

CHAPTER 1

Blogs

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What if all teachers and students described their classroom experiences like this (Warlick, 2007)?

[My students] see themselves as part of a global community—a community that shares. . . . This international audience gives my students a purpose and they are motivated to do their best writing.

Kathy Cassidy, Teacher, Moose Jaw, Canada

I worried about making my students' developing language skills available to a wider audience—but I needn't have. They are developing their own voice and with it a greater degree of responsibility and confidence.

Paul Harrington, Teacher, Blackwood, United Kingdom

We have an authentic global audience for the events that happen in our school. . . . [W]e have a real purpose for writing to inform, to educate, to connect.

—Teacher from New Zealand

These comments from educators using Class Blogmeister, a classroom blogging tool developed by David Warlick, show the positive impact that blogs can have on student engagement and performance. *What are blogs and why should educators use them? What does a fully developed blogging project look like and require? Where can educators find blogging resources?* These are some of the questions that educational leaders are asking in order to support twenty-first-century teachers and students.

WHAT ARE BLOGS?

In simple terms, blogs are web-based logs or journals (*web log* shortened to *blog*). The basic concept behind blogging is not new. Social interaction in teaching and learning is a keystone of educational theory. When teachers and students blog, they are able to actively engage audiences outside the usual classroom time boundaries.

Individuals and groups are drawn to blogs for the following reasons:

- They are simple to set up, edit, and publish; no computer language is needed.
- Topics can be as formal or personal as deemed appropriate by the writer.
- Recent entries (*posts*) are easily located as blogs are published in reverse chronological order.
- There are easy ways to subscribe (see Chapter Four).
- Comments from an audience are a standard part of the process, thus creating two-way conversations.

So what are the implications for blogging as pedagogy and what is their potential impact on student engagement?

EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE FOR BLOGGING

SupportBlogging.com, a site set up to help promote an understanding of the benefits of educational blogging, suggests that “one of the great educational benefits of the read/write web, and blogging particularly, is the opportunity for the student to become a ‘teacher’ by presenting material to an audience. When we teach, we learn” (Hargadon, 2009).

In the past, when a student wrote in class for a single teacher who provided grade-based criticism, student audience was minimal. When student writing was shared or published outside the classroom, feedback also was limited to local, rather than global, area connections.

With the rapid growth of the read-write web, it is as easy to create and exchange content as it is to consume it. Likewise, it is increasingly easy to build an interactive network. With a single click of the mouse, classes can engage in conversations with people from around the world and get authentic feedback. Different than simply keeping a notebook or diary of writing for a single audience, blogs can be public, commented on, and safely moderated before comments are published. This means that educators can provide authentic opportunities for their students to simultaneously analyze, evaluate, and create content that is immediately published for a global audience. Blogging provides new opportunities to receive feedback and see things in a different way. When put to use in education, blogging can have a profound effect on learners.

BLOGGING BEST PRACTICES: THE ALICE PROJECT

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
[asked Alice]

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865/2008)

In fall 2009, educator Christian Long’s Alice Project (2009) challenged sixty tenth-grade high school students to answer the following questions:

- How can we make *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* come alive for us?
- More important, how can we create something together that would give an audience outside our classroom its own version of Alice’s unexpected journey through Wonderland?
- Can we become the world’s most passionate authorities on Carroll’s story in the process?
- And how would we create and nurture an equally passionate audience in just two short months?

On a traditional level, the challenges were simple:

- Read a richly annotated version of Lewis Carroll’s classic children’s story, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.
- Write rigorously about what caught one’s eye along the way, balancing playful curiosity with line-by-line analysis.
- Make it interesting for others.

The last challenge, as much as anything else, became the heart of this project.

Students were excited to share their ideas with and get insight from people around the world. The blog was the right “tool” to provide a balance between traditional writing and global conversation. Beyond these questions, the students were required to collaborate on project guidelines, craft and nurture an audience over time, and

engage professional judges from around the world to evaluate their individual efforts and teamwork.

TECHNICAL STEPS

The story of Alice is simple enough for a ten-year-old child to appreciate. However, the seemingly limitless intellectual word games and social innuendos in Carroll's work invite a rethink about how students could analyze Wonderland. It demands a more public, question-filled, and debate-centered, writing-as-exploration process. The question was not *if* blogging could work but *how* it should be done to ensure the richest experience possible for students.

It seemed logical to create a series of team-managed blogs to frame student analysis. Additionally, the blog entries were to create ongoing conversations while simultaneously engaging a global audience from day one.

To truly mirror the upside-down experience of young Alice, the students were challenged to be very public about their emerging insights and wrong turns alike. This was not about perfection. It was about fostering conversation. And it was about extending the four walls of the classroom in ways impossible traditionally.

FRAMING THE PROCESS

The first step was creating a teacher-managed home blog to serve as collective archive and one-stop map for visitors. Then a unique Alice Project blog was established for each team to design, compose, edit, and publish. Although there were many free platforms (e.g., Blogger.com or Edublogs.com) that could have been used, the Alice Project used WordPress.com, a free and easy-to-manage blogging system. Nothing was made permanently public until each team's editor had read over posts and comments, followed by the teacher's own review. This allowed classroom flexibility along with appropriate checks and balances.

To establish an audience, thirty-five judges from four continents were brought together to evaluate student work from day one. The judges were assigned specific teams to evaluate in terms of the quality of writing and technology use. Twitter was used to share student progress to thousands of educators around the world. This led to regular blog visitors and comments. Student grades also were based on the quantity and quality of blog posts and comments left on their peers' blogs. Comments from around the world acted as regular criticism and advice to student writers. Feedback was constant and authentic at all points.

REFLECTING ON TIME SPENT IN BLOGGING WONDERLAND

Here are some of the students' reflections on the Alice Project:

At first when this project was assigned I thought, "Mr. Long is crazy!!!" . . . I now see that one would have to put in the amount of time and effort to truly experience what this project was about.

Throughout the length of the Alice Project . . . I spent more and more time . . . refining my entries and making them valuable to myself, my group, and the rest of the world.

This was really out of my comfort zone, as in types of schoolwork. I don't want an A just because I participated, but because I actually immersed myself into it and gave it my best shot, even though I didn't know what I was getting myself into.

The attention [our blog] drew really shocked me and allowed me to realize that we made an impact on [an] intellectual society. . . . Also, the quality of work and skill shown by my teammates surprised me. The difference between hearing them speak and seeing what they wrote was incredible. I was humbled by the extent of language skill they had. (Long, 2009)

By the time six weeks had passed, the sixty students collectively had produced 335,000 words and 779 multiparagraph blog entries,

wrote 1,200 comments to each other, and received evaluative feedback from a global audience. (See the whole project at <http://aliceproject.wordpress.com>.)

Most tellingly, the students asked their teacher on the project's completion, "How do we go back and do *normal* school now?"

OTHER EXAMPLES OF BLOGS IN PRACTICE

Obviously not all blogging projects need to have the depth or complexity of the Alice Project, but any opportunities for blogging can be engaging and motivating. Blogs can facilitate inquiry and differentiated instruction by allowing students to explore and contribute to topics that interest them. Blogs support reflection in a public forum while students begin to consider issues such as audience, purpose, bias, and the reliability of information in the digital age.

There are many reasons to engage in blogging in a school setting. Here are some examples of educators' blogging experiences:

- Maria Knee, a kindergarten teacher at Deerfield Community School in Deerfield, New Hampshire, and winner of the 2008 Kay L. Bitter Vision Award for Excellence in Technology-Based PK–2 Education, uses a blog as an interactive showcase of her students' work (<http://www.mariaknee.com>).
- Dan Meyer, a high school math teacher and Google Fellow currently studying at Stanford University on a doctoral fellowship, uses his blog to bring transparency to his teaching practice (<http://blog.mrmeyer.com>).
- Jim Gates, a retired Pennsylvania educator, uses his "Tipline" to share ways technology can enhance teaching and learning and examine the real purpose of schools (<http://tipline.blogspot.com>).

- Anne Smith, an English teacher from Arapahoe High School in Colorado, uses her class blog to post homework assignments, key events, and discussion questions (www.blogger.com/profile/00573450327737964454). This allows other teachers and administrators to visit her classroom to learn from and participate in her lessons. She has created a number of transparent learning experiences using blogs (<http://learningandlaptops.blogspot.com>), including inviting Dan Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* (2006), to collaborate on a live blogging project.
- Many instructional leaders are sharing their ideas and thoughts about education in a collaborative group blog by school leaders for school leaders. Hosted by *Education Week*, the LeaderTalk blog (<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/LeaderTalk>) expresses the voice of the administrator and provides a great example of best practices by instructional leaders.

RESPONSIBLE BLOGGING

Although blogging comes with many educational benefits, it is not free from its share of issues, including legal concerns that may arise from students facing the public, educators' sharing of their thoughts and practices, copyright issues, and exposure to or interactions with external actors. Many district acceptable use policies (AUPs) have not caught up with the tools that are being used in schools, so it is important that guidelines are clearly set and modeled. Here are some places that you can start to look for resources.

In 2005 Bud Hunt, an instructional technologist for the St. Vrain Valley School District in northern Colorado, started a wiki to provide educators with a collaborative forum for developing guidelines for their blogging practices (<http://budtheteacher.com/wiki>). The space includes sample AUPs that can be revised

for different levels. Many blogging educators use Arapahoe (Colorado) High School's blogging policy (<http://ahsblogpolicy.pbworks.com>), which describes safe and responsible blogging as well as the traits of successful bloggers to help define general guidelines for the use of blogs. In addition, David Warlick offers an impressive collection of resources for developing schoolwide AUPs (<http://landmark-project.com/aup20/pmwiki.php?n=Main.AUPGuides>). It is important to remember that rules and regulations in online communications are just as important as classroom rules and procedures.

SUMMARY

Many teachers have discovered the value of classroom blogging as a way to engage students and demonstrate learning in new and transparent ways. Leading in the twenty-first century requires an understanding of the benefits and risks of tools such as blogs. Supporting blogging is one way to provide students with the guidance necessary to use these tools safely, effectively, and ethically.

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