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Practicing Reference . . .

A Blog's Life*

Mary Whisner**

Seeking to provide a current awareness service to an underserved part of her library's clientele, Ms. Whisner enters the world of blogging and discovers that there is both joy and learning to be had in bringing a blog to life.

¶1 Somewhat to my own surprise, I started a blog in January 2005. I had not even read many blogs before then, and I certainly was not itching to try out the new medium. Nonetheless, try it I did. I've kept at it and, in the process, learned many things and experienced a range of emotions, from frustration through bafflement to excitement and glee. The question of whether developing and writing this blog is a good use of my time still remains open.

Why a Blog?

¶2 I trace my blog, Trial Ad Notes (<http://trialadnotes.blogspot.com>), to a talk that had nothing at all to do with blogs. In June 2004, University of Washington law librarianship student Tammy Hinderman presented her paper on assessing law library services.¹ It had been years since we at the Gallagher Law Library had surveyed our users about any aspect of the library's services,² and hearing Tammy persuaded me it would be worthwhile to do so. Using a tool from the university,³ I created an online survey about the reference department's research services for faculty and staff. Although the whole survey was interesting to me at the time, only one comment is relevant to this tale of a blog's life.

I am a practicing attorney who teaches Trial Ad at night. I am limited in time for research. If UW could provide me with a focused notice, relating to evidence and trial advocacy

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1. See Tammy A. Hinderman, *What Is Your Library Worth? Changes in Evaluation Methods for Academic Law Libraries*, LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES Q., 2005, no. 1/2, 2005, at 1.
2. See Cheryl Rae Nyberg, *How to Master All You Survey*, 6 PERSPECTIVES: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 8 (1997) (describing an effective survey process, using as an example the University of Washington Law Library's 1996 survey of law students about their use of the library as study space).
3. Catalyst (<http://catalyst.washington.edu>) includes a variety of tools for the campus community, including ways to set up simple Web sites, submit work electronically, and create electronic portfolios.

tools, I would be more likely to access the research department. I think the research department is a tool that I fail to access and use would benefit my students and me.

¶3 The writer was one of the seventeen part-time instructors in the Trial Advocacy Program, which runs for two quarters (winter and spring) each year. The program is directed by Maureen Howard, a full-time faculty member, who lectures to the whole class each week; the part-time instructors work with small groups of students on skills exercises, culminating in a mock trial at the end of the course. Providing service to the one instructor who commented would be good; providing that service to all of the instructors would be even better. After corresponding with the one who wrote, I met with Professor Howard. She liked the idea of providing some current awareness service to the faculty. Moreover, she thought it would be helpful for the students to follow new developments as well.

¶4 Trial advocacy was an untapped market for reference service. Although other part-time instructors ask reference staff to do research or find and download documents, the trial ad instructors never had. And although reference librarians speak to many upper-level classes and seminars about research techniques and sources, we had never worked with the trial ad program. Given what we do for other faculty and classes, I thought it would not be out of proportion to develop a new service suited to the needs of this underserved group of our primary patrons.

¶5 Over the next several months, I pondered how to provide the service. What sort of information should I offer? How could I deliver it?

¶6 Content was open. When I'd written to the first instructor, I'd tossed off several possibilities—articles on teaching techniques, information about particular topics in trial practice, new cases, empirical studies, news stories—and she said that any of those would be useful.

¶7 I decided to focus on Washington State. Most of our graduates stay in the state and, of course, all of the instructors practice here. So I would concentrate on cases, legislation, court rules, bar activities, and so on in Washington. On the other hand, good trial techniques are good trial techniques, so I would include tips from anywhere in the United States. I left myself free to include anything that caught my eye—I just didn't set out to follow all states.

¶8 The first instructor also gave me some advice about format: "I have noticed that the fewer clicks the better with me, so if the list could include the kernel in the description, that would be easier to review and I would be able to spend more time with the substance if I could clearly pick out what I needed." So the audience could be interested in a wide range of material—but would not want long articles or lists of citations. While I hoped that some students would be interested in the material—even when it was not needed for a particular class assignment—I knew that students, like their instructors, were very busy and would also want short, accessible items. The information would need to be packaged well.

¶9 One idea I had was simply to create a Word document about once a week and to have the trial advocacy program's administrative assistant post it on the course Web site. I drafted such a document (summarizing a couple of recent

cases and noting a proposed court rule change) and sent it to Professor Howard for her comments.

¶10 Before she replied, though, I thought: *blog*. A blog would let me post my updates directly, without the added step of having someone else put it on the course Web site. A blog could have short, easily skimmed items with links to more information for the faculty or students who wanted them. A blog might be just the right medium for what I was trying to do.

How?

¶11 Good idea, but how does one set up a blog? I didn't want to research thoroughly the different possibilities—hosts, software, servers, etc. (Have I mentioned that I am not essentially techie?) I would only do it if it seemed easy. I wrote to Stephanie Davidson, a law librarian who had run blogs and was much more Web savvy than I. She explained:

At the low end, a free service like Blogger will lead you by the hand, making blog creation and maintenance as easy as ordering a book through Amazon (probably easier). At the high end, you can install and configure server applications (e.g., Movable Type, or Radio) and use them to control your whole site (and not look like a blog at all).⁴

She went on, but I was very attracted by the promise that Blogger would lead me by the hand. Installing and configuring server applications was over my head.

¶12 Blogger.com (owned by Google, by the way) did indeed make it easy for me to get started. A menu of templates lets the beginning blogger choose a look—say, bright and colorful or dark and edgy. I chose something conservative—simple fonts, plain layout, dignified.⁵ In a few minutes I had a blog. And within an hour and a half I had cut and pasted the paragraphs from my Word draft and had several posts. I kept posting⁶—one post or a few at a time, a few times a week—for the next several months, always with the idea that the blog was an experiment and would need to be evaluated.

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4. E-mail from Stephanie Davidson, Reference and Electronic Resources Librarian, Yale Law Library, to author (Jan. 19, 2005) (on file with author). By the way, I had checked to see whether Catalyst had a blogging tool.
 5. The same template has been used by other law librarians. See Law Dawg Blawg (<http://lawdawglib.blogspot.com/>) (Southern Illinois University Law Library); Trial Advocacy Blog (<http://indexhtml.blogspot.com/>) (Temple Law Library's blog for the school's trial ad program); Library Boy (<http://micheladrien.blogspot.com/>) (law librarian at Supreme Court of Canada); Maryland Law (<http://marylandlaw.blogspot.com/>) (Baltimore law firm librarian); Vox Bibliothecae (<http://voxbibliothecae.blogspot.com/>) (blog on social justice issues from the Zimmerman Law Library, University of Dayton School of Law).
 6. I invited the trial ad faculty to sign up so they could post also. Several signed up, but no one to date has ever posted.

Now for Some Readers . . .

¶13 Once I received the go-ahead from Professor Howard, I announced the availability of the blog to the instructors. One commented that the blog wouldn't be useful to her because she kept up with the advance sheets and already knew about recent cases. (She also remarked that she didn't like blogs in general because they lacked organization.) Another said that it looked interesting, but he wondered how he would remember to visit it. That inspired me to look for a way for people to subscribe via e-mail. Again I sought advice, this time from Diane Murley, and I set up the same e-mail service she used at Southern Illinois University.⁷

¶14 About a month later, the administrative assistant forwarded an e-mail announcement about the blog to the trial ad students. I re-sent the announcement a couple of weeks later, at the start of spring quarter. To my knowledge, none of the instructors mentioned the blog in class.

¶15 While my target audience was the class, I believed that others (clinicians, civil procedure professors, students in the mock trial competition, lawyers) would be interested. So I also announced the blog on the law school's e-mail lists for faculty and students and the list for members of Law Librarians of Puget Sound.

The Joy of Blogging

¶16 It tickled me to write a paragraph, insert a link or two, post it, and see it up on the Web. The ease of posting made it fun. It was a different sort of writing than when I prepare research guides or write for print publication. It was a little like writing the short pieces I have done for the law library news column of our law school newsletter. Or like some of the posts I've written for e-mail discussion lists, conveying "here's an item you might find interesting" and, sometimes, "here's what I think about it."

¶17 I enjoyed dabbling in the subject area. I don't purport to be an expert in trial practice,⁸ but I'm interested in it and I can find and discuss relevant material. In a break from my usual librarian role of saying "Here's how you can find a case about hearsay and the confrontation clause," I was reading the case myself and writing a short summary. The blog gave me a reason to look at recent cases, pending bills, notices from the bar association, and more—always with the aim of finding something to share—and I enjoyed that.

7. At the time, she recommended Bloglet.com. Now she has switched to FeedBlitz.com and I'm still with Bloglet.

8. My only trial experience has been in the jury box. That lack of experience is one reason I'd hoped that the faculty would contribute to the blog.

Technical Ups and Downs

¶18 As I've said, Blogger makes it easy to get started without being a techie. But it also has some help screens suggesting ways to modify the template if one wants. I tinkered a little with these "Blogger hacks" and found it fun. I followed Blogger's advice to save a copy of the template before messing with it. When my experiments didn't work as planned, I could go back to what I had. The help screens don't explain everything, though, and I again got help from Diane Murley, who explained to me why she had set up the SIU blog the way she had and how I could copy her code.⁹

¶19 It is very easy to compose posts on Blogger using an interface that is basically a simple word processor. But one can also view and edit the underlying HTML, and I started doing that. Typing in "Smith v. Jones" became more comfortable than typing "Smith v. Jones" and moving the mouse up to the icon for italics. I even learned how to change the font style, size, and color. I was pleased. (Readers who have been fluent in HTML for a decade can go ahead and laugh.)

¶20 There were technical frustrations too. Like the vanishing posts, for instance. I would read a case on Westlaw, link to it using Blogger's BlogThis! tool, work hard on writing a summary that was light (or at least not horribly dull) yet accurate, and post it. I'd see it on the screen. And then the next day: gone! Gritting my teeth I'd reconstruct the post. Once in a while the first one would reappear and then I'd have two. It was maddening. I corresponded with Blogger support (thanks, Graham!). I learned to cut and paste everything I composed into a Word document. At least if the post vanished I could recreate it in a few clicks instead of starting from scratch. This went on for months.¹⁰

The First Evaluation

¶21 Toward the end of the course, in May, I created an online survey about the blog. I announced it in the blog itself and via e-mail to the trial advocacy faculty and students and to the law school faculty generally.

¶22 Responses were not overwhelming. Of the eighty-six students in the class, only twenty-seven took the survey. Fourteen reported that they had never viewed the blog; only two said they had visited five or more times. Student comments included:

- "I did not even know it existed."
- "I didn't use it much, because I didn't learn about it until Spring quarter was

9. E-mail from Diane Murley, Reference/Web Services Librarian, Southern Illinois University School of Law, to author (Apr. 5, 2005) (on file with author).

10. Since the problem only seemed to happen when I linked to cases on Westlaw, I hypothesized that it had something to do with the length of the URL. For a few months now, I have been converting the Westlaw links to tiny URLs (using www.tinyurl.com), and my posts haven't disappeared. Maybe my hypothesis was correct, or maybe something else has changed.

almost over. It looked interesting, and I would have used it more had I been aware of it.”

Many students must have overlooked the e-mail announcements in March.

¶23 Because blogs have been in the news so much I was surprised when a student commented, “I have no idea what a blog is.” Another student wrote: “I never used the blog because it was never adequately described. I didn’t know why it would be worth looking at. If I had known more about the content, I might have looked at it.” Of course, my e-mail announcements had said something about what was in the blog. But that wasn’t enough. Even this wired generation of students won’t necessarily click on the link in an e-mail message to see what’s there. Clearly the promotion had been inadequate.

¶24 The survey respondents who had seen the blog—including eleven legal professionals, some from out of state—did like it.¹¹ And I was encouraged by the student who wrote, “It is a great tool, and will catch on over time. Don’t give up!” But was it worth doing?

¶25 I thought that it had failed to serve its intended audience, but I believed that more of the trial ad students and faculty could be reached with better promotion. Professor Howard agreed and said she would mention it in the large lectures. She also hoped to generate more interaction by writing posts and having the part-time instructors post or comment on posts.

¶26 My work on the blog had served other law school patrons. When I was looking for information about trial practice, I often found material worth forwarding to other faculty. For instance, I told the health law faculty about bills and empirical studies related to damage caps in medical malpractice cases, and I passed along links to solo practice resources to the career planning dean and to the lecturers who teach a course in solo and small firm practice. The outside users, while not the target audience, were nice to have. It is good to provide a service to the bar and the community—not just because serving is good in itself but also because it can improve the visibility of the law library and the law school.

¶27 In assessing the blog’s value, I also weighed staff development—namely, my own. I was learning a lot, both technically and substantively. And I was enjoying it. Now, I wouldn’t suggest that a library should have a staff member spend

11. The following percentages of respondents agreed or agreed strongly with a statement that they liked to see the following types of posts:

- Summaries of recent Washington cases: 83%
- Links to articles in professional publications: 80%
- Summaries of recent 9th Circuit cases: 77%
- Summaries of current Washington bills and legislation: 67%
- Summaries of current federal bills and legislation: 56%
- Announcements of local events: 50%
- Links to newspaper stories: 47%
- Links to posts on other blogs: 37%
- Information about new books in the Law Library: 37%

I assumed that the low score for books in our library was affected by the survey responses from people outside the law school. I still highlight books from time to time. I’m a librarian.

several hours a week puttering on something *just* because she thinks it's fun. But if the project also has the potential to serve the library's users, then the fact that the librarian is learning and having fun is a plus.

¶28 All in all, I decided to keep going—still with the understanding that the blog need not go on indefinitely.

The Second Year

¶29 There were themes that continued during the second year in the blog's life: developing an audience, making technical improvements, and evaluating the blog.

¶30 Promotion was much better. At the start of the class, in January, Professor Howard sent e-mail messages about the blog to students and instructors and, in class, told the students that she expected them to look at it at least once a week. A few weeks later, she had me present a brief demo to the class.

¶31 To get a better idea of readership, I installed a free service to count visits (Sitemeter.com). As with my other technical choices, I did not do much research first, but it worked out. I only set out to get a simple tally of hits per day, but I got much more. A world map showed me recent visitors—surprisingly, most were from elsewhere in the United States and some were from abroad (including Indonesia, Greece, and Norway). Visitors were also listed by domain. Although some of our students use commercial ISPs, I wanted to see more visits from *u.washington.edu*, our university's domain.¹²

¶32 I talked to a couple of students informally. Neither had seen the blog. They both told me they were just too busy to look at anything that wasn't required. Later one told me that she had visited the blog and it did seem interesting. One afternoon I printed the URL and a brief description of the blog on slips of paper and went door to door talking to professors in related subjects. An evidence professor and a couple of clinical professors said they would look at the blog.

¶33 With a few hundred postings, the blog was getting unwieldy. A student in this year's class who wanted to find tips about opening statements would have to wade through a lot. And what busy student would want to do that? I'd seen other blogs with some sort of indexing (or posts listed by "category"). The Illinois Trial Practice Weblog (www.illinoistrialpractice.com), for instance, lets the user choose "Depositions" to see all the posts on that topic. How could I do that? It didn't seem to be an option in Blogger itself (although some other blog systems are set up with categories).

¶34 A Google search led me to FreshBlog: Blogger Hacks, Categories, Tips & Tricks (<http://blogfresh.blogspot.com/>), and that gave me the tools I needed: (1) a way to tag posts with index terms that would be stored; (2) a way to make

12. Sitemeter also lets me see how people come to the blog—for instance, if they have run a Google search or follow a link. Looking at the searches feels a bit voyeuristic, but it's also a fascinating peek into information seeking. Sometimes the blog appears to be a good resource, based on the search. Other times, I know that the blog doesn't have the information that is sought.

the tags show in the posts with links to the place where all the tags were stored; and (3) a way to make the indexing appear on the front page of my blog. It was all put together into a package called FreshTags (<http://ghill.customer.netSPACE.net.au/freshtags/index.html>)¹³ by an Australian graduate student named Greg Hill. It is “a collaborative effort, released under community licensing.” Boiled down, step one uses a tag hosting service (owned by Yahoo) called Delicious (<http://del.icio.us>); step two uses a bit of Java Script (in a bookmarklet) by someone in the United States named Ted Ernst; and step three, the part that makes it look good, is Mr. Hill’s programming. I tried it out. And it didn’t work. I posted a message on FreshBlog and, in just a short time, I had a message from Mr. Hill, explaining how I had pasted the code into the wrong spot and what I needed to do to fix it.¹⁴ Excited by the new possibilities, I spent a good chunk of that weekend tagging old posts. The more posts were indexed, the cooler the whole system seemed.

¶35 Jumping into this project, I let go of some of my librarian habits. I did not think through how I was going to index posts—would I have a hierarchy? sub-headings? controlled vocabulary? For almost a year I had been labeling posts with broad categories (“case,” “legislation,” “tip,” “book,” “news,” etc.). I used these as tags. And then I also added more specific tags that I thought would help people find whatever it was they sought. For example, one post about a recent case has the following tags: **911-calls, hearsay, Crawford-v-Wash, Sanders, cases.** Some

13. FreshTags 0.5 was released in January 2006, not long before I went out looking for a solution to my indexing problem.

14. I was struck by his generosity at such a distance. Because I knew them, I was grateful but not surprised when Stephanie Davidson and Diane Murley answered my queries. But why should a Ph.D. candidate in Australia help me? I asked him, and he wrote:

From my perspective, this is a continuation of the “geek culture,” where people make things because, well, they’re cool! They want to see them working, and they want other people to appreciate the coolness of them too. While there’s some ego involved, they rarely get paid for it (it’s not their job) and when they do go into business, money isn’t the motivation. While there have always been people like this—think of backyard inventors and, in particular, Britain’s long history of cranks and eccentrics—it seems to me that such people are spread fairly thinly, geographically-speaking. As a result of the modern communication networks, likeminded people are able to connect. My suspicion is that this really got underway in America’s progressive universities in the 60s: the hacker culture that emerged at Berkeley and MIT come to mind. . . .

You can see this same geek culture operating in sites like Slashdot, projects like Wikipedia and magazines like *Make*. Philosophically, I guess guys like Richard Stallman and Eric Raymond—and probably Larry Lessig—try to codify this stance.

As for the PhD thing . . . well, I’m probably not the first PhD candidate to run little geeky side projects. . . . I’ve been programming for fun since I was 12, so this is purely a hobby, a 21st century version of making cuckoo clocks in my backyard or something

E-mail from Greg Hill, Ph.D. candidate, Monash University, to author (Feb. 27, 2006) (on file with author).

This aspect of (computer) geek culture seems strikingly like the part of library culture that has people digging for information—even for strangers outside the patron base—because they like to be able to find it and to help out. Maybe this trait is common among people passionate about any pursuit—as when an amateur genealogist helps a friend of a friend find out when her grandfather immigrated or a classic car enthusiastic explains to someone how to nurse a 1950s Chevy back to life. This sharing of information—whether locally or internationally—is a special gift. There is pleasure in being part of the community where it takes place.

of my choices might seem odd. For instance, I don't have a tag for "trials." Why not? I figure that everything in the blog is about some aspect of trials, so that tag would be meaningless. I also don't have a tag for "Washington State," for the same reason. At first, I didn't put in judges' names, but then I started tagging some. (The Sanders in the above example is Justice Sanders, who dissented in the case summarized.) I started adding "UW" to any post that mentioned something going on at the law school, an alumnus, or a trial ad instructor. Why not?

¶36 FreshTags let me choose among several ways of displaying the indexing. I opted for a pull-down menu that lists tags in order of frequency.¹⁵ Alphabetical order would make sense to some people—but then users would have to skim past dozens of tags that are only used one or two times in order to get to the ones they'd probably want—the ones that index a lot of posts. If the user does not select any tag, then the default display is a list of posts tagged as "tips."

¶37 Since I began adding tags, I have seen the visits go up from an average of about fifteen per day to forty per day. Is it because of the tags? I'm not sure, but I am sure that they make the site much more useful.

Conclusion

¶38 It may still be too early to say whether the service to the faculty and students warrants the time I devote to the blog. It could well be that the users just don't have the right combination of time and interest to make use of it, or that what it offers is not what they want to see. Or it will become more useful as its content is developed and as users get used to the medium. A couple of months ago my desk calendar had a cartoon of a forlorn man in a suit with another man patting his arm and saying: "You're better than ever at something we don't need done anymore."¹⁶ That resonated: the blog is better than ever, but perhaps it is not really needed.

¶39 Regardless of that assessment, I am glad that I have worked on the blog because I have learned so much and developed new skills. It's been fun for me. It has also produced unexpected benefits in current awareness for faculty and students outside the trial advocacy program as well as some skills and information I have shared with my reference colleagues.

15. Currently the most frequent tags (with twenty or more posts each) are cases, legislation, news, tips, UW, juries, evidence, judges, practice-of-law, event, and empirical-studies.

Note my inconsistency in having "event" singular when most other tags are plural. That's an artifact of how I started out. There are other oddities and inconsistencies. For example, when I tag names, I only use the surname. So Judge Howard and Professor Howard will be linked. I've cleaned up a few of the inconsistencies along the way. Early on, I tagged two posts with "guns," but when I got to cases involving "firearms enhancements," I went back and changed "guns" to "firearms." I still haven't finished tagging all the posts, and I would rather get to them than retag posts for which I've provided *some* access.

16. William Hamilton cartoon, *NEW YORKER* (Nov. 17, 2003), reprinted in *CARTOONS FROM THE NEW YORKER 2006 CALENDAR* (2005) (January 11), available at <http://www.cartoonbank.com> (last visited Apr. 10, 2006) (search for ID 68667).

