

Blogging as an Educational Tool Cynthia James

As people who relish an *ole blague*, we Trinians should be more conversant with the power of blogs. Not that they come from the same root. Ole blaguing, our favourite pastime is derived from the French *blaguer* to gossip, whereas blog is a new portmanteau, media coinage from two words 'web' and 'log.' All the same, we have always been culturally ahead of the communications game, and Trini blaguing and blogging have a lot in common – every time one logs on one can have the latest update. Yes, blogs and blagues are inventories of new additions to a common conversation. Of course, a prime advantage of both is that high and low persons can participate; they can be formal as well as informal. Needless to say, their power to educate is equaled only by their power to destroy and to misinform.

However, the challenge of us educators is how to bring our propensity for *blague* closer to blog in order to stimulate learning; how to align oral tradition, in this case our propensity for *mauvaise langue*, with reading, writing, viewing, and listening, simultaneously on the same page by enlisting the power of the computer. For, to include video and audio is no technological challenge. Podcasting and embedding of video and MP3 files on the otherwise traditionally silent webpage is now a natural part of teaching and learning in Indonesia and Taiwan.

The biggest boon of blogging is that it can be used to generate higher levels of analysis, critical thinking and evaluation. A blog begins with a topic, a focus that the individual blogger initiates. Depending on the regulators he or she sets up, contributors can add comments from their standpoints in the conversation. The tone of a blog is often set by the chain of preceding comments, but can diverge into tangential but related newness.

And although a blog is usually a communal space for a group of people who share the same interests, because its conversations take place in cyberspace, it is open to anyone who finds it. Of course, the openness of cyberspace makes it vulnerable to spam and adverse comment. It also makes bloggers liable to libel. But the initiator can decide what comments to trash and even whether to take the entire blog down.

However, since the point of setting up a blog is to generate comment in the first place, expansion of an interesting topic from multi-dimensional angles, including adverse comment is what increases its vitality. The initiator of such an effervescent blog is hardly likely to take it down.

Think of how this meeting-point of discussion can dynamite any area of study. Think of the self-monitoring that can be instituted for learning in such a forum. Blogs can be used in literature, in science, in politics, in medicine and in business. And you don't have to have a computer in the classroom to dynamite traditional ways of teaching in this way through the motivational force that comes from feedback and counter-response.

I invite you to go to one of my blogs at <http://www.callcynthia.blogspot.com/> - a blog that I was required to set up as a class member of an online course I did with students in the US, Cyprus, Taiwan, Yemen, Puerto Rico and Holland. My having said this may cause readers to think that blogging rightfully belongs in distance education. However, by now, it is evident that blogging can be used to supplement any face-to-face contact. It is asynchronous, and costs less than a phone call.

Since I have instituted blogging as a teaching tool with my students, I have been greeted with two challenges: (1) How to change the culture of conservatism that besets our education systems? (2) How to incorporate assessment that can be construed as valid for what psychologically has been initiated in the public domain as conversation?

With regard to the first, changing the culture of the primacy of the text-book in the Trinbagonian education system is an uphill task. This is not only because most homes do not have computers, but mainly because educators themselves have not been setting the pace for evaluating and recognizing creditable, alternative learning sources.

In my opinion, an integration of alternative learning styles such as learning through interactive discussion will only come when sanctioned by examination boards. This brings me to my second point – that of incorporating valid assessment in blogging. A simple way to approach assessment in blogging is with a rubric emphasizing the 3 Rs; Relevance, Research, and Reflection (aka evidence of critical thinking). This approach should stem cries of subjectivity. After all, the essay, that Trinbagonian evaluation staple, is no less susceptible to the vagaries of subjectivity.

One final piece of information that may already be public knowledge: How to set up a blog? Go to Google and type in Free Blogs and follow the instructions. But be sure to also type in netiquette and netsmartz.