

Is Blogging Worth the Risk?

Yes

Blogging carries no more risk than other forms of public electronic communication, whether posting on message boards, tweeting on Twitter, or leaving social network comments—which is to say, there's definite and sometimes substantial risk! Any member of any number of audiences, even those without a vested interest, could become offended and raise enough of a complaint for action to be taken against you.

But it's still worth it!

We are all human beings and we thrive through communication with and connection to others. We need to have our voices heard and we need to hear other voices, even in reference to what some would consider the mundane. We need to stand up for our opinions and engage others in thoughtful conversations in both our personal and professional lives. We need to model for our students habits of communication that are positive and



James Maxlow

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Last year, despite concern expressed by some colleagues, I launched a blog (<http://TheInnovativeEducator.blogspot.com>). Shortly thereafter, I received a generic staff e-mail stating that employees' e-mail signatures should include basic information such as address, phone, e-mail, etc. Check, check, check. My signature had all that, plus graphically pleasing fonts, design features, and, of course, a link to my blog. A few weeks later, I received a call informing me that legal had requested I remove my blog address from my e-mail signature. Apparently, that original generic-seeming e-mail was specifically targeting me.

But I was doing what I thought all innovative educators should do. I wasn't just talking the talk, I was walking the walk—using a blog to create a purposeful and professional digital footprint and sharing ideas that I hoped would be of interest to other educators.

Disappointed, I followed the directive...and blogged about it, asking my readers



Lisa Nielsen

productive even outside the bounds of the subjects we teach. Never before have those needs been more easily met than through such acts of electronic communication as blogging.

A personal blog, by its very nature, is personal, whereas a professional blog relates to the work in which we as educators are engaged. It is perfectly natural for us to have personal and professional views of ourselves. When we cross over one area into the other, though, we should be thoughtful and deliberate about it. Injecting something of personal concern into our professional communication has a powerful humanizing and connective effect, so the chance to do so should not be ignored. But it still requires the care and responsibility associated with professional communication. The same applies in reverse: Adding professional commentary to our personal

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writings can enhance their positive impact when done responsibly.

If, after we put thoughtful and deliberate care into the personal electronic communications that we make public, we end up having to take responsibility for our comments, all the better! What better way to illustrate to our students that effective communication requires us to consider the effects our words might have on our listeners or readers. The nature of conversation revolves around offering and push-back, point and counterpoint. We may not be responsible for how others react to our words, but effective communicators anticipate reactions.

What about the extreme case of punitive action, such as censure or dismissal from employment, resulting

from personal communication? I would have absolutely no desire to work for an organization that disregards open and honest discussion or assumes that I have no self-control when it comes to keeping my personal life from affecting my professional responsibilities. The message that sends is: “We value your work but do not value you. We would prefer if a machine could do your job, but we haven’t figured out a way to make that happen yet.” It would be better to retain dignity and integrity by finding employment elsewhere than it would be to work in such conditions.

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what they thought of this mandate. Before I knew it, my story was spreading through educational press circles with headlines like “Education Dept. Restrictions on Blogs Rile a Staff Blogger” (*New York Sun*, May 9, 2008). The story became fodder for much debate in the blogosphere, throughout my department, and beyond.

Then people at work started to avoid me. Some colleagues came straight out and said they were afraid I would post something they said in my blog. Others were leaving e-mails I sent unanswered. I felt like I had contracted the plague.

Weeks later, I wrote a post about a class of mine that, among other things, shows teachers how to use Google text messaging as an educational tool. The *Sun* picked up that post, too (“Despite School Cell Phone Ban, Course Sees Them as Aid,” May 16, 2008). As a result, the facilitator scheduled to teach the class asked

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to back out because he was afraid he would get in trouble. Then my employer told me that I had to make sure no cell phones were used in the class, even though it was for teachers, not students. Suddenly, a course I had been running successfully for quite some time was under deep scrutiny.

Not long after, an inappropriate anonymous quote appeared in another newspaper article. Guess whom my employer assumed was the source? Me! I always blog/write/speak under my real name. But it didn’t matter. Because I had a blog, I was suspect.

My colleagues shared that this fallout was exactly the sort of thing they had warned me about when I began blogging. Although none of it deterred me personally, I realized there is a real risk in blogging that I had not initially considered. For even

the most innovative of educators, engaging in an activity that constantly places you under examination makes an already difficult job even more difficult and potentially jeopardizes job security. For that reason, even though I believe educator voice is important, I think most will ultimately find that blogging is just not worth the risk.

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Want to weigh in on this debate?

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