Why Blog?

Will your Web log add to the world of knowledge? Here, our expert demonstrates the myriad benefits this form of communication holds for teachers, students, and parents alike.

WHAT ARE WE BLOGGING ABOUT? The headline from an article in the San Francisco Chronicle says it all: "Thanks to new media, we have all become messengers— but what are we saying?"

Technology is allowing anyone with a computer, the ability to type, and an Internet connection to become a published author—of sorts. Web logs, or "blogs," are the latest way that students, businesses, and many others are publishing their musings.

The term was coined in 1999, and today Webster's dictionary defines a blog as a "diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page." More importantly, it says that blogs are "typically updated daily" and that "blogs often reflect the personality of the author."

Yet, it is the content of blogs that matters, not the tool. The tools (see "Tools for Blogging," page 4) allow a broad, non-technical audience to publish news, information, and opinions widely. The content can range from dyed-in-the-wool journalism to stream-of-consciousness revelations. What you really need to consider before blogging, is: Why are you going to do it? To reach individuals with critical information, to express opinions, to teach students writing skills, or simply as an outlet for personal frustrations?

As California teacher (and blogger) Joel Arquillos says, "Ask yourself, 'So what?' before you start blogging. Will your blog add to the world of knowledge and learning, or is it just for fun?"

To Blog or Not to Blog?

Is the blogging craze relevant to educators? With a little imagination, it can be made to be, particularly as a way to strengthen the home-school connection. Many schools are using blogs to reach out to parents and the community with consistently updated information on school events and activities. In other instances, the traditional student "journaling" that is used to build writing skills is now being conducted online (and sometimes in public) via student blogs.

Resources for helping decide if blogging will help your school meet its communications or instructional goals are beginning to become available all over the Internet. Will Richardson, the supervisor of Instructional Technology and Communications at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ, maintains www.weblogg-ed.com, a Web site dedicated to discussing the use of Web logs in education.

Blogging to the 'Other Side of the World'

With the help of the network of teachers in the National Writing Project and librarian Delaney, students in one of Arquillos' classes began an exchange of ideas via blogging with students in Maine—or, in their view, "the other side of the world." The result was an open forum where kids from two different environments used writing to communicate their opinions, fears, desires, you name it. Dubbed the "Maine to California blog," the project gave kids freedom to discuss with an audience issues they found important. And, according to Arquillos, the students also "learned the power of writing and being able to defend their views."

His students even discussed traditionally sensitive issues with students in Maine teacher Dave Boardman's class. As shown in this student entry, the project created a cross-country blogging community that members didn't want to let go:

"After school is out, will the blog still be on the Net? I mean, is it just going to shut down after June 12, or whenever the last day of school is? Are you going to keep it up and running for the random updates on students, or is this strictly a school thing, and will it only run when school is in session like next year? Just really curious because I think it would be cool to keep updated on my fellow portfolio English classmates…and the cool Californians."

Communicating With Parental Units

Carrier pigeons, snail mail, or blog? Okay, the choices for communicating with parents might be more varied than that, but the reality is that, increasingly, today's parents want daily updates on what is happening at school with homework assignments, planned field trips, etc. Yet the demands on their time often prohibit stopping by the classroom on a daily basis to chat (or, more likely, their children prohibit it when they reach the teen years). Therefore, a blog can be the right tool for reaching your school's or district's parents quickly.

Why blog when your school already publishes a print or e-mail newsletter? Print newsletters present their own challenges— mailing costs are high and, as we all know, students don't seem to be the most reliable couriers for getting materials from school to home.

Today's proliferation of spam and computer viruses has given e-mail newsletters their own set of roadblocks, as well. In a May 2005 study, the independent e-mail auditor Pivotal Veracity (www.pivotalveracity.com) requested an e-mail newsletter or marketing materials from 100 companies, and found that 59 percent were affected by "false positives" in spam filtering or were not received at all. And this is for material the sender actually requested. For these companies, opt-in e-mail was more often than not tagged as spam or simply not received. So, parents may be signing up for your school's e-mail newsletter, but who knows if it is actually making it into their inboxes? Unlike an e-mail newsletter or a print newsletter, a blog entry is in no danger of not getting to its intended audience because it got caught in a spam filter or discarded on the walk home from school.

Bear in mind, you must have a parent population that has access to computers and the Internet in order for a blog to be successful. But more and more, personal computers in the home are reaching the same ubiquity as televisions. And with phone and cable companies competing to provide high-speed Internet access, the cost of getting online faster continues to plummet. So, a blog also might be the most cost-effective, timely way to ensure that parents from your school or district have up-to-the minute information on their kids.

How Do Parents and Students Know It's New?

A blog may seem like the perfect alternative to your school's print or e-mail newsletter, but how will readers know when there is something new on the blog? After all, everyone is busy, and remembering to check a Web site every morning can compete with having that second cup of coffee.

There is, of course, technology for that, too: Your readers can subscribe to an RSS feed. RSS—an acronym for really simple syndication—it allows anyone with a Web site to easily "syndicate," or distribute, blog content. Subscribing to an RSS feed is equally simple, and can be done directly on the blog site.

When you sign up for an RSS feed, you receive notice of new articles on a blog directly in your Web browser, saving you the time of browsing the site itself and scouring it for the latest information

In addition to the RSS feed, your readers will always see timestamps on everything that you type or upload to your blog. In addition to that, everything that you upload will always be archived based upon the year, the month and the assigned name that you gave to that section.

The Classroom/Blog/Home Connection

Log on to www.mrwrightsclass.com and see how a third grade teacher at Wyman Elementary School in Rolla, MO, is using a blog to communicate with his parents. Click on Class Info and you will see those aforementioned papers that

never seem to make it home in the backpack—such as the weekly spelling list or field-trip permission slips—can now be accessed by parents on Christopher Wright's web page. Plus, Wright's blog is interactive; parents can post comments or send him questions.

Barriers to Blogging in Schools

Even though the technology for blogging is free or relatively inexpensive, the student-to-computer ratio in schools continues to get better than ever, and Internet connectivity has reached nearly 100 percent, there are still challenges to blogging in education.

Security, for one. As Arquillos says, "We couldn't allow kids to just start posting their names and identities online." To address that issue, the Galileo Academy of Science and Technology decided to have sites that teachers used for their classes, as well as private, members-only sites for their collaboration projects. The teachers publish their blogs publicly, and students are able to interact with one another while knowing their personal information is secure.

The other challenge is monitoring the content of what students are writing. While you certainly don't want to censor student work, just as you developed an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) when your school began to offer students access to the Internet, it is important to develop guidelines for acceptable blogging. This may simply be an amendment to your school's or district's AUP, but it needs to be information that students are aware of—before they become bloggers.

The Organization/Blog/Educator Connection

Companies serving the education community are using blogs to provide educators with information that supports teaching and learning. For instance, education companies have developed blogs that discuss topics of interest such as testing and assessment, or differentiated instruction. The first blog I helped develop for Pearson Education (www.pearson.com), TrueScores (www.truescores.com), is one example of a way that scientists and other education professionals within a company are sharing their views and research with the greater education community.

Professional organizations and associations are also using blogs to reach out to their members and the greater community. For example, the International Reading Association (www.reading.org) publishes "Reading Today Daily" with news from the world of literacy at blog.reading.org.

Rules to Blog By

If you decide that blogs will help your school meet its communications or instructional goals, or both, there are three rules to blog by:

1. *Blogs take time.* If a school is going to use a blog to communicate with parents, or if teachers opt to blog in order to keep in contact with students, or any combination of the above, expect to expend effort. Blogging is writing, and good writing takes time—sometimes a significant amount of time. You will want the information to be timely, accurate, and, of course, well-written. And don't forget that timely part. Since most blogs are organized with date and time stamps in reverse chronological order, going too long without a blog entry can make a reader wonder if the blog really is providing the most up-to-date information—or if it, like many personal Web pages were in the early days of the World Wide Web, has been abandoned.

2. *Blogs are very public.* Because blogs (unless they're posted on an internal server, set up so that only selected individuals can view them, or are password-protected) are on the open Internet, pretty much anyone can read them. Think of blogging as a kind of public speech: So, don't post something you wouldn't want a student's parent to read, or something you don't want to see online in perpetuity. Even though blog entries can easily be changed, sometimes they can't as easily be completely deleted. Thus, odds are they, like any Web page, may live forever in Google's (or someone else's) cache.

3. *Blogs are not a new medium.* "New mechanism" is a better phrase. The medium is the Internet (or, more specifically, the Web page). The mechanism is a blog authoring tool. Very useful, very cool, and very widespread (unless your server goes down). But blogs are not the new papyrus. They're a digital way of inscribing that same papyrus. And the inscriptions commonly are words, though there are also a growing number of video and audio blogs (think podcasting).

4. **Go Forth and Blog**

If blogs still intrigue you, there should be little stopping you from starting one. There's nothing mystical—or even highly technological—about them. Blogs are all about communication: between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and students and students.

5. What makes a good blog? **One that gets read**. If your blog has no readers, you might as well keep a diary. Fortunately, an educator has a captive audience. Parents and students want a steady stream of up-to-date information, and teachers need them to have it. Therefore, a well-kept blog is an ideal way to satisfy everyone.

Starting your own blog? These software and service packages can be a big help.

Blogger Free to use and recommended for anyone trying to blog for the first time. Blogger is now owned by Google (www.google.com) and is the largest blogging publishing service. Blogger is very easy to use, even though it requires using its navigation bar if you use its free hosting service, blogspot. You can avoid that, however, by simply hosting the blog on your own Web site (publishing it via FTP). Blogger also has good tutorials on what blogs are, in general, and how to set them up. Plus, you can browse the blogs of others that it hosts. www.blogger.com

TypePad A paid subscription service with blogging tools and hosting included, TypePad costs from $5 to $15 per month. More features (typical with paid services) and customer support are included here than with free services. www.typepad.com

Movable Type From the same company that sells TypePad, Movable Type is aimed more at organizations and businesses, and is probably worth considering by schools and districts that want a more professional blog-publishing tool. This is software, not a service. Education pricing starts at $40 and goes higher, depending on features and number of users. There's a comparison of TypePad and Movable Type at www.sixapart.com/decision and more information about Movable Type at www.sixapart.com/movabletype.

Blogware Blogware is a paid subscription service that's actually resold by others. Packages and costs vary with Blogware retailers. www.blogware.com

Manila A combination Web log and Web site publishing software package, Manila is a paid subscription. manila.userland.com

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