**Abstract**

A “blog” can be used as an online journal club to supplement classroom learning. When crafted in a certain way, it can help students develop their scientific reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills in a way that can easily be assessed by educators.

**Key Words:** Biology blogs; online journal clubs; assessment in biology.

A web log, more commonly known as a “blog,” can be used as a fun and engaging supplemental activity to classroom and lecture material. It can also be used to help students develop important skills related to science communication: reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing. A blog, used as an online journal club, is currently integrated into my genetics course (3 credit hours) for college sophomores and juniors. Because there is no associated lab or recitation section for this course, the blog provides a valuable, time-saving outlet for deeper exploration and discussion of the subject matter.

For 10 of the 14 weeks during the semester, I post an “instructor blog message” that serves as an extension of a particular topic being covered that week in lecture. The blog messages cover controversial issues or recent advances in the field of genetics to engage students’ attention and motivate them to apply their knowledge of the subject matter from lecture in a variety of contexts. Each instructor blog message is accompanied by a reading assignment. Students are expected to provide comments each week in addition to completing the associated readings. Several open-ended questions are provided to give the students launching points for their comments. Students are given a participation grade (worth 5% of their total course grade) based on the number and quality of their blog postings. In terms of “quality” assessment, they are evaluated on how well they demonstrate their understanding of the topic and on the degree of thoughtful analysis and/or opinion in the posting. Proper grammar and spelling also count. I stress to students that even the most comprehensive and well-thought-out scientific explanations will not be valued if they are riddled with misspelled words and poor grammar. Students who put a reasonable amount of thought and effort into their postings receive full credit. Posts that are superficial, unclear, or inaccurate have points subtracted.

The assigned readings for each instructor blog message come from a variety of sources, including primary research articles, scientific reviews, and articles from the mainstream media. As many educators are well aware, it can be difficult to get students to read – and, more importantly, to analyze these sources in an in-depth and timely fashion. To encourage students to read each article critically and comprehensively, I include random passages from two different blog articles on each exam (two midterms and a final), followed by four or five multiple-choice questions that assess reading comprehension and overall understanding of the scientific concepts presented in the passages. These questions are in a format similar to that used in the MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) and the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations). This assessment technique strongly encourages students to not only read the articles but to really try to understand them.

Blogs are easy to access and use. Many websites (e.g., Google’s “Blogger” site: http://www.blogger.com) offer them as a free service. You can customize them as well as restrict access or writing privileges. The blog for my course is at http://hartgenetics.blogspot.com/. Commercial blackboard-compatible plug-ins are available that make student blog contributions even easier to access and assess. Not surprisingly, our current “cyber-savvy” generation of students has responded very positively to both the blog and associated assessment strategy in course evaluations.

**JANET A. DE SOUZA-HART** is Assistant Professor of Biology at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy & Health Sciences, 179 Longwood Ave., Boston, MA 02115; e-mail: janet.hart@mcphs.edu.

The American Biology Teacher, Vol. 72, No. 3, page 149. ISSN 0002-7685, electronic ISSN 1938–4211. ©2010 by National Association of Biology Teachers. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions Web site at ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/abt.2010.72.3.4