

Blogging Ahead

WRITING ABOUT EXPERIENCES, particularly travel experiences, has long been a practice known as journaling. Today online journaling has gone high-tech and not only captures words, but also images and links to other resources. Today's 'journals' are visually appealing, and they can be viewed in a matter of minutes—almost instantaneously—and have the ability to showcase not just one person's experience through writing but several voices. Welcome to the blog.



Blogs are a relatively new form of technology and the use of blogs did not really explode until the 1990s and early 2000s. There were 112.8 million blogs in existence as of November 2007, according to Technorati.com. Nowadays blogs are being used in higher education. Professors, students, admissions, and education abroad offices are all using blogs to discuss their opinions and experiences and aid in recruiting students. The international educational experience that studying abroad offers students can be an ideal subject for blogs to reflect on what they've learned and share their new knowledge with the campus community; in turn, it may compel other students to study abroad. But first, education abroad offices need to know how to effectively create and use education abroad blogs.

Benefits of Blogs

Among the benefits of using education abroad blogs is that students are able to express their ideas, reflect on their experiences, and talk to their family, friends, and other students without having to pay to phone them. In addition, students writing about their experience may be more likely to seek out places of interest so they have something exciting and informative to talk about in their blogs. Another benefit of blogs is that it is a way for students to get assistance. Parents, friends, and education abroad advisers reading a student's blog would be able to see clues so they can take quick action to get the student help in dealing with culture shock, school issues, or any other challenges that may happen during their time abroad.

Education abroad offices also benefit from blogs. They can use blogs to promote programs and studying abroad to students, faculty, and other academic advisers. Blogs are also a means for interested students to find further information about programs that interest them, such as what the food is like and how much homework there is. It can aid interested students in deciding where they want to go as well as be a method of teaching students the similarities and differences between another culture and their own. It does take resources, such as staff and students time to write and monitor blogs, but the blogs themselves are usually a free marketing tool.

The Ideal Education Abroad Blog

Many education abroad advisers might wonder: "What would an ideal blog look like?" or "What do I include in my blog to create an ideal education abroad blog?" Of course, there is no 'one size fits all model' as sizes and resources of each education abroad office differ, but there are several standard tips that can be easily incorporated into the creation of education abroad blogs. One key element to include would be to allow the students to post to the blogs themselves but with monitoring. In this arrangement a designated staff person is notified when each post appears so they can read it to check for any inappropriate language, subject matter, etc.

It is also important for the students to understand that their postings should be more reflective in nature versus simply describing the events of the day. There should, of course, be some description of events, people, places, etc. but students must also reflect on what they have learned. For example, they could write about differences and similarities between cultures

Example Blogs

WHILE ONLY A LIMITED NUMBER OF universities and colleges are making use of blogs, thousands of travel blogs are available online. The problem is that it is impossible to tell, without reading every single blog, which blogs are general travel blogs and which are blogs by students on education abroad programs. Several universities, colleges, and providers, including my own, have taken the step forward and are using blogs for education abroad purposes. A listing of example blogs is below.

- http://www.aa.psu.edu/blogs/profile2.asp?user_userid=amv179&blog_ID=41
- http://www.aa.psu.edu/blogs/profile2.asp?user_userid=cew5035&blog_ID=38
- <http://www.blogabroad.com>
- <http://www.utexas.edu/student/abroad/students/cgeoblogs.html>
- <http://abroadblogs.newpaltz.edu/>
- www.cafeabroad.com—Newspaper style
- http://www.mtvu.com/on_mtvu/activism/stand/search.jhtml—Video Blogs
- <http://blogs.glimpse.org>



or how learning the language and local customs has affected them.

An ideal blog should have the ability for people to post comments to the student blogger. Again, this would include monitoring so the blogger does not receive any inappropriate comments. Titles of posts and the ability to search by subject are also important. Sometimes students reading blogs will only want to know about certain aspects of education abroad trips like packing or obtaining a visa. Having titles and categories to search will allow perspective students to explore the topics that interest them without having to read through every posting. An intriguing background or graphical template to catch readers' attention can help draw readers into blogs. Placing the postings in reverse chronological order can also make blogs more accessible. Finally, blogs should give the student bloggers the ability to post pictures, with captions and descriptions, and post videos. This will allow students, faculty, family, and friends to see exactly what bloggers are seeing and experiencing. These last two components are a little more difficult to implement since they require digital or video cameras and training for bloggers to be able to post and edit their pictures or videos.



Student Selection

If education abroad advisers have the option, they should hand-select students that they have met and know will blog in a timely manner. Strong writing skills are vital to a good blog, so the selected students should be screened for this capability, if possible. Offices can select students who are going to popular destinations or to programs they are trying to highlight or feature for increased enrollment. It is also important to use students from a variety of locations and lengths of programs. According to John Duncan from Blogabroad.com, they have a map

with their past bloggers locations indicated so that in selecting future bloggers they will not cover the same location more than once. Education abroad offices may wish to use an application process to screen students for their writing ability. Blogabroad.com receives more than 200 applications every semester for potential bloggers, and their selection is based

on the potential bloggers' writing ability on the applications. Selecting appropriate students, who can effectively tell a story, will aid in increasing readership of the blogs as well as in promoting programs and education abroad in general.

Blogging Guidelines

To make blogs an effective part of an education abroad marketing plan, there are several concepts they should make clear

to students. First of all, an office should tell students to use common sense. This means when writing they are representing the school and themselves so they should refrain from using profanity or discussing or posting pictures of themselves drinking or doing anything that would be considered illegal. At Penn State Altoona, we provide students with guidelines that state what we would like them to refrain from discussing as

well as pointers on what to discuss. The Office of Education Abroad at Penn State Altoona will also provide a list of questions students can answer in their blogs if they get stuck on what to write about. We encourage students to write more than just facts. We want their postings to be reflective and not just a description of the tour they went on or how big the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben really is. We want them to also discuss things they think other students would want to know about if they were trying to decide if they wanted to study abroad at that location. Finally, we talk to students about writing



truthfully. If they don't know the answer, we want them to say so. In addition, we don't want them to contribute to stereotypes of a culture. We caution them to write their opinions but state that what they are writing is their opinion and may not necessarily be true for everyone.

Incorporating Blogs

Once an office has selected their students, given them guidelines, and selected their blogging software or built their own, they are ready to start incorporating their blogs into their marketing plan. Blogs should not be an office's sole means of promoting their programs. But they can be an effective piece of an office's entire marketing plan. Offices can post the blogs on their education abroad office's Web site and link the blog to a particular program page. In addition, the adviser can discuss the blogs with students in advising sessions and classroom presentations as well as post flyers around campus notifying students of the blogs' existence. Education abroad offices can also link their blogs to the university or college homepage and talk with their university relations office about promoting the blogs to the campus community. In addition, if the education abroad program has a language requirement, the education abroad office can talk to the language professors about incorporating the blogs as a part of their course. Finally, if your office does decide to incorporate blogs you will need to develop measures to determine their effectiveness.

Disadvantages of Blogs

THERE ARE SOME DISADVANTAGES TO USING BLOGS, but most of these can be eliminated or at least the risk can be decreased with prior planning and guidance. Because blogs appear on the Internet they are public information and anyone with Internet access can read them. This could lead to harassment of the blogger through inappropriate comments on blogs as well as direct contact with the blogger if personal information is given. Bloggers themselves will also need to be monitored since they may have a tendency to use offensive language or pictures in describing events or experiences. Even though you do not want to censor what a student is saying, you do want to make sure that students are not using inappropriate language since the blogs are being read by their families and professors and they are being used for promotional purposes. Another potential disadvantage is that, when students are blogging, they may make defamatory comments about the home or host school or the program itself. In the heat of the moment the students may use their blog to express their frustration about their situation even if their feelings about the situation may change later.

The reliability each blogger also has to be considered. Bloggers may not post in a timely manner or at all and they may not post anything of substance (i.e., something more than a few sentences telling what they did in their day). Another issue is that since blogs are a form of technology, this means they also will have certain technology requirements. Blogs require staff and students to be trained in how to write and publish blogs to the blogging tool of their choice.

If your office is considering incorporating blogs as part of an overall marketing strategy or as an additional learning exercise for students, these tips will hopefully aid you in creating a successful blog. This can enable your campus to better promote education abroad opportunities to interested students. A blog can be an effective tool for increase interest in studying abroad. It is a way to meet students at their level. Because students are already using and reading blogs in large numbers, it makes sense to take advantage of students' technological savvy and make blogs a part of education abroad

on your campus. Plus, it is a relatively inexpensive marketing tool. There is usually no cost to set up a blog (especially through the resources listed) and even though it will require staff time to monitor and set up the blogs, the effort is marginal compared with the potential gain. If a blog piques the interest of one student to study abroad who wouldn't have considered it otherwise, getting on board with blogging is well worth the effort.

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Resources to Create Blogs

THERE ARE SEVERAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE to education abroad offices that offer free blog software and/or tips on creating ideal blogs. All of these resources are free to use.

- <http://www.blogger.com>
- <http://www.wordpress.com>
- <http://www.typepad.com>
- <http://www.blog.com>
- <http://store.glimpse.org/blogs.php>
- <http://www.targetx.com/mootz/studentbloggers.pdf>
- <http://blogs.targetx.com/targetx/emailminute/?cat=3>