WPA: Writing Program Administration Volume 29, Number 3 (Spring 2006)

Communicative Strategies for Administrative Practices: Evaluating Weblogs, Their Benefits, and Uses

William Endres

What makes the Internet special is not the technology per se but the social interactions it is inspiring.

—Sara Kiesler

I once heard Donald Murray, an early and prominent member of the writing as process movement, make a distinction between having problems and having difficulties. I admired it and have carried these notions with me for some years now: *problems*, he claimed, can be solved once and for all, whereas *difficulties* require individual approaches and are always simply a part of life (Murray). Communicative issues fall very much into Murray's category of difficulties. Unlike a problem, such as how to calculate cumulative grade-point average, in which the correct mathematical equation simply needs to be applied, communicative strategies and practices constantly offer challenges and difficulties for WPAs. How these communicative challenges are faced varies from program to program because writing programs are situated so differently. Variants include the size of the institute (large state universities to small liberal arts or community college), an institutional commitment to the teaching of writing, the hierarchical placement of the writing program within the institution, a writing program's administrative structure (collaborative, top down or, most likely, some unique hybrid), and the personality and disposition of writing program director and instructors. All of these factors and more create diverse communities and cultures that

shape the way the professional challenges and difficulties of writing program administration will be resolved. Each writing program must find approaches that speak to the salient features of its unique culture and community.

For WPAs, as with any administrators, establishing and maintaining good channels of communication are perpetual and ongoing tasks. With the proliferation and rapid, continual development of computers and their communicative possibilities, these difficulties become even more complex. This essay, therefore, examines Weblogs (blogs) as a way to help with these communicative difficulties. Blogs, through their ease of learning and use, simplify to some extent the complexity of these choices while offering dynamic solutions to communicative difficulties that make good use of some of the best communicative features of the World Wide Web (www). This essay offers a brief history of blogs, and their potential uses, particularly for disseminating information, encouraging reflective practices, and collaborating for committee and curriculum development work. The uses of blogs, however, will be (and need to be) shaped by and around a given writing program's practices and culture to be successful. Given that, the second half of this essay discusses, first, research in media richness for structuring communicative tasks, particularly for committee work and curricular development, and then diffusion theory, which investigates the successful and not so successful spread of new ideas and innovations, for approaching the integration of blogs into a writing program's practices. The appendices contain information about setting up blogs, including helpful links.

Brief History of Blogs

"Weblogs," since John Barger named them such in December 1997 (see Rebecca Blood's "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," par. 1), have become known simply as "blogs." Originally, blogs were a collection of dated entries consisting of links to Web sites and articles, accompanied by commentary. The commentary, most definitely brief (usually a sentence or two), evaluated the information, explained its importance or interest, or added further information about the topic; in many ways early blogs worked as do entries in an annotated bibliography. Blogs were ways for Web enthusiasts to communicate their thoughts and draw attention to items discovered while surfing items Web surfers viewed as important, unusual, interesting, or noteworthy.

In early 1999, as Rebecca Blood explains, only twenty-three known blogs existed (par. 1). That number, however, soon changed. With blog writers like Jesse James Garret and Cameron Barrett publishing lists of known blogs (par. 1) and with the release of free software that no longer required someone to know Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) to create and maintain

a blog—particularly, the release of *Pitas* in July 1999 and *Blogger* in August of that year—the number of blogs on the Web increased at such a rapid pace that it was impossible to keep track of them (par. 4). In early 1999, one could have read and kept current with every blog on the Web. By late 1999, it was impossible.

The ease of creating and maintaining a blog through *Pitas* or *Blogger* truly revolutionized blog use on the www. Without the need to know HTML and FTP (File Transfer Protocol) programs, publishing on the www took little, if any, time to learn or do. The publishing of a blog, just as with its viewing, could now happen through a Web browser—such as Netscape Navigator, Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox—and could take place from any computer with Internet access. To create and publish a blog, once a Web browser is directed toward the blog site, an entry is typed into a text box and, by a simple click of the submit button, the entry is published. Each entry is automatically arranged on the blog Web site, with the most recent entry appearing at the top of the page. Publishing a blog, therefore, is not nearly as difficult as, say, working through the formatting possibilities for a typical word processing program. In addition, free hosting services—like those offered by Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Pitas (www.pitas.com)—allow anyone to set up an account for a blog in five to ten minutes and be ready to start publishing.

The release of *Pitas* and *Blogger* also marked a further effect. As Sarah Kiesler points out, a technological change can be "primarily amplifying, making possible for people to do what they have done before, but more accurately, quickly, or cheaply," or it can be "transformative: it leads to qualitative change in how people think about the world, in their social roles and institutions" (xii–xiii). Around the release time of *Pitas* and *Blogger*, blog use began to be transformative. Groups of blog writers began focusing more on breaking national and international news, than on interesting and unusual Web sites. Using the work of Greg Ruggerio, Blood explains that these blog writers began to challenge the notion of a passive audience, one encouraged by the standard practices of the corporate-controlled media. By juxtaposing articles, searching out alternative sources, and commenting on the information, blog writers presented an alternative to the corporate-controlled news, albeit in a small way. They discouraged people from being part of a passive audience, instead encouraging them to become a part of an active public (par. 8–10). As Blood states, "By writing a few lines each day, Weblog editors beg[a]n to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor" (par. 10). This transformative use of blogs to challenge corporate control of the news and offer alternative perspectives on world events came to the forefront particularly during the Iraqi war, with blogs like that of Joshua Kucera (www.seren-

dipit-e.com/otherside), discussed by Christine Boese in "The Spirit of Paulo Freire in Blogland: Struggling for a Knowledge-Log Revolution" (blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/the_spirit_of_paulo_freire.html).

Additionally, with the introduction of *Pitas* and *Blogger*, people further transformed the concept of a blog, that is, in the words of Kiesler, they "alter[ed] what the technology [could] accomplish" (xiii). People began using blogs to record thoughts, insights, and the happenings of their day, often recording more than one entry in a single day, thus using a blog like a journal. Others began to use blogs to express ideas and opinions, with blog writers quoting each other, linking to each other's sites, and carrying on extended conversations. These blogs were different in substance and nature from the pithy one- or two-sentence commentary and links that previously constituted a blog. As Kiesler reminds us, it's "[p]eople's behaviors, not just the attributes of the technology, [that] determine" how people ultimately use a technology (xiii). Blog practices, then, began to be transformative and to evolve to meet the communicative needs, wishes, and potentials of their users.

Blogs, Disseminating Information, and Feedback Loops

Disseminating information and making certain that it is timely, pertinent, and readily available to instructors—for everything from changes in writing program policies and procedures to the date on which the college or university is celebrating Presidents' Day—is a constant challenge and essential for a writing program's smooth operation. However, if information is constantly disseminated, and other channels of communication are not readily visible and available for participation and dialogue, a WPA encourages a passive audience versus an active public (as discussed above through Greg Ruggerio's work)—and the members of a passive audience may not only fail to concern themselves with fully understanding the disseminated information, they may not take the time to read it. When considered in light of community building and the dynamics of active learning in student-centered models of education, newsletters resemble the lecture mode in classroom delivery. Newsletters and memos, once the favored form for disseminating information and extremely effective at bundling it, have given way to Web sites and e-mail lists. These Internet-related technologies have gained advantage over newsletters and memos because they are easier to distribute and cheaper to produce, eliminating the cost of duplication (Kiesler's earlier discussed sense of a technological change being primarily amplifying).

Rarely, if ever, however, is one technological innovation simply cheaper and easier than its predecessor. A change in technologies is almost always balanced against a complex of advantages and disadvantages. Examining

paper versions of weekly and monthly memos and newsletters, for example, shows that they hold some advantages when compared to electronic media. Faced with a communicative task, as Christina Haas points out in her essay "On the Relationship between Old and New Technologies," one finds many competing old and new technologies to choose from. A simple replacement model of technology—that is, where one technology, usually a new technology, is viewed as merely replacing an older technology—represents for Haas an "oversimplified, bifurcated model" (210), a model that does not speak to the various competing and sometimes complementary technologies, both old and new, from which one can choose (222). A paper newsletter, as we know from experience, is highly portable—we can pull it from our mailboxes and read it during lunch or while walking to teach a class. Makers of computerized technologies know we appreciate paper's portability and are attempting—particularly with laptops, notebooks and wireless technologies—to make computerized technologies portable in ways similar to paper. In addition, a page of print can normally be scanned quickly, especially if formatting techniques and conventions are effectively used—like headings, indentations, underlines, boldfaced words, and bulleted lists. Allowing the reader to scan a page quickly for important information and to move between pages quickly is an advantage of print. A screen of text, normally, is not as easily scannable, and it requires the use of a mouse and scroll bar or the click of the mouse on hyperlinks to move between "pages" of information.

Furthermore, for instructors, a newsletter has the advantage of showing up in a mailbox like an e-mail in an inbox, initiating a physically palpable alert (or notification) that information is available, whereas a Web site initiates no alert or notification when new information is added, available, and most likely needed to be known. On the other hand, a Web site has all information organized in one centralized location—newsletters and e-mails have to be stored and filed away in an organized system, forcing instructors to take time filing and organizing if their incoming information is to be retrievable to be used at a later time.[1] Additional disadvantages are that a physical page of information can be lost, and an e-mail can be easily deleted—then the information might as well not have been sent in the first place. Recently, e-mail has run into further difficulties: with the glut of e-mail messages now being sent (legitimate and spam), and with the proliferation of viruses and the growing threat of identity theft via computers, e-mail requires a higher level of protection and expertise, resulting in more time- and labor-intensive effort for users. Therefore, in determining the best means for accomplishing a communicative task or for establishing a communicative practice, all these factors must be considered.

Beyond the comparison of the technologies, a WPA needs to consider feedback loops and interactivity. As Stanley Deetz and Devon Brown point out, communication is "a formative process," and, therefore, communicative spaces need to be interactive and collaborative to encourage relations that are "open and productive" rather than "closed and reproductive" (184)—supporting Ruggerio's notion, mentioned earlier, that interactive communicative practices promote an active public. Sometimes information needs simply and directly to be known. But in the knowing of the information, communication as a "formative process" leads—sometimes in what might seem small and mundane ways—to changes in users' behavior and perspective. Individuality and the context of messages, however, constantly bring about the potential for readers to need to clarify information. An evident and actual possibility to do so in any communicative act is therefore necessary. If no such possibility exists, a passive audience is implied (or has been assumed) and clarifying information might be perceived by members of this audience as too time-consuming or too troublesome to worry about, leading to passivity. In a communicative act, as Deetz and Brown explain, space for individuality and for relating that individuality to what is being communicated, through interactivity and feedback loops, allows a better chance for information to have significance for the individual and consequence for all parties involved through collaborate interaction (184–5).

If a blog is used for disseminating writing program information, one of its advantages over e-mail, as with Web pages, is that it organizes information for instructors in its centralized location. The most current blog entry appears first on the opening page, with past entries accessed either through links on the blog's monthly calendar or as a list of titled entries by date, depending upon the option the blogger chooses in setting up the blog. Additionally, information can be found through a blog's search feature. A blog, therefore, eliminates the need for all instructors to maintain a filing system to organize writing program information—although a blog does not initiate an alert (or notification) when new information is available. Most important, a blog's comment feature allows instructors to pose questions, make suggestions, or raise issues connected to any blog entry, possibly leading to blog information or policies being clarified for all users. Additionally, the comment feature for a blog can be set up so that when someone makes a comment, an e-mail message is automatically sent, notifying the blog's author that a comment has been made.

If a WPA decides to use a blog to disseminate writing program information, a listserv can continue to operate along with a blog, with the benefits of each communicative means complementing the other. A listserv can function advantageously to communicate last-minute information, or

simply notify instructors that important information is now posted to the writing program's blog (the Web address of the blog conveniently included in the e-mail message). In addition, listservs may better facilitate certain types of discussions (see Kraus 2004) and exchanges between instructors than blogs, such as sharing information about how certain texts work in the classroom, inquiring about articles, stories and poems that might help students to explore a certain course theme, or exchanging writing exercises. Writing programs would do well to take advantage of the benefits of both technologies.

Purdue University's *Introductory Composition at Purdue* (a blog created and maintained by Shirley Rose while she was the WPA at Purdue) serves as an example of a blog's being used for programmatic information (visit www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/ICaP/instructor_resources/ICaPBlog/blogger.html). Additionally, an excellent library blog for disseminating information is *LISNews* (lisnews.com), written and maintained collaboratively; it is a way to consider maintaining a blog. For further information, see Laurel A. Clyde's *Weblogs and Libraries*, which also includes many exemplary blogs.

Traditionally a function of newsletters, blogs can be used to build community, accomplished through inclusion of photographs from a recent writing program get-together, recognition of instructors for their accomplishments, inclusion of short profiles or other personal interest stories, among others. Depending on the nature of the local writing program community, knowing its strengths and needs can reveal different opportunities for building community through a blog and can also reveal whether or not a blog can be helpful with fostering the community. Space limitation, particularly for photos, is always an issue with a print publication. Blogs, on the other hand, are fairly limitless in physical-spatial terms. For an example of a blog having the specific goal of community building, visit Humboldt State's *Comp Profs: The Blog for Teacher's of Writing at Humboldt State* (compprofs.blogspot.com). For blogs that integrate pictures into their sites, see Clotilde Dusoulier's *Chocolate & Zucchini* (chocolateandzucchini.com), Mark Friesen's *News-Designer.com* (www.newsdesigner.com/blog), and Wooster Collective's *A Celebration of Street Art* (www.woostercollective.com).

Blogs for Modeling and for Gaining from Reflective Practices

Blogs offer the opportunity for WPAs to communicate with instructors and members of their writing programs as a forum to reflect upon current practices, curriculum or issues within the program. Reflective practices have begun to be studied more extensively in education and in composition in the

last ten years. Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her book *Reflection in the Writing Classroom,* reminds us that "reflection is a critical component of learning" (7), one with the "power to transform" (12). For Yancey,

> When we reflect, we thus *project* and *review,* often putting the projections and the reviews in *dialogue* with each other, working dialectically as we seek to *discover* what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand. When we reflect, we call upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive aspects of ourselves, putting these into play with each other. These help us understand how something completed looks later, how it compares with what has come before, and how it meets stated or implicit criteria, whether of our own or of others. Moreover, we can use those processes to theorize from and about our own practices, making knowledge and coming to understandings that will themselves be revised through reflection. (6)

Blogs used for reflection by WPAs, then, can make explicit certain reflective practices that in all likelihood are already in play as WPAs go about their work, whether those practices involve teaching their own composition classes, working on curriculum revision, instructing new graduate teaching assistants, interacting with instructors, dealing with issues from students, articulating curriculum, writing instruction practices and program policies, or the like. This modeling of reflective practice by a WPA encourages the habit of reflection in instructors who read and perhaps comment on those blog postings, particularly instructors new to the field of composition and to teaching, and those postings become aids in their professional development. As Yancey points out, drawing from John Dewey's *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*, reflection is "habitual and learned" (9). This is of particular importance because, as Dewey states, "While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn *how* to think well," which includes "acquir[ing] the general *habit* of reflecting" (qtd. in Yancey 9). A reflective blog, therefore, can encourage habits of reflection that are indispensable for clear thinking.

Equally important, a reflective blog can serve to aid instructors in understanding local instructional practices and curriculum for writing courses within the national conversation in the field of composition. Again, Yancey's work on reflection is helpful. Drawing from Joseph Harris and his *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Yancey quotes Harris to explain her main interest in reflection "as a means of *go*[*ing*] *beyond the text to include a sense of the ongo*[*ing*] *conversations that texts enter into*" (qtd. in Yancey 5).

Placing local practices in the context of "the ongoing conversations" in the field of composition—the context in which practices and curriculum are shaped—is a service that WPAs can perform for instructors and particularly graduate students—that is, reflecting upon curriculum as it relates to current trends and theories in rhetoric and composition. Understanding how a certain writing program's practices are situated within the national conversation will benefit not only rhetoric and composition students but also students of literature, creative writing, and linguistics, making them more informed about composition theory and helping them to articulate their own practices within this larger conversation, particularly when they need to do so to apply and compete for future teaching experiences and positions.

One of the struggles that WPAs have faced, which has motivated the crafting and adoption of the Council of Writing Program Administrators' 1998 document, "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration," is their gaining recognition for the intellectual work performed by WPAs and the problem of evaluating that work by colleges and universities. A blog used for reflective purposes, allowing instructors to gain from a WPA's experiences and knowledge, highlights and documents the intellectual work necessary for a WPA to administer a writing program. Such use of a blog may not make a large difference, particularly if a college or university is slow to accept the merits of new technologies, but it presents an opportunity to help educate others in the college and university about the field-specific knowledge and the intellectual work necessary for a WPA to run a successful writing program.[2]

A reflective blog, therefore, can offer many benefits, from encouraging reflective practices, to helping instructors understand how their curriculum is shaped by the conversations in the fields of rhetoric and composition, to documenting the intellectual work of a WPA—all of these with the prospect of encouraging intellectual exchange between instructors and building a dynamic environment in which instructors teach. As Yancey points out, using the research of scholars such as Arthur Applebee, Stephen Brookfield, and George Hillocks, "Teachers come to *reflection* as a means of enhancing their teaching" (15). "Teachers' practice," Yancey continues, "is known, reviewed, understood and enhanced through reflection" (15). Blogs offer a way to integrate this helpful and necessary activity of reflection into a writing program's practices and culture.

Blogs, Media Richness, and Committee and Curricular Development Work

Administrative blogs can also be quite useful for committee work and curricular development. When choosing a means of communication, we have many competing technologies from which to choose. To understand crucial considerations for making choices between communicative technologies—that is when choosing a communicative means and structuring the communicative task—the essay "Communication without Frontiers: The Impact of Technology upon Organizations" by Paula O'Kane, Owen Hargie, and Dennis Tourish is most helpful. As an important beginning point toward understanding the effects of various means of communication on the communicative task, the authors review the notion of *media richness* and its origins in the concept of *social presence* as set forth in *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. In essence, their theory of social presence states that "the more we are aware of the other person's actual presence the more likely it is that interpersonal relationship will result," with interpersonal relations leading more likely than not to better communication (O'Kane 88). Knowing the importance of social presence for a communicative task opens up a way to begin assessing the differing available means of communication and the challenges faced in their use. Drawing from the research of Stephanie Westmyer, Rachel DiCioccio, and Rebecca Rubin and that of Janet Fulk and Lori Collins-Javis, O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish point out that when various means of communication are examined through this theory, not surprisingly, face-to-face offers the greatest social presence-the greatest number of audio and visual communicative clues-while other communicative means offer less and less social presence, including the range from video conferencing to, ultimately, e-mail (88).

The importance of the research into social presence is twofold: first, by offering less social presence, various technologies decrease the possibility that interpersonal relationships will result—which may or may not be important to a particular communicative task, that is, if committee members already know each other well or committee members strike up immediate rapport, which can happen even between relative strangers on e-mail; and, second, most importantly, because various media project different levels of social presence, they have different capacities to carry information, with some communicative tasks, such as conflict resolution, requiring wide channels of information. O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish explain that this capacity to carry information has become known through the work of Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in the early and mid 1980s as *media richness* (88).

Media richness, as set forth by O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish—drawing heavily from the more recent work of K. S. Suh, particularly his "Impact of Communication Medium on Task Performance and Satisfaction: An Examination of Media-Richness Theory"—consists of these salient features:

- availability and speed of feedback
- ability to communicate many clues simultaneously, including voice tone and nonverbal behaviors
- use of language rather than statistics
- ability to transmit affective components of messages (88)

Face-to-face communication, when examined through these criteria, can easily be seen as possessing high media richness, with the physical presence of face-to-face contact offering (1) quick and available feedback on what is communicated through the immediacy of the physical presence of the individuals involved in the communication; (2) opportunities for simultaneous clues in a message through facial expressions, tone of voice, eye-contact, body language, etc.; (3) the obvious possibility of language use, and (4) various ways to portray the affective aspects of a message through facial expressions, tone of voice, eye-contact, body language, etc. (as in *simultaneous clues* above).

Different communicative tasks, therefore—because they depend on and need various levels of media richness if the communication is to be efficient and effective—are more or less successfully enacted when performed through various media. As O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish point out, face-to-face communication, the richest medium, tends to be the most effective means of interacting when "issues are inherently complex; conflict is involved; uncertainty reduction is a priority; and building interpersonal relationships is an urgent requirement" (88).

In determining the best means of communication for a communicative task—including when and how best to use blogs for committee and curricular development work—O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish offer three main features of a communicative task as fundamental considerations:

- Determine the informational purpose behind communication episodes—for example, is the primary purpose to transmit uncomplicated information, reduce uncertainty, or resolve interpersonal conflicts?
- Consider the logistical issues involved in bringing parties together for face-to-face encounters. Often, this is just not possible.

- Evaluate the familiarity of the individuals concerned with the technological options available. (89)

When these considerations are applied to the use of blogs for committee and curricular development work—and to other communicative tasks, for that matter—WPAs are more likely to structure and manage the use of blogs more effectively and efficiently, leading to better outcomes. For instance, if a writing program suffers a sudden budget cut or presents a new curriculum to instructors for the first time, face-to-face interaction will most likely be warranted and most effective to reduce or help people manage the uncertainties that these situations pose and, further, to deal with the complexities that both situations involve—not to mention handling the potential conflicts that might arise. On the other hand, if a group of people who know each other well is reviewing handbooks for new adoption by a writing program, a blog could work quite well. A blog offers members the opportunity to work within their own time constraints and post their reviews of handbooks and read fellow members' reviews and responses when their schedules allow; however, the complexity of the communicative tasks to be completed on the blog would need to be limited appropriately. Limiting the complexity of these tasks can be accomplished through a face-to-face meeting aimed to come to consensus on the more complex tasks of deciding which handbooks the committee will review, the criteria for their assessment, and agreeing upon a time framework and order for reviewing handbooks. In this scenario, members would use the blog to post and read assessments of the various handbooks and comment upon them—following the agreed-upon list of handbooks, the criteria, and the time frame. Future face-to-face meetings, then, might be necessary only when serious disagreement exists on a particular handbook's merit and in the final stages of the selection, when differing opinions and conflicts need to be resolved for the committee to come to consensus on the final choice.

Blogs, therefore, can be used to replace some meetings and to prepare for others. Additionally, for preparation, a blog can be used to disseminate agendas for meetings, offering an opportunity for participants to comment upon, revise, and refine an agenda before a meeting happens. In this way, a blog can help committee members to prepare for a meeting in a thoughtful and reflective manner. The gathering of early responses and exchanges through a blog allows the physical meeting discussion itself to begin at a more significant level: participants gain from the ideas already circulated and have a sense of the arguments and positions of fellow committee members, through what could be considered a rough draft of a meeting.

In the case of curricular development, blogs can be used for posting proposals and curriculum, and garnering input from committee members. A draft, then, can be revised from the committee's comments, and then reposted and revised, repeating this process as long as it continues to be productive. The comments on a draft presented on a blog are centralized, with each comment automatically linked to the entry of the draft and therefore conveniently organized. In addition, because it is on the Web, a blog's universal ease of access to drafts and revisions by committee members also allows for ease of access by WPAs. Therefore, a WPA can acquire a quick sense of the progress a committee is making or how its work might affect other aspects of a writing program without needing updates from a committee member; thus, a WPA may stay informed, organized, and able to gain quick access to information that he or she might need at the last minute for other work within the writing program. As etiquette, a WPA should always inform committee members that he or she will be accessing their blog to acquire these quick updates before the committee begins its work.

In "The WPA as Researcher and Archivist," Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser offer strong arguments for WPAs archiving important writing program work so that this information can serve later research. Particularly those blogs used for curriculum development, committee work, and in conjunction with meetings can be of great assistance in this area. Blogs offer a transcript of reasonings, concerns, debates, considerations, and arguments, that is, a record of the paths to certain outcomes possibly invaluable to research. Drafts, final versions of documents, and minutes from meetings are certainly helpful for research, but these documents normally do not supply the richness of the discussion and deliberation surrounding them. Blogs fill in this much-needed context. Blogs are also easy to archive. They can be stored on a computer as an archive or burned onto a CD. If a paper archive is desired, they can be printed out.

An important caveat when doing curriculum development and committee work via blogs is that the information *not* be accessible to everyone with access to the World Wide Web. Blogs can and should be password-protected for this type of work. Committee members should feel certain that their deliberations and comments will not have a wider audience than the one they expect. If a wider, more general audience has access to committee deliberations, comments may be misunderstood and taken out of context. Password-protecting a blog reduces concerns about an unintended audience and will control access to the blog to those who can best contribute to the deliberations.

Evaluating the use of blogs and all means and tasks of communication in light of the findings presented by O'Kane, Hargie, and Tourish can help a WPA to refine communicative practices within a writing program. For more extensive reading about strategies for assessing communicative practices and developing an overall strategy for communicative tasks, see Cal Downs and Allyson Adrian's *Assessing Organizational Communication: Strategic Communication Audits*.

Integration of Blogs into Communicative Practices: Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Integrating a blog into a writing program's communicative practices will require a slight shift in a writing program's cultural habits. To aid a WPA in working through this transition effectively and efficiently, Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations* (in its fourth edition) is most helpful. Here, Rogers draws from the interdisciplinary research into the diffusion of innovations, a tradition that includes archeology, sociology, communications, and education. Research in diffusion of innovations led to five adopter categories:

- Innovators: "venturesome," "able to cope with a high degree of uncertainty about an innovation at the time [they] adopt," and "willing to accept an occasional setback when a new idea proves unsuccessful" (282–3).
- Early Adopters: "respected by [their] peers and the embodiment of successful, discrete use of new ideas" (283).
- Early Majority: "follow with deliberate willingness in adopting innovations but seldom lead," "interact frequently with their peers but seldom hold position of opinion leadership in a system," and "deliberate for some time before completely adopting a new idea" (283–4).
- Late Majority: approach innovations "with a skeptical and cautious air," "do not adopt until most others in their systems have already done so," and many times adopt out of "an economic necessity" and/or "the result of increasing peer pressures" (284).
- Traditionalists:[3] regularly make decisions "in terms of what has been done previously" and "interact primarily with others who also have relatively traditional values" (284).

The importance of these adopter categories,[4] as Rogers explains, is not so much as categories in and of themselves but as a means to lead to the mapping of the diffusion process. If an innovation is to be adopted, the uncer-

tainty concerning the innovation must be reduced. This is accomplished through the flow of evaluative information within a community. By understanding the channels of communication between adopter groups, "[t]he structure of *who* relays messages to *whom,*" the flow of evaluative information, and therefore the diffusion process, becomes evident and accessible (*Diffusion* 300–5).

Interpersonal networks are the channels of communication that are most important to the diffusion process and the flow of evaluative information. As Rogers explains, "Mass communication channels are primarily knowledge creators, whereas interpersonal networks are more important in persuading individuals to adopt or reject [an innovation]" (*Diffusion* 305). But Rogers warns that we must also be aware of a fundamental principle of communication: "that the exchange of ideas occurs most frequently between individuals who are alike, or homophilous" (*Diffusion* 305). In considering the adopter categories in light of this fundamental principle, the innovators, surprisingly, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the traditionalists are normally least like the majority of the community and, therefore, have fewer channels of communication available to them through which to promote a change in community practices. The early adopters, by contrast, are the crucial group in the diffusion process. As Rogers explains, they have attitudes and values that closely resemble the majority of the community, particularly the early majority, the next group in the diffusion process (who make up approximately one-third of the community) and the late majority (who make up approximately another one-third of the community) (*Diffusion* 283). Early adopters normally have multiple interpersonal connections to people in these two categories. Early adopters, Rogers continues, "[b]ecause [they] are not too far ahead of the average individual in innovativeness, serve as a role model for many other members of a social system," with "[p]otential adopters [both early and late majority]looking to early adopters for advice and information about an innovation" (*Diffusion* 283).

Additionally, early adopters tend to be the opinion leaders[5] in a community rather than the innovators, who may even be looked upon with suspicion (*Diffusion* 318). Early adopters make natural opinion leaders because for a community early adopters are "the embodiment of successful and discrete use of new ideas," thus they are "respected by [their] peers" and the individuals that other community members look to for advice and as models (*Diffusion* 283). Innovators, because of their ability "to cope with a high degree of uncertainty" (*Diffusion* 282) and, as Rogers explains in *Communication of Innovations*, their "eager[ness] to try new ideas" (183), can normally be counted upon to experiment with a new innovation, like a blog, quickly and easily, without much convincing, *and* be counted upon as resources for

understanding a new technology, because, in all likelihood, someone within the innovator group will have already tried it. For the diffusion of an innovation within a community, however, the early adopters are the vital target group to establish change.

The attitude of early adopters towards an innovation and its adoption, therefore, is critical. A WPA, then, will need to identify the early adopters, particularly those who operate as strong opinion leaders in a writing program community; the WPA must then involve them early in the work of integrating any new technology, such as a blog, into current practices. Monitoring their reaction to an innovation will offer insights into the possibilities of the success of an innovation in the community and will offer the opportunity to cultivate in early adopters an understanding of an innovation's advantages, increasing the chances of a successful and speedy diffusion. In addition, working with early adopters and opinion leaders early in the process will allow for a thorough assessment of the merit of the innovation and a thorough working through of various ways to integrate an innovation into practices. Drawing from the research of George Homans, Rogers explains that opinion leaders tend to adhere to community norms and values—one way that they obtained and maintain their status in the community—and therefore perform "a valuable service to the system in that the leader[s] thus provide a living model of the norms for [their] followers" (*Communication* 219). Opinion leaders, therefore, will be most adept at understanding community norms—after all, they tend to be the exemplars of community standards—and will recognize ways that the integration of a new technology might violate community values and norms.

Early involvement of the opinion leaders and early adopters in planning an integration of any innovation helps to get these individuals invested in the particular innovation at hand *and* offers them time to become comfortable with the change. Additionally, it offers them enough time and space to understand ways to integrate the new practices into their own behaviors and habits. As diffusion research shows, having time and the opportunity to experiment with an innovation generally leads to more rapid adoption of an innovation (*Diffusion* 258). Early adopters need to determine how best to use an innovation, given the local community's values and practices, because they typically do not have extensive models to follow. Later adopters, particularly the late majority and traditionalists, will have plenty of peers around them already using an innovation who function as models, reducing their need to experiment with an innovation (*Diffusion* 258). Therefore, including influential early adopters in the initial planning of an innovation is extremely helpful. Having some opportunity to experiment with an innovation is also important to the early majority, who tend to deliberate more

than early adopters when faced with the possibility of an innovation; the early majority, too, benefits specifically from time to experiment (*Diffusion* 284). If it is possible, therefore, to work with early adopters in developing a blog's uses for a writing program and then to institute the use of a blog for a short time while retaining familiar communicative practices (say, a newsletter or listserv), the innovation has a greater chance to be adopted *and* adopted more quickly since it offers community members a less risky trial of the innovation. But if the initial work and planning with a group of opinion leaders and early adopters has been done, it will more generally assure the integration of a blog into community practices in ways that benefit the writing program community.

For further strategies and considerations for guiding a community through change, see Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak's *Learning to Change: A Guide for Organization Change Agents* (2003) and William W. Hutton's *The Change Agents' Handbook: A Survival Guide for Quality Improvement Champions* (1994).

Concluding Thoughts

Wireless technologies are the latest development in the area of computers and communications. Blogs work quite well with existing technologies but are particularly complementary to the new wireless technologies being developed. Personal digital assistants (PDAs), or handhelds, like the Palm Pilot and Spring Visor, once functioned simply as schedule planners and address books and for jotting brief notes. Now, through wireless technologies, they can connect to the Web and allow their users access to email and Web sites. Additionally, with the development of the BlackBerry—a PDA that also functions as a cellular phone—a new line of handheld devices, known as mobile managers, is being developed and marketed. Because of the limited screen-size of handheld devices, blogs offer an efficient way to arrange data and navigate it on these screens—while offering, of course, the ease of access to the information that the wireless technologies and the Web make possible. Blogs, therefore, have reason to become even more prevalent.

Establishing and maintaining good channels of communication, however, will continue to be perpetual tasks, at once a "difficulty," in Donald Murray's sense of the word, and one of the challenges of WPA work. New technologies, like blogs, offer new and exciting possibilities for meeting these difficulties and challenges, while offering as well some inherent difficulties and challenges. Integrating a new technology into a culture always takes time. The current strengths and weaknesses within a particular writing program will determine how blogs might best benefit, or not, the writing program's culture and communicative needs. The elements contained in this

essay will supply a good starting point from which to begin evaluating and reflecting on the aptness of using blogs to assist and support the administrative work of a writing program.

Appendix A

Setting Up a Blog on www.blogger.com

1) Go to http://www.blogger.com.
2) Click *Create Your Blog Now* (middle right of page, under "*Create a blog in 3 easy steps*").
3) Create a user name, password, and display name. Enter them in the appropriate boxes. Also, click to check the box to confirm that you will abide by Blogger's "Terms of Service."
4) Create a title for your blog and a name to be part of your blog's address; these will identify your blog—you can simply use the title (but for ease of typing the address, eliminate the spaces).
5) Choose a template for the appearance of your blog.
6) Click *Start Posting* to create you first blog entry.

Appendix B: Additional Blog Resources

—Compiled from *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*.

Blog Hosting Services (Free)

Big Blog Tool (www.bigblogtool.com)
Blogger (www.blogger.com)
GrokSoup (www.groksoup.com)
LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com)
Pitas (www.pitas.com)
we::blog (www.danchan.com/weblog)
Xanga (www.xanga.com)

Commenting Services (Free)

aspComments (www.sneaker.org/projects/aspcomments.shtml)
Reblogger (jsoft.ca/reblogger)

Searches for Blogs (Free)

Atomz (www.atomz.com)
blogSearch (markpasc.org/code/radio/blogSearch)
Google (www.google.com/services/free.html)

Blog Server Software (Free)

BlogWork (www.blogworks.com)
Greymatter (www.noahgrey.com/greysoft)
Movable Type (www.movabletype.org)

Notes

1 Many people use the find feature in their email program to locate needed email messages. The find feature can search for specific words in the title or the content of email messages and generate a list of emails that match the criteria. This cuts down on the need to file and move messages into various folders. Additionally, email programs can be set up to sort incoming email into specific folders by the sender's email address, which works well particularly for listservs. Even with these automated features, however, I still find that sorting and filing some email messages helps with speedy retrieval of needed information, helping me to avoid waiting forever for my find feature to finish searching a folder of email messages or for me to work through the long list of emails that the find feature generates.

2 As reported in the Oct. 21, 2005 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, two assistant professors who maintain or contribute to well-known blogs were denied tenure at the University of Chicago: Daniel Drezner, in political science, and Sean Carrol, in physics. The effect of their blogging activity on the tenure decision has led to much speculation. Concurrently, Gary Becker, 1992 Nobel Laureate in Economics and Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, maintains a well-known blog with Richard Posner, Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago and former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit (www.becker-posner-blog.com). Interestingly, Becker began his academic career as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, left and earned tenure

at Columbia University, only to return to the University of Chicago. Furthermore, the Law School at the University of Chicago maintains a faculty blog (uchicagolaw.typepad.com). Clearly, how blogs are viewed within universities and colleges is a complex matter. Two additional articles of interest in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* are Ian Tribble's "Bloggers Need Not Apply," 8 July 2005: C3 and Henry Farrell's "The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas," 7 Oct. 2005: B14.

3 Rogers uses the term *Laggards* for this group; however, I prefer the term *Traditionalists* to avoid the negative connotations of Rogers' term.

4 WPAs can fit into any one of these adopter categories. These categories, as Rogers warns, must be thought of as "ideal types" and are "concepts based on observations of reality that are designed to make comparisons possible" (*Diffusion* 282). As Rogers explains, these categories, as conceptualizations, have exceptions and deviations within any local community (*Diffusion* 282).

5 In rare circumstances, community norms can alter the tendency for opinion leaders to be part of the early adopter category. For example, if a community adheres strictly to traditional standards, like the Amish, the strongest opinion leaders tend to be part of the traditionalist adopter category.

Works Cited

Applebee, Arthur. *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

Bausch, Paul, Matthew Haughey, and Meg Hourihan. *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*. Indianapolis: Wiley, 2002.

Becker, Gary, and Richard Posner. *The Becker-Posner Blog*. December 2004. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.becker-posner-blog.com>.

Blood, Rebecca. "Weblogs: A History and Perspective." *Rebecca's Pocket*. Online posting 07 Sept. 2000. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>. Rpt. in *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge: Perseus, 2002.

Boese, Christine. "The Spirit of Paulo Freire in Blogland: Struggling for a Knowledge-log Revolution." *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. Ed. Lura Gurak, et al. St. Paul: UThink, U Minnesota Libraries, 2004. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/the_spirit_of_paulo_freire.html>.

Brookfield, Stephen D. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Caluwé, Léon de, and Hans Vermaak. *Learning to Change: A Guide for Organization Change Agents*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003.

Comp Profs: The Blog for Teachers of Writing at Humboldt State. Sept. 2004. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://compprofs.blogspot.com>.

Clyde, Laurel A. *Weblogs and Libraries*. Oxford: Chandos, 2004.

Daft, Richard, and Robert Lengel. "Information Richness: A New Approach To Managerial Behavior and Organization Design." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 6 (1984): 191–233.

Deetz, Stanley, and Devon Brown. "Conceptualizing Involvement, Participation and Workplace Decision Process." *Key Issues in Organizational Communication*. Ed. Dennis Tourish and Owen Hargie. NY: Routledge, 2004. 172–187.

Dewey, John. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking*. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1933.

Downs, Cal W., and Allyson D. Adrian. *Assessing Organizational Communication: Strategic Communication Audits*. NY: Guilford Press, 2004.

Drezner, Daniel W. *Daniel W. Drezner*. Sept. 2002. 14 Jan. 2006 <www.danieldrezner.com/blog>.

Dusoulier, Clotilde. *Chocolate & Zucchini*. 29 Sept. 2003. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://chocolateandzucchini.com>.

Farrell, Henry. "The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 7 Oct. 2005: B14.

Fogg, Piper, and Rebecca Aronauer. "Political-Science Professor with Well-Known Blog Denied Tenure." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 21 Oct. 2005: A8.

Friesen, Mark. *NewsDesigner.com*. 11 June 2003. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.newsdesigner.com/blog>.

Fulk, Janet, and Lori Collins-Javis. "Wired Meetings: Technological Mediation of Organizational Gatherings." *New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*. Ed. Fredric Jablin and Linda Putnam. London: Sage, 2001.

Gurak, Laura, et al. "Introduction: Weblogs, Rhetoric, Community, and Culture." *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. Ed. Lura Gurak, et al. June 2004. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/introduction.html>.

Haas, Christina. "On the Relationship between Old and New Technologies." *Computers and Composition* 16 (1999): 209–228.

Homans, George. *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961.

Huton, William W. *The Change Agents' Handbook: A Survival Guide for Quality Improvement Champions*. Milwaukee: ASQC Quality, 1994.

Kucera, Joshua. *The Other Side: Joshua Kucera's Iraq War Weblog*. 24 Mar. 2003. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.serendipit-e.com/otherside>.

Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997.

Hillocks, George. *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice.* NY: Teachers College, 1995.

Kiesler, Sara. Preface. *Culture of the Internet*. Ed. Sarah Kiesler. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997. ix–xvi.

Krause, Steven D. "When Blogging Goes Bad: A Cautionary Tale About Blogs, E-mail Lists, Discussion, and Interaction." *Kairos*. 9.1 (2004). 14 Jan. 2006 <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/9.1/binder.html?praxis/krause/index.html>.

Levmore, Saul, et al. *The Faculty Blog: The Law School (The University of Chicago)*. 28 Sept. 2005. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.uchicagolaw.typepad.com>.

LISNews. Nov. 1999. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://lisnews.com>.

Murray, Donald M. Talk with New Graduate Teaching Assistants. Hamilton Smith Hall, Durham. Aug. 1991.

O'Kane, Paula, Owen Hargie, and Dennis Tourish. "Communication Without Frontiers: The Impact of Technology upon Organizations." *Key Issues in Organizational Communication*. Ed. Dennis Tourish and Owen Hargie. NY: Routledge, 2004. 74–95.

Rogers, Everett M. *Communication of Innovations: A Cross-Cultural Approach*. 2nd ed. NY: Free Press, 1971.

———. *Diffusion of Innovations*. 5th ed. New York: Free Press, 2003.

Rose, Shirley K. *Introductory Composition at Purdue*. Sept. 2003. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/ICaP/instructor_resources/ICaP-Blog/blogger.html>.

Rose, Shirley K., and Irwin Weiser. "The WPA as Researcher and Archivist." *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource: A Guide to Reflective Institutional Practice*. Ed. Stuart C. Brown, Theresa Enos, and Catherine Chaput. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002.

Short, John, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*. New York: Wiley, 1976.

Suh, Kil Soo. "Impact of Communication Medium on Task Performance and Satisfaction: An Examination Of Media-Richness Theory." *Information and Management* 35.5 (1999): 295–312.

Tribble, Ian. "Bloggers Need Not Apply." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 8 July 2005: C3.

Westmyer, Stephanie A., Rachel L. DiCioccio, and Rebecca B. Rubin. "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Communication Channels in Competent Interpersonal Communication." *Journal of Communication* 48.3 (1998): 27–48.

Wooster Collective. *A Celebration of Street Art*. 2001. 14 Jan. 2006 <http://www.woostercollective.com>.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.