

Blogging in the School Environment:
Promises and Challenges
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Blogs rose to prominence in 1997 and now number in the several millions and yet many schools still don't know what a blog is. The rise of blogging has given schools a valuable tool for communication from home to school, from teacher to teacher, and from student to authentic audiences that exist outside of the classroom walls. However, most schools aren't even aware of this nearly free tool available to them. If used correctly, blogs can provide a better way for communicating with parents than traditional school web sites, they can motivate students to write by connecting their writing to readers, and they can give teachers a self-reflective tool for their own professional development.

A blog, of course, is the popular name for a web log, a journal of sorts that allows anyone to publish articles and usually allows readers to post comments. In practice, the difference between a traditional web site and a blog is that a blog is far easier to set up than a traditional web site and so it is more frequently updated. “[A blogger] does not have to do any programming, or even formatting to create a technically sophisticated, visually impressive web site,” (Martindale, 56). A blog allows visitors to subscribe to it, meaning that updates to the page can be sent to subscribers automatically via e-mail or a blog reader. These subscriptions are a major advantage over a traditional web site in that visitors do not have to manually visit the page for updates; updates will be sent out to them when available. “A key feature to most blogs is the automated syndication of content,” (Martindale, 56). Finally, due to the ability to handle comments, blogging can become a two-communication tool unlike a web site that is often static and only one-way in terms of its communication. The two-way nature of the medium allows students to gain a sense of audience in their writing and allows parents a convenient avenue for communicating with school leaders that doesn't involve taking time off from work or visiting the

school. Having constant communication with parents allows schools to become aware of misunderstandings and concerns and address them.

The Home School Connection

Schools are increasingly aware that they need to have a web site to have a public presence on the web. However, the majority of school web sites in a district like Los Angeles Unified are static pages set up by volunteers, experts, and other school outsiders. Often these sites sit without updates for years when teachers and administrators find themselves too busy or too intimidated to update the pages that they did not create themselves. Posting to a blog, however, is as simple as sending an e-mail. “Teachers can post tips, explanations, or [work] samples to help reduce confusion. They also can post hyperlinks to Web sites that provide assignment-related homework helpers and resources...and even educational games for concept reinforcement,” (Ray, 2006, 176). Since the blog is easier to update, teachers are more likely to update it frequently. Since it is updated frequently, parents are more likely to visit or subscribe.

Even in low income schools where many students do not have computers at home, many parents do have access to e-mail via cell phones. If parents subscribe to a blog by e-mail they can easily receive reliable updates and teachers can easily send valuable information as they find it. In the same way that friends know what’s happening in each other’s lives via social networking services like Facebook, parents can know exactly what’s happening in the classroom if a teacher communicates about lessons, units, and standards via a blog. Parents can be encouraged to help at home if they are provided with frequent tips about how to do so.

School offices themselves can use blogs as a communication tool, saving money on paper and copying and ensuring that important messages make it home. Schools like Magnolia High

School in Texas use blogs entirely for the creation of their web site and they were awarded the School Web Site of the Month Award, (Tech Directions 2008). In addition, posting to a blog can humanize both the school leaders and the school itself. A Florida superintendent found that his blog drew hundreds of comments each week. “It’s hard to view school leaders as bureaucratic, out of touch, and aloof when they show their humanity week after week online by sharing their fears, dreams, hopes, frustrations, and plans,” (Carr, 2007, 30). Although parents do not necessarily visit a school every day, they can stay in touch with the school’s goals via a blog. Unlike prerecorded calls from a principal that manage to arrive just when a family is sitting down to dinner, a blog makes communication convenient not just for schools but also for families; information can be accessed at any time that families are able to do so.

Professional Development

Professional development often consists of one hour scattershot presentations with little follow-through and even less teacher input. By providing time for teachers to participate in blog reading or writing as professional development, administrators can support self-reflective practice and differentiated instruction tailored to teacher’s needs. Networks of like-minded teachers are already blogging online. By beginning to enter the dialogue through one’s own blog and by leaving comments on others, teachers can quickly find themselves in the company of some of the nation’s finest educators and have access to some of the latest research being circulated. “In a workplace setting where professionals are isolated from each other for the majority of the day, effective use of a blog is one method of bringing educators together. The typical workshop model of professional development does not meet the needs of most teachers.” (Poling, 2005, 14). An example of this in practice, is urban science teacher and

blogger, Ms. Frizzle who came to “be recognized by herself and others as a ‘reform-minded’ teacher committed to excellence and equity in education,” (Luehmann, 2008, 287) all because of her efforts of maintaining a blog. Her blogging, both her practice of reflecting on and writing about her teaching and the conversations that ensued with other educators, began to inform her teaching as much as her teaching influenced her blogging.

“Teachers who work in urban settings face additional challenges because many of their students come to school with significant disadvantages (such as those linked to poverty)...and are different from the teachers themselves,” (Luehmann, 2008, 291). Often times lunch room conversations in such schools consist of complaining about students, parents, and a system that seems to hold everyone back. Teachers who blog sometimes share similar frustrations but are likely to couple them with their strategies and ideas about how to make them better. The blogosphere is almost like an anti-lunch room space where negativity is tempered by constructive ideas and a hope that things can be better. Blogs “encourage ongoing and thoughtful writing and reflection...teachers engage in “two simultaneous conversations: one with the self and one with others,” (Luehmann, 2008, 289).

Whereas networking with teachers outside of a school is nearly impossible under normal circumstances, blogging allows teachers to make connections across districts, across the country, and across continents. While it’s easy to feel like the way things are done at a particular school are the only way things are done, a teacher can quickly start to feel like they are part of a system bigger than their own school by communicating with and being challenged by the thinking of some of the most dedicated and thoughtful teachers in their fields. In time-constrained situations like banked time professional development, it is perhaps best for teachers to focus narrowly on a

particular goal...language development, for example...when doing their blog reading and search for posts related to that focus using a blog search site like Technorati.com.

Classroom Use

Blogs in the classroom can replace paper and pencil journal writing, showcase student work, collect student research on a particular topic, or be the format for creative writing. Aside from the novelty of working on a computer, the main advantage of blogging as a writing activity is that online writing has an audience whereas most classroom assignments normally begin and end with the classroom walls and the teacher as the only reader. Instead of merely talking about writing for an audience, blogs provide that authentic audience. Even if commenters are only parents, other students, and other teachers at a particular school, students are more motivated when they can receive instantaneous feedback on their writing.

Instead of writing simply because the teacher tells them to, “[Student bloggers] develop more authority as critics with valued opinions and voice and let go of some of their fear about making mistakes that can prevent inexperienced writers from discovering and communicating,” (Smith, 2008, 35). It’s empowering for novice writers to begin to see themselves as “real writers” and their enthusiasm can spill over to their lives outside of school. “More teen bloggers (47 percent) write outside school for personal reasons than do teens who don’t blog (33 percent),” (Ramaswani, 4). However, it’s not only teenagers who benefit from blogging. “Before blogging, 39 percent of the third-graders said they liked writing at school; after the [blogging] project, that number rose to 67 percent,” (Ramaswani, 4). There are also qualitative benefits as well, “[A recent study showed] that students who blog also write more and

write better,” (Ramaswani, 3). “General attitudes toward writing improved...the quality of writing samples increased...students remained motivated,” (Ramaswani, 4).

In addition to motivating students who need motivating and helping to improve the writing of struggling students, integrating technology into the curriculum in the twenty-first century is increasingly no longer an option. Our schools are woefully inadequate at keeping up with the revolution in personal computing and giving students the tools they will need to be successful in an increasingly digital world. It is those students who are economically disadvantaged who are hit the hardest. Blogs, however, can “develop [students’] digital fluency while also strengthening their traditional literacy skills,” (Witte, 2007, 92). The writing that students do online have the potential to go beyond typical classroom writing because of the addition of audience which helps authors find a voice and the inclusion of hyperlinks (references) that help students begin to evaluate and synthesize information. “Classroom blogs bridge the ever-widening gap between out-of-school literacies and in-school literacies...These essential new literacies of online reading comprehension emphasize higher order thinking skills, like analysis, synthesis and evaluation,” (Zawalinski, 2009, 652).

While blogging might seem like the perfect enrichment activity for gifted students and those who already high achieving, it is low achieving students who are not already motivated to write who may benefit most from blogging in the classroom. Students who are learning English or are intimidated by writing might find that blogging “opens up possibilities for risk-taking and interactivity that teach important lessons about the role of error and audience response in composing process,” (Smith, 2008, 35). Blogging can motivate the unmotivated, encourage beginning writers, and help students see the link between writing and authentic communication.

Practical Concerns

Pedagogy. “Blogging doesn’t solve a problem just because you have the technology...blogging should be weaved into other components of a classroom writing program... Too often in blogging, attention to pedagogy and the process of writing are ignored” (Ramaswani, 6). Teachers who are unfamiliar with blogging might be likely to become enamored by the technology and forget about teaching writing. Like any subject, “Good teaching requires effective planning, especially with the introduction of a new online writing technology,” (Kajder, 2004, 33). Teachers must find a way to integrate this new technology effectively with their existing writing programs. Rubrics can be established to create writing goals. Strategic comments left on blogs can challenge students to rethink their communication and push them to the next level. Simply turning on a computer and letting students poorly communicate will not improve writing without strategically planned mini-lessons, and gentle teacher prodding.

Equipment and Money. While blogging platforms such as Edublogs.com, Wordpress, Blogger, and Blogspot are all free, there are costs associated with purchasing and supporting working computer equipment in schools. Fortunately, even the least powerful internet connected computer can handle the light processing requirements of blogging. Unfortunately, having even one working computer is sometimes a novelty for many urban elementary school classrooms. Classrooms with only one computer will have to develop a schedule to allow all students to get to the computer in turn. Although this can be frustrating for teachers, the promise of the blogging platform mean that we cannot use a lack of equipment as an excuse not to bring this tool to the classroom.

Teachers need to be aware that there is some work involved in managing student accounts if each student is to have their own account. Once a year, teachers will need to set up student accounts. Some teachers get around this by having every student post from the same account or having students create their own accounts. Once created, however, commenting on blogs may be easier to manage than collecting and responding to student writing journals. Teachers will also want to run anti-spam software on their blog since blogs are frequently besieged by spam comments. Good (and free) anti-spam blog plugins can take care of 99% of spam.

Student Safety In addition, teachers need to take care to ensure that students remain safe online. Students should not post student last names or any identifying information online and students should be taught how to interact safely with others they may encounter online. While teachers may see this training as an unnecessary obligation, we know that students are going online at home and that schools are doing very little to teach cyber safety. By allowing students to use the internet responsibly in school we are beginning to teach them how to use this new tool safely. Traditional “stranger danger” safety lessons in school need to transition to include how to interact appropriately and remain safe online. Blogging can provide an excuse to begin to include such lessons in the curriculum.

Conclusion

A teacher needs only to look around their own home to see how the internet and computer technology has begun to transform their life. Unfortunately, typical classrooms haven't begun to transform in the same way. Integrating technology in the curriculum is no longer an option for teachers who wish to keep their classroom relevant. Blogging is one tool that shows promise in motivating reluctant writers and supporting self-reflection among teachers and students. In

addition, schools can use the blogging platform as a means of communicating with parents consistently and conveniently. Teachers can't wait until their classroom has state of the art computers to begin the process since that day may never come. Even the least powerful computers are ready to blog. The question is really whether schools are ready.

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