

Blogs

The word “blog” is a contraction of “web log.” Blogs are a form of online journal that millions of people around the world use for self-expression and communicating with family and friends. The author of a blog usually organizes it as a chronological series of postings. Although some groups of people contribute to blogs, there is usually only one central author for each.

Blogs are growing in importance around the world. They are used by everyone from teenagers posting who they like or dislike at school to CEOs communicating directly with their customers to dissidents in oppressed populations expressing their political views.

In version 1.6, Moodle released a blog tool for users. The Moodle blog has some advantages and disadvantages when compared to other blogging platforms.

Using Blogs

This chapter covers the following MTC skills: 3.16 Blogs

Blogs in Moodle are user-based—each user has his own blog, which is non-course-specific. Your profile page contains a Blog tab for accessing your blog page, as shown in Figure 11-1.



If your profile page doesn't contain a Blog tab, contact your system administrator and ask if blogs are enabled.

Adding Blog Entries

To add a blog entry:

1. Click on the Blog tab in your profile page.

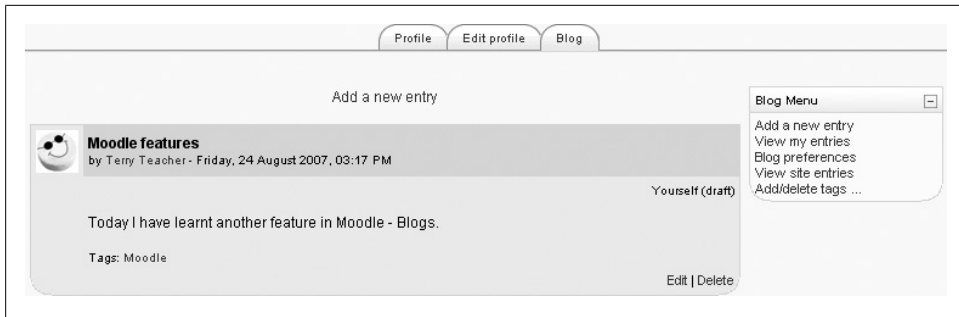


Figure 11-1. A blog page

2. Click on the “Add a new entry” link in the Blog Menu block.
3. In the “Add a new entry” page, as shown in Figure 11-2, write your entry and give it a title.
4. If you want to attach a file, such as an RTF document or a picture, click the Browse button, find the file on your computer, and click Open. Be sure your document is smaller than the maximum attachment size (set by the system administrator).
5. Choose who you wish to publish the entry to (i.e., who may see the entry). There are three options:
 - Yourself—so your blog entry is a draft
 - Anyone on your site
 - Anyone in the world
6. Select appropriate official tags for your entry and/or add one or more user-defined tags (which we’ll cover in the next section).
7. Click the “Save changes” button.

You can edit your blog entry at any time using the Edit link at the bottom of the entry. You may want to change the publish option from yourself to anyone on the site. You can also delete the blog entry completely if you wish.


Viewing Blog Entries




You can view your own blog entries via the Blog tab in your profile page or the “View my entries” link in the Blog Menu block. You may view blog entries for all students in your course, or for all students in a particular group, via the Blogs tab in the course participants page.









































Alternatively, you can choose to view all blog entries with a particular tag via links in the Blog Tags block (which we’ll cover in the next section).


General


Entry title*

Blog entry body* 


Trebuchet | 1 (8 pt) | Lang | **B** | *I* | U | ~~S~~ | x₂ | x² |  |  | 

Path: 

Format  HTML format

Attachment (Max size: 500KB)

Publish to  Yourself (draft)

Tags

Official tags Moodle

User defined tags (Comma separated)

Figure 11-2. Adding a new blog entry

Blog visibility

By default, all site users can view all blog entries via the “View site entries” link in the Blog Menu block. However, your system administrator may have restricted blog visibility site-wide so that users can only see blog entries for people with whom they share a course or a group.

Blog preferences

The “Blog preferences” link in the Blog Menu block allows you to choose how many blog entries are displayed on a page. The default number of entries is 10.

Blog Tags

A tag is a relevant keyword or term associated with a blog entry, describing it and enabling keyword-based classification of information for the purpose of retrieval. Typically, a blog entry will have one or more tags associated with it.

You can add new blog tags when adding or editing a blog entry. There are two types of tag:

User-defined tags

Personal tags that any user can add

Official tags

Added by an administrator and available for any site user



If you need to add official tags as a teacher, contact your system administrator and ask for the capability to be allowed.

Blog Tags block

To encourage the use of blogs in your course, you may wish to add a Blog Tags block, as shown in Figure 11-3, to your course page. A Blog Tags block displays a “tag cloud,” i.e., a list of tags where more frequently used tags appear in a larger font size. Tags can be listed in alphabetical order or according to the last date used, depending on how the Blog Tags block is configured.

To add a Blog Tags block to your course page:

1. Click the “Turn editing on” button.
2. Select Blog Tags from the “Add blocks” menu.
3. If appropriate, move the Blog Tags block up and/or left, using the arrow icons under the block title.

To configure a Blog Tags block:

1. Click on the edit configuration icon in the block header.
2. On the Blog Tags configuration page, as shown in Figure 11-4, adjust the settings as required or leave them as default.
3. Click the “Save changes” button.

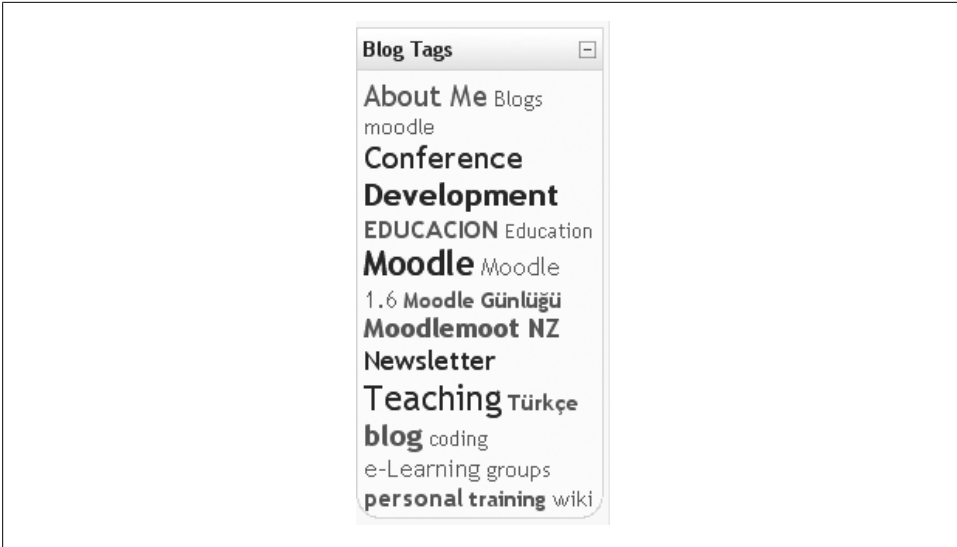


Figure 11-3. The Blog Tags block from Moodle.org

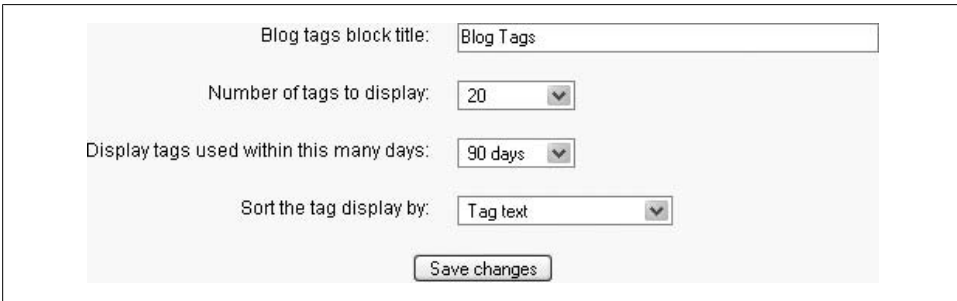


Figure 11-4. Configuring a Blog Tags block

Blog Capabilities

Blog capabilities focus on entries and tags, as you might expect.



These capabilities are set at the global level, so as a teacher you may not have the ability to change them.

View blog entries

This allows a user to view entries in other users' blogs. If you prohibit this capability, the user will not be able to read any blogs on the system.

Create new blog entries

This allows a user to create entries in her own blog.

Edit and manage entries

This allows a user to manage entries, giving her the ability to change and delete other users' entries.

Manage personal tags

This allows a user to create and delete user-defined tags that others may use. (Users are always allowed to add their own user-defined tags.)

Manage official tags

This allows a user to create and delete the official tags that all users see.

Effective Blog Practices

Blogs in Moodle are a relatively new feature, which many people are still learning how to use. There are currently very few examples of good usage of blogs. Most blogs are either blogging for the sake of blogging, or an ill-defined “learning journal” where students engage in unstructured reflection on what they are learning. It’s difficult to maintain students’ motivation for either of these activities. Students who are engaging in purposeful blogging for the first time will have a difficult time successfully posting without scaffolding and some clear goals. Perhaps a weakness in blogging assignments comes from a lack of first-hand experience on the part of teachers.

To begin to understand blogging, we would strongly recommend starting your own blog in Moodle. This experience will help you understand blogs better, and it will also give you another channel to communicate with your students and/or colleagues. As you develop your blog, notice which posts are easy to write and which are a struggle. Do you post regularly? Or do you need to remind yourself to post? Creating interesting posts on a regular basis is not easy, nor is making time to post regularly. However, if you set a good example for your students, you will find it easier to create good blogging activities.

The most important element of running an effective blog as part of your course is to have a clearly defined goal for student blogging.

At the beginning of a course, do a quick poll of your students. How many of them are blogging now? Why are they blogging? Many of your students will have either MySpace or Facebook accounts where they can post updates of their activities to their friends. But social blogging is different from blogging in a learning environment, and you will need to work closely with your students to create effective blogs.

It’s recommended that you allow each student to create his own blogging goals. As David Hawkins writes in his book *The Roots of Literacy*, “Children can learn to read and write with commitment and quality just in proportion as they are engaged with matters of importance to them, and about which at some point they wish to read and write.”

Blogging is essentially a writing exercise. It can be a personal, reflective exercise, or it can be a forum for posting about the ideas and concepts important to the author.

Once your students have started blogging, they may respond better if they have an audience. Knowing someone is reading your posts is a great motivator to continue writing. Be sure to comment, either via messages or in class, on posts students have made public. If students want to keep their posts as private reflections, allow them to do so. Blogging is always personal, and your blogging authors need to feel a sense of control over their personal posts.

Creative Blog Practices

As blogs are so new, there is a lot of room for new and creative applications. As the blogs continue to develop in future versions of Moodle, there will be more capabilities to apply to interesting activities. But even now, there are a few creative activities you can develop using the blog tool.

Group work with tags

Blog tags are used to categorize and locate blog entries. Usually general categories are used, like “teaching” or “trips.” However, creating assignment-specific tags can turn the blog tool into a brainstorming tool. If you have an assignment on understanding evolution, create a set of tags for your students to tag research findings, claims, counter-claims, evidence, etc. Once students have begun to create entries, they can collate the work of the entire class by selecting the appropriate tags, and every post with that tag will be displayed.

One-minute responses

Effective feedback is important for learning. This is true for both the teacher and the student. One-minute-response blog posts are an easy way to get informal feedback from students about a lesson or activity and keep them posting in their blogs. Usually, the instructor gives the students a few prompts to get quick feedback on the effectiveness of the lesson.

You can use three questions when asking for a one-minute response to a lesson:

- What was the muddiest (i.e., least clear) point in the lesson?
- What was the most important point?
- How useful/interesting was the lesson?

Obviously, there are many more prompts you can use to get the feedback you want from your students. You may want students to reflect on how they feel about the class itself, or about a test, or ask other questions about how they perceive various aspects of your course. Alternatively, you could ask them for quick answers to more specific, content-related questions that you know students frequently have problems with.



Jason: One of the most effective Geography classes I've seen uses one-minute responses on a daily basis. In each lesson, the instructor hands out a page asking students what they didn't understand, what the strongest point was, and what they wanted to know more about. The instructor then takes a few minutes at the beginning of the following lesson to address the issues raised in the reflections from the day before.

Assign students a one-minute response as a blog assignment. Post the questions in a prominent place in your course, and ask them to tag the post with the name or date of the activity. Clicking on the tag will make it easy to collate all of the student responses.