Chapter 19

Taking Class to the Airwaves: BlogTalkRadio

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This past year I discovered BlogTalkRadio while attending an educational leadership conference. The Executive Director at the conference reported that she was using BlogTalkRadio to interview various educational-leadership faculty members around the country on a variety of important policy and leadership topics. She explained how the interviews were available online at the organizations' BlogTalkRadio site (http://www.blogtalkradio.com/ucea) and that upcoming episodes could be attended live or listened to later in an on-demand format. I was intrigued by BlogTalkRadio. How did it work? And, how could I use it in my online classes?

BlogTalkRadio

BlogTalkRadio (www.blogtalkradio.com) is a free social networking tool that allows anyone anywhere to host a live Internet Talk Radio show by using only a telephone and a computer. The tool allows "citizen broadcasters"—which I quickly defined as teachers and professors—to share content, conversations, interviews, and student presentations in a public world-wide forum. On top of that, the behind-the-scenes technology allows the seamless integration of BlogTalkRadio with Facebook, Twitter, and Ning.

To listen and follow shows, you simply need to create a free account by providing some basic information—a username, email, and a password. During the account creation process, you can also create a free radio talk show of your own. Each show is archived automatically and readily available in multiple formats: MP3, RSS subscription or iTunes. As a host of your own radio talk show, you have access to a customizable profile, where videos, a blog, or links to other websites or widgets can be added.

The basic free BlogTalkRadio account provides for up to five simultaneous guests with up to a two-hour time limit per show. You can also upgrade to a Premium Hosting Package that enables you to do the following:

- screen callers in a private room right from the hosting switchboard;
- host the show with a headset (rather than the phone); and
- schedule shows for up to three hours (the free package has a two-hour limit per show and can be scheduled in 15, 30 and 60 minute sessions).

The process for hosting a show is very easy. When you set up your BlogTalkRadio account, simply check a box to create a free radio show. Once you do this, you can create an upcoming episode at which time you will be given two phone numbers. The first phone number is for you to call into BlogTalkRadio to host the show. The second phone number is for guests. Using the second phone number, students can call into the show as guests. The phone numbers of guests calling into the live show appear on the host's switchboard page. The host can put a listener "on air" by simply clicking an icon beside the phone number. After the show those who missed the live show can download and listen to a recording of the show. Recordings can be linked or embedded into a variety of websites, a blog, or a Learning Management System (e.g., eCollege or

Blackboard). There are no limitations to how many users can listen live or to the recordings of your shows.

This new tool allows users/hosts to broadcast live from any website, to conduct interviews with multiple callers, or to moderate a dialogue with one or more guests. The opportunities to use this new tool at this point in time seemed endless to me. But if the idea of a talk-radio-show turns you off, think of BlogTalkRadio as a web-based conference call, with the capacity for five callers at a time with additional people in the queue. By using BlogTalkRadio, you are able to connect yourself to your intended audience by using just a phone and a computer. You can provide information, in a lecture format, or you can invite callers/listeners to respond to questions, or present information. I am using this tool in my current online class and I am very excited about the possibilities BlogTalkRadio provides for increasing the level of interactivity in my online classes.

Getting Started with BlogTalkRadio

I lost no time in clicking through the registration page, and in a few minutes, I created Leaders Mindset as my online identity. I decided immediately that I would use it in my first fully online class in the following semester. I read through all of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for BlogTalkRadio 101 (overview, virtual tour, getting started as a host, using the switchboard, and more). I set up an upcoming episode and contacted two of my colleagues to help test my first show. I added opening music to my scheduled show by uploading an audio file and then scripted out what I wanted to say.

My pilot was successful on multiple levels. One of my colleagues was able to make contact and be on the show. The other colleague was able to find the recorded session and listen to the archived show afterwards. For me, I was excited about hosting my first BlogTalkRadio show and about the possibilities of using this new tool in my online courses. However, I knew that planning was going to be very important. While I was experienced in teaching graduate students in face-to-face classes, this new format was going to be different. I would be sitting at my computer with my phone set on speakerphone. I'd be talking to a screen, assuming that my colleagues or students would be out there listening to the show. I had to figure out the best use of BlogTalkRadio for my students and myself in order to get started.

Prepping for Taking My Class to the Airways

My first question, was how best to use BlogTalkRadio. Any technological tool used in the service of teaching is only a tool. The learning experience has to be sound and well designed to facilitate student learning. If technology is to be used, the tool must support the intended learning goals. This particular online course was the sixth in a cohort of education doctorate students, who had been together in face-to-face classes. Some of these classes were hybrid, but students had interacted with each other in real time over the prior two semesters. They knew each other. I was the outsider to this learning community. So, my first choice was to use BlogTalkRadio as a vehicle for students to introduce themselves to me, the newcomer. My second choice for using BlogTalkRadio was to host students presenting their book reviews and leading a conversation about the contents of that book for our leadership course. Let me explain how I accomplished each of these goals.

Hosting Student Introductions on BlogTalkRadio

I shared with students how to access BlogTalkRadio at www.blogtalkradio.com and how to set up an account as listeners. I also provided them with information about the upcoming episode and shared with them the call in number so they could introduce themselves to me. Since my goal was to make class as asynchronous as possible, I provided two nights for these introductions, as well as an alternative way for those who couldn't attend either night to email me a personal introduction. I also prepared five questions designed to get students talking not only to each other but also to share their initial thoughts on leadership. The closing question was focused on something that perhaps others in the class may not already know about each student. Students were to prepare ahead of time talking points to answer the following questions:

1. What is your name?
2. Where do you now work and what is your role in that organization?
3. Why did you decided to apply for the Ed.D. program?
4. What are some of your initial thoughts about the word leadership(i.e., what is it, your experiences with leaders - good/bad, what kind of a leader you would like to become, what goals you think you will be able to accomplish as a leader, what you hope to learn in this course, other ideas you want to share about leadership)?
5. Something interesting about yourself (non-fiction) that you are willing to share that perhaps others in your class may not know about you (e.g., the alligator wrestling contest you won last year, that you've lived in eleven states so far, that you used to be a lawyer, or worked for the CIA).

As I participated in hosting these student introductions, I was keenly aware that as each student called in to BlogTalkRadio, how the format showcased each individual student. I was also aware from looking at the chat feature attached to the BlogTalkRadio show that other students were signed in and listening to these introductions. While most students introduced themselves on the first night— with fewer students picking the second night—when those last students introduced themselves the following evening, most all of the other students in the class were present in the chat feature to listen to these remaining introductions. Both of these sessions were recorded and archived for students to access later. I would definitely repeat this introductions strategy in a future online class.

Hosting Book Review Conversations on BlogTalkRadio

The second time I used BlogTalkRadio was to host Book Review conversations. Often when students do book reviews, the only person who gets to see the book reviews is the professor. This is unfortunate, because the professor more than likely has already read the book, and those who could benefit most from these reviews are the other students in the class. The plan for this group was to have each student select a book for review and to present the key points of the review in five PowerPoint slides or an equivalent format. They were then to upload the PowerPoint slides into eCollege (one of two learning management systems used at the University of Colorado Denver) so that other students could review their slides before each presentation. This approach would also enable students to view the slides while listening to the book conversation live on BlogTalkRadio. I then created a signup sheet using Google Docs for students to sign up for one of five slots on three different nights to conduct their book review.

After the initial preparation, it was finally show time. Students called in to the live show during their allotted time and engaged with me in a conversation about the book.

At the end of our conversation, each book reviewer asked listeners to call in and give their responses to the following questions—given to them (i.e., the listeners) prior to the activity:

- What is the takeaway point of the book for me?
- How could I use the ideas in this book as a tool for leaders, leadership, or leading?

In this fashion, the book review assignment benefited not only students reviewing individual books but also the students listening. A threaded discussion was provided along with the link to the recording for students not able to attend the book reviews live, so that all could participate in the activity.

Final Thoughts about BlogTalkRadio

Getting set up in BlogTalkRadio was easy. The harder part was thinking through the actual "performance" of hosting a live show focused on facilitating student learning. Starting with the goals for each of these activities, I did my best to think through the best possible use of this new tool to reach those learning and performance goals for students. Even though I had never scripted what I intended to say in my face-to-face classes, after listening to the recording of my pilot session with BlogTalkRadio, I felt compelled to script all future class sessions. With a script in front of me and the agenda in front of my students, I felt more confident in how this online session would go, especially when working with real students in a live online class session.

While I was aware of how important the scripting was for me in planning for these sessions, I also realized by listening to students when they introduced themselves to me how important preparing those talking points was for them. Most students focused on their answers. They came across as more polished and knowing some of the nuances of leadership. Other students came across with an unfocused delivery that gave little evidence of their preparation for the session. I believe the process of providing structure to BlogTalkRadio sessions in the form of question prompts, asking students to prepare talking points ahead of time, and showcasing individual student responses in a web-based talk-radio format, heightened student motivation and engagement, and produced higher level responses from students on planned topics of interest to all.

While BlogTalkRadio is a new tool for me, I am enjoying thinking and planning for all of the possibilities of this new tool for enhancing and increasing the interactivity of my online courses. Do yourself a favor and check out BlogTalkRadio! Be sure to send me information about upcoming episodes of your live show. I hope you enjoy using BlogTalkRadio in your teaching as much as I have.

Bio

Connie Fulmer earned her Ph.D. in Educational Administration at The Pennsylvania State University and started her academic career at Northern Illinois University. In July of 2000, Connie joined the Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies (ALPS) faculty here at UCD and served in the following leadership positions: Program Chair of the ALPS Principal Licensure Program, Coordinator of Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies Division, Teacher Education Division Director, and Program Chair of all programs in the School of Education and Human Development (SHED).