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Writing with Weblogs

Reinventing Student Journals

Blogger is a free blog hosting site.

By **Glen Bull, Gina Bull, and Sara Kajder**

Subject: Weblogs, journals, writing

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators, library media specialists, technology coordinators

Grade Level: 5–12 (Ages 10–18)

Technology: Internet/Web, online tools

Standards: NETS•S 3, 5
(<http://www.iste.org/standards>)

A Weblog is a personal online diary. The phenomenon of Weblogs, or *blogs* as they are commonly known, began in the late 1990s. Blogs are updated on a regular basis, just as a diary is—typically several times a week—and often focus on a particular topic or area of interest to the writer. For a brief overview of blog terminology, see *Blog Terms* on p. 33.

Creation of a blog initially required knowledge of HTML. In 1999, a number of companies began offering free blog publishing software. Blogger is one of the best known, and it now has more than a million registered users. (*Editor's note:* For this and other URLs, see the Resources section at the end of the article.) Other free blogging services of this kind include Xan-

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ga and Live Journal, an open source project developed through a volunteer programming effort. There are currently tens of thousands of bloggers who post regularly, and the number of active participants is growing daily.

Blogs offer a communication medium that is more structured than an e-mail list and more focused than a discussion board. The structure creates a framework for social networks and taps a basic human desire to interact and communicate. The thousands who join the blogging revolution each week testify to the potential of the new medium. The instructional potential is striking.

Using the Tools

A number of different tools can be used to create blogs. We recommend a resource such as *Essential Blogging* by Cory Doctorow et al. for an overview of a range of widely used blogging tools. Blogger provides a free online tool that allows writers to create blogs after a basic registration process requiring only a contact e-mail.

Web sites such as blogger allow you to quickly construct your own blog, working from online templates that take care of the design and allow users to focus on the writing. During registration, users are prompted to

Will Richardson's blog provides tips for using blogs in the classroom.

name the blog site. The text entered into the text field will be followed by *.blogspot.com*. For example, a blog devoted to the topic of journals might be given the name of *journals.blogspot.com*.

A window is provided that users access each time text is added to the blog. Text is entered into the lower portion of the screen along with a date option in the box to the right.

Once text has been entered and is ready to post, users select the “post and publish” option in the upper right corner of the screen. This publishes the text to the user’s blog, which can be viewed at the previously selected Web address.

Stepping into the Classroom

In illustrating what this may look like in classroom practice, it is important to consider how journals can challenge student writers. Outside of classroom

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contexts, journals provide a space for thinking about ideas. Ideally, a journal writer considers new ideas while connecting to what is known. Journals offer a space where risk is encouraged. In order to draw students to writing, they need these same rich opportunities and authentic spaces in which to write.

Following this approach, we used blogs as a journaling tool for pre-service teachers in an educational technology course. These students discussed their ideas about media and literacy. They read and explored online texts housed within the Smithson-

BLOG TERMS

The term *Web log* initially referred to an online journal posted on the Web. The two-word phrase *Web log* soon was compressed into a single word, *Weblog*, subsequently shortened to *blog*.

Weblog is still in common use as a noun ... a writer might comment, “I updated my Weblog this morning.” The act of writing a Weblog is known as *blogging*. A person who writes a Weblog, by extension, is a *blogger*. The space in which blogs occur is known as the *blogosphere*.

ian Institute’s 9-11 Digital Archives. Each student maintained a blog as a response journal and was instructed to post when texts triggered ideas or reactions. Peers shared comments and feedback through e-mail. Coincidentally, while they were completing this assignment, the second Gulf War began, providing a unique reading experience as students examined the images, sound files, and texts made available through the archive.

The writing that resulted through this activity proved to be richly responsive. Students were drawn into the media offered through the digital archive both by their memories of the past and by their needs for the present and future. In class, they described the writing as unsettling but important to their lives outside of our classroom. Brandon, a student in the class, could not separate work as a writer from work as a viewer, explaining, “I feel the images in context to what we’re doing now and can’t help but think about what is legitimate and illegitimate in an action.”

Beth, another student, did not write about the details of the images but of what they led her to see, writ-

ing that “as much as I resist it, the images I’m reading refuse to let me not admit that this is happening.”

Each student blog had multiple entries, all of which used the texts to connect current events and their own beliefs, something that they found to be powerful as writers and that drew them into creation of additional blogs not related to class content. Several students directly stated that they grew to see themselves as writers and wanted to explore the space in their own contexts outside of class.

Blogs tend to be public spaces that encourage community discourse. Instructional reinventions can adapt blogging tools for private uses by students. Here, teachers and students can read the blog, but it isn’t added to a directory list and is housed at an address disseminated by the student writer. One of the more skeptical students, Greg, wrote, “because I know that other people will be reading what I post here, I’m probably holding back some of what I’m thinking about what I’ve seen.”

To lower the stakes and create a more secure writing environment, we suggested that students mark their blogs as private when registering. Greg

offered in a later posting that “this blog is allowing me to communicate ideas that I’d never share openly in class.”

We took advantage of several moments in our face-to-face classroom discourse to build community and verify that student writers selected the community viewing their work.

Without prompting, students inserted images and sound files from both the 9-11 Digital Archives and their own personal work into their entries, finding that the original files needed to be there to frame their responses. Beth explained that “If much is left up to the imagination, we can make the event seem separate from our lives. When it is obvious and graphic, there’s no way around it.”

Blogger offers an audio-posting service, allowing writers to phone in a posting that is then attached to their blog in the form of an audio file. This feature allowed students to express ideas they might not have otherwise shared. For example, Shannon, who made a posting about her fear that “9-11 will be a passing media blitz that will soon be forgotten,” explained that although she did not feel safe expressing that idea in written words, it was essential to her thinking, and needed to be included to provide connections for her other work. She later offered, “speaking allowed me to compose in a way that felt safer, but it also allowed my real voice to have a place on the page.”

Talking about a Revolution

Educators across the Internet are not only bringing blogs into their teaching; they are posting their own reflections and ideas about classroom applications, reinventions, and student learning. Here, teachers are talking with teachers about what works, what doesn’t, and what has promise. One such teacher is Will Richardson, who maintains an active and valuable site about using blogs in education.

Postings here range from instructional reflection to administrative tips. The Web site also offers an evolving list of links that highlight exemplary classroom applications and student writing.

Looking at the Wellsprings of Expression

The form of expression changes as technology evolves, but the underlying motivations remain the same. A. B. Dick Co. first sold the Edison Rotary Mimeograph duplicating systems in 1900. Hugo Gernsback launched the first modern science fiction magazine (*Amazing Stories*) in 1926, and made a fateful decision . . . to include a discussion section and publish the full addresses of letter writers to allow them to contact one another directly. This gave rise to the Science Correspondence Club, which published the world’s first fan magazine, *The Comet*, in 1930. Hundreds of fanzines were published on mimeograph machines, serving the same purpose as today’s blogs. By the 1960s, the ’zines provided an outlet for political expression, literary experimentation, and rock-and-roll critiques.

As the Internet became popular in the 1980s, multiple outlets for expression evolved. These included mailing lists, discussion boards on The Well and CompuServe, and Usenet newsgroups. All of these technologies provided mechanisms for interactive discourse. Blogging, in a sense, has its roots in the same motivations that caused amateur writers to develop hand-typed ’zines on smudged purple mimeograph stencils in the 1930s. Typically undertaken without remuneration, these printed and electronic publications represent a labor of love.

A question of interest to educators is whether, and how, this capacity might be used to further instructional goals. Frequently, teachers tighten and constrain the space presented to student writers through tightly construct-

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ed, teacher-driven questions or create an unscalable gap by asking students to think and write on topics outside of their understanding.

We house journals in our classrooms or see them stacked in the bottom of student lockers. Classroom journals rarely function as compelling, inviting writing spaces where students can meaningfully engage with text. Instead, writing and thinking in this space becomes forced, unwelcoming, and inconsequential.

Blogs provide a different tool and the potential to reinvent how we work with journals in classrooms, challenging teachers and students to think about writing in authentic ways. Blogs demand multimedia postings, precise economical writing, regular and timely responses, and a new and exciting kind of student involvement.

Summing Up

What makes this an innovation poised to potentially transform work we do within the classroom? The answer centers in the power of the communication medium. More developed than e-mail lists and more intimate than a discussion board, blogs can provide a conversation space for student readers, writers, and thinkers that transcends what we have known to this point.

Meg Hourihan, in her Web-based column, summarized the outcome in this manner,

Weblogs provide the framework, as haiku imposes order on words. The structure of the documents we're creating enables us to build our social networks on top of it—the distributed conversations, the blogging lists, and the friendships that begin online and are solidified over a *bloggers' dinner* in the real world.

As bloggers, we're in the middle of, and enjoying, an evolution of communication. The traits of Weblogs mentioned above will likely change and advance as our tools improve

and our technology matures. What's important is that we've embraced a medium free of the physical limitations of pages, intrusions of editors, and delays of tedious publishing systems. As with free speech itself, what we say isn't as important as the system that enables us to say it.

When Tim Berners-Lee conceived the Web, he envisioned it as a space in which both writing and reading would occur. Web browsers proved easier to develop than Web editing tools. He was surprised and dismayed to discover users often found it necessary to edit raw HTML directly. The result was that the Web sometimes became what he termed a "read-only medium." The latest blogging tools now take us closer to his original intent of the Web as a read-write medium.

Bringing blogs into our classroom spaces challenges us to answer some difficult questions. What does it mean to communicate through a blog? What are the rules? How does that apply to how we communicate and share meaning in open speech? How do we lead students to share and respond to comments shared by other readers? What do the multitextual resources made available online bring into the conversation housed within a blog? How do struggling readers and writers work within this writing space in ways that are different from their engagement with print text?

The sharing of messages, the openness of the thinking, the accessibility of the media ... it all adds up to a form of communication that warrants our exploration.

Resources

9-11 Digital Archives: <http://www.911digitalarchive.org>
 Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>



The deadline to submit workshop or session proposals for NECC 2004 is October 8, 2003.

Visit <http://www.iste.org/necc> for submission guidelines.

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Live Journal: <http://www.LiveJournal.com>
 Meg Hourihan, "What We're Doing When We Blog": <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/javascript/2002/06/13/megnut.html>
 Will Richardson's Blog: <http://www.Weblogg-ed.com>
 Xanga: <http://www.xanga.com>



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