

DRAFT

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Learning Blogs

Part I: Blogs?

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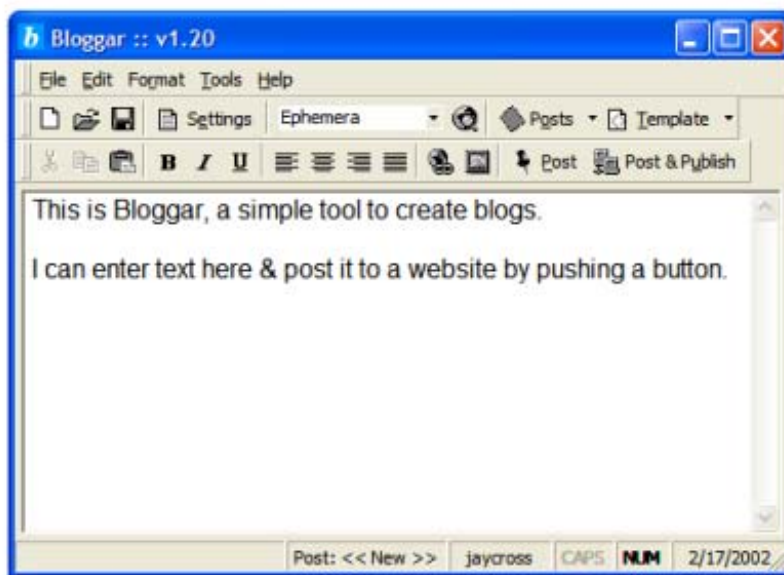
Blogs? *Blog* is short for web-log, an informal personal website.

Tens of thousands of people blog every day. (*Blog* is both a noun and a verb). I've blogged for 18 months, and I'm convinced that blogs are destined to become a powerful, dirt-cheap tool for eLearning and knowledge management. Allow me to explain what blogs do and introduce the concept of **learning blogs**. Then we'll introduce the new Learning Circuits blog. Part II will address collaborative blogs and blogging behind the firewall.

What's a *blog*?

Think of a blog as one person's public diary or suggestion list, for this is where blogs started. Web enthusiasts posted links to neat stuff they found on the net to their personal websites. They added commentary. They began posting daily. They read one another's blogs. A community culture took hold.

Blog came to be defined as a site with dated entries, usually by a single author, often accompanied by links to the blogs the site's editor visits regularly.



Enter text, push button, your words are on the web.

In 1999, blogging software arrived on the scene, so anyone could enter text and post it to a website. Generally, blog software comes with a personal web site to use if you don't already have one. The software not only captures your words in dated entries on the web, it also maintains a chronological archive of prior entries. In the spirit of sharing inherent in net culture, both the software and the personal web sites were free or very low cost.

Blogging is the fastest growing trend on the web today. Half a million people have downloaded blogging software. So, what's the big deal about posting text to the net? Blogs are personal. They are unfiltered. Real people, not corporate PR departments or ad agencies, write them. The best way to understand is to visit a few blogs, and that's just what we're going to do.

An information blog

Maish Nichani's **eLearningpost** deals with "Corporate Learning, Community Building, Instructional Design, Knowledge Management, Personalization and more." Every weekday Maish links to four or five interesting articles. Sample sources are Wired, Chronicle of Higher Ed, Syllabus, First Monday, Training, PBS, and CIO. Maish writes a brief paragraph to describe each link. It's easy to tell that he is one brilliant and multidisciplinary fellow.

I no longer read three-quarters of the magazines I once felt obligated to. Instead, I read **elearningpost** religiously. Maish will more likely find the gems than I would. It's also more fun to read from a variety of voices--an article from Fortune, a story from Online Learning, or a white paper from IBM--than one publication cover-to-cover.

Take a look at [elearningpost](#) to see what I've been talking about, but please come back when you're through. There's more to the story.

A learning blog

I set up the **Research on Learning and Performance** blog to capture ideas I might want to add to the [eLearning Jump Page](#) at Internet Time Group. Twelve thousand people visit the Jump Page every month, 20% of them more than once, but because it's free, I have to limit the amount of time I dedicate to it. As more and more information about eLearning spews forth, keeping the Jump Page up-to-date was becoming a hassle. Now, every couple of weeks I harvest worthwhile entries from the blog and post them on [Internet Time site](#). The blog as clipping service.

Research on Learning and Performance began as a private affair but I soon made it available to anyone who's interested in looking at things day-by-day rather than waiting for the next site update. Last month, 900 people looked at my Research blog. Three-quarters of them also read through previous months' entries. Blogs can be a sticky business.

What sort of content do you find on this blog? Whatever I found interesting at the time. Love me, love my blog.

- Photos and impressions of ASTD TechKnowledge in Las Vegas
- Notes on participating in a Centra press event (posted during the session)
- Stanzas of haiku about meta-learning
- A pithy quote from Cisco's Tom Kelly
- From Stephen Downes: "learning ought to be created by the learner"
- Notes from a meeting with Chris Ashley at The Interactive University

My blog contains more than a year's worth of items like these. The content comes in small bites. How do people retrieve needles from this haystack? Most use the Google search box that appears atop each page.

Take a brief look at [Research on Learning and Performance](#) to get the flavor of a personal, rambling blog.

What's in it for me? Posting to my blogs forces me to organize my thoughts. Things that might have remained in the dark recesses of my mind are forced out into the open.

All shapes and sizes

"Imagine Hunter S. Thompson writing about the new Mac operating system," writes Carlyle Adler in [Fortune](#) Online. "That's the wacky spirit you can expect when you check out the online narratives known as Weblogs. While these sites represent both the best and worst of Web self-publishing (the virtual tour of ugly couches wasn't for us, nor were the angry ex-girlfriend sites), several of the technology Weblogs are worth checking out."

Here are a few blogs I consider "worthy." Your mileage may vary.

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|---|--|--|
| Personal Evhead Rebecca's Pocket Kottke.org | News Robot Wisdom The Guardian The Obscure Store | Tech Slashdot Dan Gillmor's eJournal Doc Searls Weblog |
|---|--|--|

Blogging to Learn

Not long ago, a blog pointed me to the article [Weblogs: A Swiss Army website?](#) in which Chris Ashley at U.C. Berkeley's [Interactive University](#) program writes:

"...weblog software and the weblog model of content production and platform interoperability are proving to be increasingly useful and

powerful, pushing and inspiring innovative developments for, and uses of, the Web. These areas include: content, information, and knowledge management; community building; publishing and journalism; teaching, learning, and collaboration; and course management systems.”

“Weblog software, interfaces, and workflows are helping to realize a web of increasing organization and interoperability, ease of production, improved and flexible information flow and interlinked accessibility...”

Since I live in the Berkeley hills, not far from the University of California, I walked to the campus to talk with Chris about blogging, the role of the e-teacher, meta-learning, and more. Our conversation revealed half a dozen ways in which blogging can support learning.

1. Blogs are **a personal writing space** to use and share with others. Chris’s own blog, [a place to write](#), is a great example. Writing things down engages the mind and shapes up our thinking. Imagining an audience of readers helps us learn by teaching others.

Blogging pioneer [Peter Merholz](#) writes “the power of weblogs is their ability to immediately put form to thought--that I can get an idea in my head, however poorly baked it might be, and in seconds share it with the world. And immediately get feedback, refinement, stories, etc., spurred by my little idea. Never before was this possible.”

2. Blogs are easily linked and cross-linked to **form learning communities**. A few days after we met, Chris emailed me that “It was interesting how the next day you posted on your blog about our talk, which David Carter-Tod commented on in his blog, which one of my colleagues, Raymond Yee, noticed after we had just had lunch together and I told him about talking to you. Raymond then posted about this little circle on his blog, and then I had to comment on it on mine, all an interesting little web that blogs make happen so quickly.
3. Innovative high-school teachers are encouraging students to maintain class and personal **school blogs**. Enthusiasm grows as students take ownership of the content. Individuals write, edit, review, and publish content. They critique one another and present different viewpoints. Teachers make articles available to read electronically. Blogs maintained by individual students enable teachers to assess their students’ thinking patterns and depth of understanding. In the future, students may learn by assembling personal digital portfolios. See [weblog-ed](#) for fascinating accounts of the power of school blogs.

Former MTV-vj Adam Curry is working with teacher Peter Ford to offer free school blogs and [advice](#) on their use. They note that “Children are

vain, just like adults. They desire and require an audience for their thoughts and achievements. ... The simple intuitive nature of SchoolBlogs is precisely what is required to allow students to express themselves *on their own terms*. Children's involvement with web-sites has to be more than a posting of a few pieces of their work on a third person's static web-site for a non-existent world to see. There is no ownership in that. SchoolBlogs can give children their own soapbox, their own voice. They become habitual writers. They are in control.”

4. Because blogs automatically archive postings, over time they become repositories of useful content. Blog archives are the poor man's **content management system**. Say I want to read current thinking on building learning communities. I go to [elearningpost](#) and enter learning community in the search box. Four seconds later, I receive more than a hundred pointers to articles on the topic. This works for media as well as text. A blog like [Gallery](#) is in essence a personal content management system, in this case an index of photographs.
5. As much as we'd all love to learn our craft by apprenticing to a world-class performer, it's not going to happen. The workshops of master craftsmen do not scale. By combining blogs and digital storytelling we get the next best thing, a **virtual apprenticeship**. The [Center for Digital Storytelling](#) believes that “in the not distant future, sharing one's story through the multiple mediums of digital imagery, text, voice, sound, music, video and animation will be the principle hobby of the world's people.” Imagine learning to teach by observing and learning from stories told by a world-class instructor. Professional development will never be the same.
6. Blogs highlight **great information** I'd never find on my own. [Cameron Barrett](#) has taught me more about web design than any course. [David Weinberger](#)'s blog mentors me on knowledge management and often has me laughing out loud. [Chris Pirillo](#) keeps me abreast of Windows developments. Recently, [Stephen Downes](#) began augmenting my understanding of how people learn. And Cameron, David, Chris, and Stephen keep making connections for me all the time.

So, you ask, why couldn't I get the same insight from reading a book or a magazine? Let me count the ways. The informality of the blogs makes them engaging. Since bloggers read one another's stuff, the best of the best rises to the top and eventually appears on the handful of blogs I read, quite a time-saver. Blogs offer personal, often contrarian, viewpoints, leading [Jesse James Garrett](#) to call blogs the “[pirate radio stations of the web](#).” Because some blog content is suspect, I read it critically, which plants it in my head. Blogs are current - I learned about

the World Trade Center disaster on [DaveNet](#), not CNN. Basically, blogs work well.

New Blog in Town

Learning Circuits is inaugurating a blog of its own to capture daily thoughts from learning gurus.

We're starting simply, with a one-way blog. Learning Circuits has recruited these people to drop observations and dialogue into our blog when the mood strikes them:

(list of people here)

If our experiment is successful, we'll explore two-way blogging and other facets in the months to come.