

Using Blogs To Enhance Student Engagement And Learning In The Health Sciences

Lana Zinger, Ed. D., Queensborough Community College, USA
Alicia Sinclair, Ed. D., Queensborough Community College, USA

ABSTRACT

Teaching in a diverse, urban community college, it has become apparent that students spend most of their free (and classroom) time participating in social media. In response, we decided to incorporate social media, blogs specifically, as a way to increase student engagement, retention and achievement. The learning objective was for our students to learn how to translate complex science into something a broad audience can understand and appreciate. Graduates of a health program need to be the best communicators when translating scientific evidence into something others can understand, and act on. We created a health blog and with the goal of helping students translate what they learned in a classroom via their own health blog.

Keywords: Blogs; Student Engagement; Health Sciences; Learning

USING BLOGS IN A HEALTH SCIENCE CURRICULUM

Blog is a term short for "web log" and is simply the name for an online diary or journal, or the activity of writing thoughts in that journal. Social media, specifically blogs, represents the future of higher education as it enables educators to provide students with a tool that is enjoyable yet educational. Blogging is no passing Internet fad, available data showing that, while bloggers come and go, the blogosphere continues to explode (Whelan, 2003). With blogs, education becomes no longer a fact-based learning process; instead, it's student-engaged, cognitive. In fact, blogging is becoming more useful as a teaching tool thanks to the efforts of professors who are experimenting with it (Krause, 2005) and even institutions such as Harvard Law School implemented a web log project in 2003 that has made great strides.

We created a health blog entitled *Healthy Eating and Healthy Living* with the goal of helping our students create positive change in their lives, and making those changes last. We also wanted this blog to help students increase exam scores, learn the course materials more efficiently and translate the health education into a service learning component. Students were first asked to search the blogosphere and rate the health blogs they found. With so much health misinformation out there, finding good quality health advice can be a daunting task. Students were then asked to create their own health blog on such topics as nutrition, reading food labels, cooking techniques, alternative therapies, current issues in health or health care. Students drew on course materials, and other academic resources to ensure the accuracy of their blogs.

Translating health education via blogging is an important service learning tool that helps students learn while actually performing a service to their college community. Service learning has been an important part of higher education and pedagogy for over two decades because it adds richness and reality to an academic experience for both students and faculty. Students get to know their communities, develop new skills and integrate knowledge of course materials into an authentic setting (Palmer, 1997). What was most significant in using blogs were students' abilities to apply the knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another.

SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF BLOGGING INCLUDED

Blogging is cross-curricular

Drawing upon fields such as health education, nutrition, psychology, exercise physiology and mind-body medicine, this blog educated the student in a holistic, cross-curricular manner. Blogs provide a forum for academic discourse that reaches beyond the scope of a university subject and which augments the knowledge creation occurring throughout a student's enrollment in a higher education program (Williams & Jacobs, 2004).

Blogging is a publishing tool

Our students were very excited to have their blogs featured online for the campus community to view. This was a great way to get our students to write while fulfilling their College writing intensive requirement.

Blogging takes writing assignments into the real world

Students frequently complain about writing assignments because they are not confident in their writing or they lack the skills to write effectively. Using a computer to blog seemed to decrease their writing anxiety and proved to be a boost in their overall writing scores.

Blogging is a useful networking tool

Our health blog started out small with only the college community responding to our students but then we opened up the blog and our students were communicating with people from all over the world.

Blogging encourages collaborative, team work

Students learned how to work together in small teams to collaborate on blogs. They had to decide on a topic, take turns, converse, help each other research the topic, share the computer, and problem solve.

Blogging creates student engagement

Even though the concept of blogs has been around for some time, it was very new to our students and their willingness and enthusiasm to try it proved very beneficial to student engagement and retention. In their words: "it was fun to blog about what we learned in the classroom." They don't realize they are doing exactly what all educators want them to do – writing, reading, and learning.

Blogging enhances communications techniques

Blogging teaches how to communicate with different types of people, how to translate often confusing health information into real-life education and improves students' communication skills. Graduates of a health program need to be *the* best communicators when it comes to translating scientific evidence into something that others understand, and can act on.

CONCLUSION

The academic benefits of blogging are numerous. However, there are some things to keep in mind in order to effectively execute their use in a college-level course. First, student blog entries must relate back to the course objectives. If they do not, then there is little purpose for the blog itself. Second, students need to feel they are providing accurate, easy-to-understand information. Instructors need to allow for a draft process so the student's final product is a blog they are comfortable with and is academically appropriate. Lastly, making sure there is adequate technical support for the blogs is key. Instructors should decide ahead of time what type of platform to use. If not, blogs may be difficult to upload, or lack accessibility. When done meeting some basic requirements, student blogs have endless potential.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Lana Zinger, EdD, CHES, RD has extensive experience in community health and nutrition. She is a registered clinical dietitian specializing in sports nutrition and athletic training, weight management, medical nutrition therapy of chronic disease such as heart disease, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, diabetes, and HIV. Dr. Zinger was the Clinical Nutrition Director at Cabrini Medical Center and St. Vincent's Hospital. For over 17 years, she has worked as a fitness and nutrition consultant to athletes, individuals of all ages and corporations. Dr. Zinger holds a Bachelor's of Science in Nutrition from New York University, a Master's of Science in Nutrition and Physiology from Columbia University and a Doctorate in Health and Behavior Studies from Columbia University. Dr. Zinger is the author of *Health for Life; Critical Issues in Health; Introduction to Public Health* and co-author of *The Fundamentals of Nutrition and Nutrition and Health Today*. She has conducted numerous workshops, presentations and national conferences on such topics as: The Role of Nutrition and Disease, Prevention and Treatment of Obesity, Teaching Meditation and Compassion in an Urban Classroom and Implementing Service Learning. Lana Zinger Ed.D, CHES, RD, Queensborough Community College, 22205 56th avenue, Bayside, NY 11364. E-mail: lzinger@qcc.cuny.edu (Corresponding author)

Alicia Sinclair, EdD, CHES has been in the fields of health education and nutrition for over a decade. She is a health educator with specialties in overweight and obesity as well as nutrition education. Her clinical experience includes work at St. Luke's Obesity Research Center in New York City. There, she treated patients with binge eating disorder. As a consultant, she has worked with Shape Up New York, a free family fitness program where she taught participants strategies for healthier eating. She holds a Bachelor's of Science in education from the University of Maine, a Master's in counseling psychology from New York University and a Doctorate in Health and Behavior Studies from Columbia University. Dr. Sinclair is the co-author of *The Fundamentals of Nutrition and Health* as well as *Nutrition Today*. She currently teaches various health and wellness courses for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey as well as health and nutrition courses for the City University of New York. Alicia Sinclair Ed.D, CHES, Queensborough Community College, 22205 56th avenue, Bayside, NY 11364. E-mail: asinclair@qcc.cuny.edu

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