

# Using Blogs in Latin American Studies Seminars

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*ABSTRACT: Although there is extensive research on applying blogs to higher education, there is little available to assess its application to teaching the Latin American Studies seminar in particular. This article makes a preliminary assessment of the value of a blog in helping to meet two challenges posed by the Latin American Studies seminar. These challenges are exposing students to different cultures and accommodating the broad range of student interests and subject matter. Evidence for this assessment is centered on a classroom (i.e. not online) course led by the author in which a blog was used as a shared site for students to upload assignments and to discuss guest speakers and other assigned experiences. This evidence includes focus groups, interviews, and personal experience, as well as secondary literature. This article concludes that the blog in this case is well suited to answer the particular challenges of a Latin American Studies seminar because it enhances the interactivity and active learning implied by the term “seminar”.*

## Introduction

Some educators can recall from decades ago the chaos they beheld each time they opened the door to their department’s AV supply room. Dusty machines for projecting and magnifying dominated the disorder, amid cords, slides, film rolls, and rolled-up maps leaning like jousters’ swords into the corner. Today we are more likely to go for our teaching tools to our computer hard drive or through an internet connection rather than to a closet down the hall. Although computer-based educational technology seems more tidy and compact, our source for tools over the last 20 years can still seem chaotic given the vast and rapidly changing choices available. Thus, in these times part of being a successful teacher involves evaluating these computer-based tools to decide which improve the quality of learning of our classes and which tools are merely new. This article assesses one such tool for rapidly updating a course web page—the blog—in terms of how it may improve the teaching of the Latin American Studies seminar.

Most everyone is by now familiar with the idea of blogs, given that the term itself was designated six years ago by the dictionary publishers Merriam-Webster as the word of the year. There are now beyond 40 million users of these easy and accessible web-publishing platforms worldwide, and a new blog is launched every second. (Barnes, 2005) Among these millions of users are students and professors. Blogs have been adapted in higher education because of their easy access, rapid editing, and their ability to append comments to the published content. A growing pedagogical literature has more rigorously confirmed the utility of the blog, both in higher education in general and in the case of specific subject matters. However, within this growing pedagogical literature on blogs there is a relative dearth of information on applying blogs to the job of teaching Latin American Studies, and in particular to the introductory seminar course.

The introductory seminar within the field of Latin American Studies poses two daunting challenges to educators. First, these classes teach about other cultures that are heretofore unfamiliar to students who are typically freshmen or sophomores. Second, the seminar is a first passage into an interdisciplinary field that connects students with a wide range of backgrounds and interests. In fact, one objective of this course is to develop an interest in each student and lead them to specialize in later coursework in one of the many possible scholarly and

artistic approaches to understanding Latin America. Thus, this second challenge for the introductory seminar is presenting material from many disciplines and in many formats and encouraging a diverse class of students to engage and interact.

This paper explores the value of using a blog in a Latin American Studies seminar course for the purpose of gathering, sharing, and discussing both subject matter assigned to students and student written work. The course addressed here is an introductory class and is conducted in a traditional classroom setting as opposed to online. To explore the value of blogs in Latin American Studies seminars I rely on secondary research as background, but focus primarily on my experience in leading a course. I also weigh the feedback from surveys and focus groups from other faculty and students involved in this course in assessing the apparent benefits and drawbacks of this technology. To focus the assessment, I compare the outcomes using the blog versus using institutional course software (D2L, Blackboard) for the same purpose. Therefore, the central question in this paper is whether a blog is a more successful means than is institutional course software of addressing the challenges of the Latin American Studies seminar.

I conclude that a blog is an effective way to further the interdisciplinary ideal of Latin American Studies courses and is particularly effective in introducing undergraduates to the features of cultures that are different from their own. Assigning students to make their written work a post to a blog, or assigning them to comment on other students' posts, also lends itself to achieving other typical course objectives such as interactivity among students and the study of the visual and performing arts produced by the cultures of Latin America. My intent is to induce further experimentation in the classroom with this promising teaching tool and to suggest that more rigorous empirical study of this tool is worthwhile.

### **Literature Review on Teaching Latin America and Blogs in Education**

Recommended designs for teaching the Latin American Studies seminar will typically call for an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to the course design and content. One reason for this is the help that an interdisciplinary approach offers to students confronting a number of new and distant cultures for the first time. According to one researcher, "an interdisciplinary approach helps to overcome the challenge of conveying the diversity of the region without simplification or overwhelming students with information." (Novoa, 2007) Lozano-Alonzo et al. (2006) also argue that the greater value in an interdisciplinary Latin American course is not merely in increasing the quantity of subject matter that is mastered, but rather resides in higher levels of knowledge acquisition through "an intellectual dialogue" between the frameworks of disciplines. In other words, the diverse nature of knowledge bound by Latin America is a means to an epistemological end, which is a more sophisticated sort of wisdom. Finally, the Department of Education deems an interdisciplinary approach as a "critical" element in the Area Studies programs, which include Latin America, that the federal government has promoted since 1965. (Schneider, 2000). In short, most educators contend or assume that Latin American Studies seminars should be interdisciplinary in their approach and content, and some pedagogical research buttresses that belief. The argument developed below is that blogs are an effective on-line platform for courses that strive for this interdisciplinary approach.

The Introduction to Latin American Studies course is typically labeled as a seminar and—true to the meaning of the term—aims at interactivity among its students as one of its objectives. The specific objective is for collaboration on assigned projects and dialogue in reacting to class content to take place between students, ideally with little to no mediation by the professor. As a means of furthering this objective, the blog is a promising new tool according to some research. Andergassen et al. (2009) finds a growing consensus that "social software" such as blogs are effective in achieving what is termed student-centered learning, an example of which is dialogue among students about an assignment through the written comments that are left by each student and posted below the original article or post. In this body of research, blogs are seen as effective platforms or spaces for interactivity among students, and this interactivity is a means to desirable categories of knowledge (e.g. discursive). According to

Williams and Jacobs (2004), there are also other benefits. “Blogs are more successful in promoting interactivity that is conversational; a mode of interaction more conducive to improved student and teacher relationships, active learning, higher order thinking, and greater flexibility in teaching and learning more generally.”

I would also contend that the interactivity that occurs among the students in a Latin American Studies Seminar is another aid to addressing the challenge of teaching the diversity of cultures in Latin America and the range of disciplines that address the region. Given the wide range of interests among students, it helps engagement to offer students choices of topics and learning materials, such as assigned texts. These allow students to pursue their area of expertise and indulge new interests within the field of Latin America. However, more important to the goal of addressing diversity, the students post the results of their assignment, such as a paper with relevant images, on the blog. This makes the students’ work accessible to all other students, who are then assigned to react to other students’ posts. This exposes all students to a wide range of subject matter and the variety of ways to interpret it. Also, since the material is presented by other students to whom they make comments, the material can often be more engaging. In other words, students learn well when they learn from each other.

In sum, existing literature points to the value of an interdisciplinary approach to learning and interactivity among students both for higher education in general and in teaching about Latin America in particular. At the same time research on the efficacy of blogs in education suggests that its accessibility and ease of use make it an effective tool in achieving the objectives of cultural understanding and interdisciplinary learning. Therefore, the use of a blog in the Latin American Studies Seminar shows promise based on existing research. What remains is to evaluate the actual use of the blog in such a course.

### **Test Case: A Latin American Seminar Using a Blog**

The specific question to be weighed in evaluating a test case is whether incorporating a blog into the course design of a Latin American Studies seminar can further the common objectives of such a course. As an experiment that contributes a first step toward research into that question, I designed and taught a class in the fall of 2009 within the International Relations program at my university that was called Introduction to Latin American Studies. This class is being developed as the only required course among a variety of combinations of other courses that make up the list of requirements in a proposed Latin American Studies minor at the university. The program itself includes the goal to be interdisciplinary and to serve as “a broad introduction to history, society, and culture” (cited in “Proposed Revisions to the Latin American Studies Minor”, unpublished report, Sept. 2009). Given this, the design of the class was to serve students from a wide variety of backgrounds and majors and rely on assignments that allowed students to choose and pursue a variety of topics. The course also was conceived to involve personal visits to the class by a variety of experts on Latin America. These visiting experts included both faculty from a variety of disciplines and community members. In other words, this class gathered students, several faculty, and community members from off campus, all of whom shared little more in common than an interest in some aspect of Latin America. This feature of the class posed the question of how to make a workspace that accommodated diversity.

For this class, which met twice a week, I used both the centralized campus course software brand-named Desire2Learn or D2L (education research will term this technology computer-mediated communication, or CMC) and a single blog using Wordpress software that is offered through and supported by the campus learning technology staff members. All of the students were given the same access to post, comment, and edit the site to which I also had access. The site was not restricted to only class members or the campus; it was available to anyone with access to the Internet (the URL is [www.blogs.uww.edu/introtolatinamerica](http://www.blogs.uww.edu/introtolatinamerica)).

#### *Interdisciplinary Learning*

Thus, one goal in using the blog in a Latin American Studies seminar is to provide a space for interdisciplinary

learning, which is a term understood in practice as providing students experience in researching and writing from a variety of academic disciplines. Another means to the interdisciplinary goal were the visits by other faculty and guests from outside the campus.

There were seven out of the 30 class sessions in which these guests made a presentation to our class, four of whom were faculty from Women's Studies, Sociology, Modern Languages, and Social Work departments. For these sessions with a visitor, I posted an introduction to the speaker and their topic to the blog. Students were assigned after the class session to post a reaction to the visitor's presentation roughly equivalent to a page in length that summarized the main points, and also included two other components. The reaction was to include, first, a question that the presentation provoked, and, second, a description of how this topic connected with, or was related to, other assigned material in the class. Often this material would be background reading or class discussions on the broad history or themes of Latin America, such as the legacy of colonial control or racial mixing. The blog format, which is as easy to gain access to as any other website, was chosen in part because it was easily shared among the faculty participating as guests to the class sessions. The intent was to use a platform to which all participating faculty members and guests could obtain access.

### *Collaboration and Interactivity*

With the interdisciplinary goals of such a course in mind, several assignments provided students the opportunity to pursue topics of their choosing—either locations or themes—within the broad field of Contemporary Latin America. However, these projects submitted by students were used to further another goal, that of interactivity. This goal was pursued through requiring students to react to the work of other students and not merely from the instructor. Thus, there were two occasions when students were assigned to post the results of their independent research to our shared blog. One research project required students to choose among five salient topics in the current events of Latin America—narcotics trafficking or environmental movements were two popular topics—and then summarize some aspect of that topic in a post. The other requirement was to attend a cultural event related to Latin America in the area and then describe the event in a post that also included images. Those students choosing the same current events topic or cultural event worked together in researching or attending the events. However, each composed their own post.

Once the post was published online, each student was assigned to comment on at least two posts by other students. This requirement was meant to encourage interaction among students. A combination of the ease of access and of the appealing visual quality of the blog was meant to encourage more frequent and longer use of the blog beyond the required minimum posts and comments.

### *Culture and Visual Arts*

The objectives of this course, as is typical of most introductions to Latin America, included an exploration of the rich and accomplished cultures (in the sense of art and expression) of the region, including an exploration of the many cultures of Latin America and a study of their artistic production. The class blog was used as an aid to understanding these cultures and was an effective way to sample the visual and performing arts that are a necessary part of any class introducing the Latin American region. Students were granted flexibility in their choice of assignments to pursue a particular culture and location. In presenting their research, students were to include digital image files. I also posted image, sound, and video samples in the posts that provided background to art and popular cultural topics I taught in class, or in the posts I made on items that captured my interest and related to the class content. In addition to easy access and easy browsing, the blog platform provides an easy way for students and instructors to upload and share media files for music and video. Music samples of Latin American genres from samba and tango to reggaeton and duranguense were playable using software embedded in the blog post. One guest to class sessions was a group that teaches and performs capoeira, which is an Afro-Brazilian form of performance that combines martial arts with dance. Their visit was videotaped by the campus

technical support staff, and the link to the video file posted to the blog. Thus the experience in class was also archived for students to re-visit if desired as they wrote and submitted their reactions.

### Assessing the Blog

The use of a blog as a shared space for assignments and interaction in a Latin American Studies seminar was intended to encourage interdisciplinary work, interactivity among students, and to aid their understanding of the various cultures of the region. The assumption was that this platform would be more effective in encouraging those goals than centralized course software or a classroom-only space. Each of these aims will be assessed in turn.

#### *Interdisciplinary Learning*

The blog format provided at least two advantages over a class approach that relied solely on class-time interaction and paper assignments, or solely on the course software. These advantages stem from the open access and the comment feature. The open access allowed other participating faculty to visit the site, find the post regarding their visit, view student comments on their visit, and even post their own comments. Granted, it would also be possible to post an introduction to the visitor to a forum (or discussion) feature of course software such as D2L or Blackboard to which students could comment. However, access by faculty would require the course instructor to enroll other guest faculty as visitors to the site, while non-campus visitors would only have access, if at all, after more lengthy and cumbersome steps. Despite these clear advantages, faculty and other guests apparently went to the site very little. Based on a survey of the participating guest faculty in this particular course under discussion, only one of the guests visited the site and only one time. More promotion of the site by the course instructor among the guests, including perhaps a request that they comment on student comments, would probably increase this usage.

The posting of assignments and the requirement that students comment on the work of each other was intended to fulfill the objective of interdisciplinary learning. The results of these assignments were promising, based on student interviews after the class. The three out of 14 students interviewed after the class reported that they read more posts than assigned, that they consulted the blog at times out of interest beyond the need to fulfill class requirements, and mentioned that they were exposed to topics they had not known of before. They mentioned the brevity of articles and the ease of scrolling through past posts at one location as reasons why they were willing and happy to browse the blog. Even after a semester had elapsed since the Latin American Studies seminar ended, interviewed students were still able to recall some knowledge of certain topics outside their speciality, and these were topics they learned about through reading other student posts on the blog. Examples of such topics included blog posts on the tango or *narcocorridos*, a type of popular music that celebrates drug cartels. "It is a good way to see lots of little bits of everything," summarized one student (J. Riemer, personal communication, April 21, 2010).

#### *Collaboration and Interactivity*

The goal of interactivity in this course was pursued mainly through the work of students reading and writing reactions as comments to the posts of other students on the blog. In total there were 209 comments on the blog, which averages 14 comments per student. Students in post-class interviews reported that they routinely read many more posts than the ones they eventually wrote reactions to, and also read the reactions of other students. Meanwhile, other students did fail to fulfill the minimum requirements for comments, but the rate of this failure was no higher than presumably would also occur if central course software were used instead of a blog.

One student also provided extra-curricular posts out of a spirit of sharing her experiences with other students and the public. This student transmitted a letter from a great aunt who lives near Lake Maracaibo in Venezuela

and another post was a narrative of walking through a Milwaukee neighborhood into which she weaved her own family's history and also changes in immigrant enclaves. Kim (2008) asserts that writing assignments on a blog with open access may inhibit participation due to anxiety. However, the case of this course tentatively suggests that willingness and rewards of interactivity among students was improved by using a blog as the gathering space for student work as compared to the use of a less accessible course software such as D2L.

#### *Visual and Performing Arts*

Students did use the blog to hear examples of music through embedded players. They also reported that the ability to easily post and view digital images of sculpture and painting was an advantage of the blog over the traditional course software. Such media can also be made accessible through centralized course software, but mainly through links and new windows that students reported are less inviting and slower.

#### *Other effects of blog on learning outcomes*

Rather than reporting greater anxiety by virtue of having the posts visible to other students and, in theory, anyone with internet access, students reported after the class that the public nature of their work encouraged them to take more care and more pleasure in the work they submitted. They expressed pleasure in the cases when non-students browsing the blog made comments, including a reader from Brazil. However, the writing was far from error-free in the case of several students. Students also appreciated the experience with posting to a blog because they expect those skills learned such as linking to other websites and including other media to be applicable to their professional work in the future.

#### *Disadvantages and cautions*

The blog posts were short, up to 400 words, and therefore do not allow a fuller development of ideas nor encourage the ability to communicate more sophisticated and substantive arguments. It is also more difficult to provide feedback to students compared to written work on paper or the digital word processing files that allow inserted comments. This shortcoming could be overcome by the effort of requiring a digital word processing file as well, or by the professor making a copy of the post that could then be commented upon. I used a feature in the online grade book that permits only brief, overall comments for each graded assignment.

The fact that the blog is not password protected also exposes the participants and the institution to more risk of copyright violations if they quote from works or upload images and other visual media. Copyright law makes a distinction between material on the internet that is or is not password protected.

### **Conclusion**

Instructors in higher education are rightfully astounded and perhaps intimidated by the variety of rapidly changing digital teaching tools at their disposal. Among the elements of the so-called social media, the blog would seem to offer more effective means to overcome the challenges presented by teaching the Latin American Studies seminar. In other words, the blog is a valuable aid in the challenge of introducing the variety of distinct cultures of the region to U.S. students, and also effective in presenting the variety of disciplinary approaches to understanding Latin America to a wide range of students. A one-course experiment in the use of a blog as a means to the goals of interdisciplinary learning, interactivity among students, and exploring the region's culture produced, overall, encouraging results. Like much of the research on blogs in higher education, this case should be followed by additional research before hard conclusions can be drawn. Rest assured that when such results are produced, someone will post them on their blog.

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