humorous disclosures to gain favor with a class; however, such disclosures often sacrifice classroom productivity. What’s more, it would be untrue to say that every learning experience requires extensive instructor self-disclosure. For instance, it is doubtful that young children need to learn of a teacher’s marital conflict or battle with depression, but with older learners, some educators have found that personal revelations can be quite effective tools to generate a positive learning environment. Gary Goldstein and Victor Benassi, writing in “The Relation Between Teacher Self-Disclosure and Student Classroom Participation,” (*Teaching of Psychology*, 1994), also found that classroom participation improves with instructor self-disclosure.

Additionally, in “Using Teacher Self-Disclosure as an Instructional Tool” (*Communication Teacher*, 2004), Jacob Cayanus describes how “positive teacher self-disclosure can result in students viewing the teacher as friendly and warm, which in turn helps create a positive learning environment.” Nevertheless, achieving reciprocity and the positive learning outcomes associated with self-disclosure is no easy feat; students possess a variety of introverted and cautious personalities that can be extremely difficult to overcome, and an instructor’s attempt to bring students’ views out into the open is often met with resentment. But blogging can potentially aid instructors by creating a unique avenue for open disclosure without the instructor’s direct presence.

## Blogging and Learning Outcomes: The Focus Groups

Yet, does blogging actually influence self-disclosure or learning? To find out, a series of focus groups were conducted with collegiate upperclassmen from Christopher Newport University (VA) following eight weeks of blogging by the instructor. The blogging experience and subsequent focus group responses reveal a variety of insightful clues and caveats for successfully employing blogs in your own institution’s or district’s classrooms.

After receiving institutional approval to conduct the focus groups, an appropriate collegiate course of upperclassmen was selected. The students were given the option to participate in the blog or complete another course assignment. The instructor’s weekly reflections of course content and current events were uploaded through readily available blog freeware from Google’s [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com) (now [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)). Fifteen of the 30 students elected to post responses to the instructor’s blog. Over the course of eight weeks, seven blogs were written by the instructor, which generated 73 response posts by the students. Each of the focus groups was conducted by the instructor and composed of approximately three students.

Self-disclosure was the first issue explored in the focus groups, and the students indicated that the blog did provide a distinctive avenue for the type of reciprocal disclosure mentioned above. One student remarked: “I expressed more. . . . You can even take the comments that people said in class and think about [them] in relation to your own life and then come out with something in the blog. Then, you are kinda [sic] revealing a little bit more yourself.”

One of the most powerful observations was that students who were typically non-participatory revealed extensively in their response posts. The following student commentary gives a clue to the behavior: “I find it a lot easier to express myself through writing than [sic] verbally, and a lot of times in class it takes me along [sic] time

## Self-Disclosure in the Classroom

Self-disclosure can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, but one of the most comprehensive is offered by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in their work *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973). The authors paint a clear picture of interpersonal interaction, and they consider self-disclosure to be the exchange of information pertaining to oneself that serves to enhance intimacy. One outcome of self-



to think of something sensible that I want to say and by that time the conversation has moved on. So, I have more time to sit and think when I am writing.”



**“Enhanced critical thinking has always been the hallmark of great learning experiences, and it appears that blogging can play a significant role in developing this skill.”**

—Vernon Harper Jr., Christopher Newport University

In *Online Counseling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals* (Elsevier, 2004), Internet theorists Ron Kraus, Jason Zack, and George Stricker point to a “zone of reflection” as a significant difference between face-to-face and online interaction. With a zone of reflection, students appear to process information at a much deeper cognitive level. Said one focus group participant: “I started to see [theories] more than just in the classroom. I would be watching a movie and I could analyze it. . . . Anywhere, I would just be like that is so and so theory. . . . I think it made us a little bit more critical about everything we learned in the class.”

Enhanced critical thinking has always been the hallmark of great learning experiences, and it appears that blogging can play a significant role in developing this skill. Even with these significant strengths,

reveal in the classroom may expose a great deal online. Interestingly, these shy students do not believe that online self-disclosure should be brought back into the face-to-face classroom. One of the focus group questions dealt specifically with the issue of an instructor referring to a student’s post in class. The students generally indicated that once a disclosure is made in the blog, it should stay in the blog: “Some people are a little bit more private about the things they write [online] and there might be . . . an embarrassment factor . . . so [it was all right] as long they knew you were going to share it [in class] and as long as it wasn’t . . . an attack environment.”

This is an important caution for educators using a blog, and there is some evidence in the literature to support the idea that

people view online interactions very differently from face-to-face interactions (Robert Cathcart and Gary Gumpert, “Mediated Interpersonal Communication: Toward A New Typology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1983).

Another important blogging concern is the explicit control that must be exercised by the educator. Just as in a face-to-face classroom, students will reveal inappropriate content or comment in an inefficacious manner. Instructors must be quick and diligent in their management of messages posted to a blog. As Susan Hendrick writes in “Counseling and Self Disclosure” (*Self-Disclosure: Theory, Research, and Therapy*, Valerian Derlega and John Berg, eds., Plenum Press, 1987), “It seems essential that we not take the word *reciprocity* too literally. Reciprocity

refers to a mutual giving and taking . . . however, it does not mean *equality*.” In other words, an educator’s blog establishes the flow of subsequent response posts by the students, and the proper utilization of that authority influences the ultimate learning outcomes of critical thinking and disclosure.

A variety of tools are available through the blog software to aid in this new type of classroom management. First, the educator should always select the “e-mail posts” option. In doing so, each new response post will be sent electronically to the instructor so that improper posts can be quickly removed. Another important control pertains to whether students can respond to the posts made by their peers. By allowing this option, the blog migrates into a typical discussion thread, and the instructor no longer guides the blog. Although this democratic approach to the blog can be quite helpful in some situations, most instructors will want to focus their students’ attention upon a specific topic.

**Blogging: The Ability to Extend Learning**

When all of the issues are taken into consideration, a blog can be an incredible tool to generate self-disclosure between educator and student. And although a blog may be more advisable with mature learners, with the content controls afforded by the blog software, it is also an appropriate technique to introduce younger learners to online interaction. In the end, a blog extends the learning experience well beyond the face-to-face classroom, creating a more complete learning experience. **THE**

For more information on blogging in the classroom, visit [educational.blogs.com](http://educational.blogs.com).

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Blogging promotes reciprocal self-disclosure.

the blogging experience also revealed some important cautions for educators.

**Caveats and Considerations for Implementing Blogs**

As mentioned previously, blogging generates reciprocal self-disclosure between the instructor and student, and more introverted students who typically do not

reveal in the classroom may expose a great deal online. Interestingly, these shy students do not believe that online self-disclosure should be brought back into the face-to-face classroom. One of the focus group questions dealt specifically with the issue of an instructor referring to a student’s post in class. The students generally indicated that once a disclosure is made in the blog, it should stay in the blog: “Some people are a little bit more private about the things they write [online] and there might be . . . an embarrassment factor . . . so [it was all right] as long they knew you were going to share it [in class] and as long as it wasn’t . . . an attack environment.”

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