

Blogs: A New Tool for Instruction

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Have you heard the buzz about the latest technology application for instruction? It's called a blog! Short for web log, a blog is actually a web page which allows visitors to read and reply to content on varied topics, most often successful because of the way it attracts birds of a feather from disparate geographical locations to one online address. Not only are blogs easy to set up and manage, they quickly allow visitors to post comments in response to what the blog author has posted on his or her site. Up until now if a teacher wanted to have an online presence on the Web, he or she needed to create his or her own class web pages and then update them frequently as news and announcements would dictate. This requires knowledge of HTML as well as the ability to FTP material up and down from a school server. Blogs offer the ability to have that online presence without having to be a jack of all technology trades.

While there are blogging applications out there which can be purchased and placed on a server in order to make blogging possible, there are many free blog hosting services online which make this investment unnecessary. Consider Blogger.com <<http://www.blogger.com/start>>, one of the early entrants into online blog hosting. Blogger provides server space, a naming convention, and click-and-pick templates which make setting up a blog a matter of minutes. Users need to create a free account so that Blogger can manage users effectively, but once you have a name and password you are free to set up your own blog or blogs.



Of course, once you set up the look of your blog, there are a number of preferences you will want to consider and adjust, such as allowing posts by members only or inviting the public to post, allowing or inhibiting the posting of email addresses, how often your blog messages will be archived, and who you will invite to serve as authors on your blog. This last consideration is especially important, because blog authors determine the flow and direction of discussion. For example, if you would like to be the sole author of your blog, it will be up to you to write often (the ideal is to write daily, much like journal writing) so that the blog becomes a document of your ideas, feelings, goals and accomplishments. On the other hand, if you make each of your students an author, then the blog will serve as an archive for all kinds of activities and personalities that are thriving within your classroom. In this scenario, the teacher becomes much more a manager of material posted to the blog (and yes, you can modify and delete posts, as needed).

Consider Mrs. Leake's Classroom News from Buckman Arts Elementary School in Portland, Oregon < <http://buckman.pps.k12.or.us/classrooms/leake/>>. Mrs. Leake actually transforms this blog so that it takes on the features of a very familiar format, a classroom newsletter. By simply posting news, announcements and student work in the blog template, she is able to keep the school community current on her classroom happenings. Because of the archival nature of blogs, she nicely builds a record of everything happening in her classroom over the course of the school year. Because blogs are set up to post material chronologically, Mrs. Leake is able to easily showcase her newest information on the front page of the blog with easy-to-find links on a right-hand menu for visitors to navigate her site. This busy educator doesn't have to miss a beat in posting new material and keeping her blog thriving and vital. All she needs to do is login with her name and password and she can post items instantly. No HTML code. No FTP protocol. It's that easy.



Another salient feature of blogs is their ability to be syndicated and shared on other websites through RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Developed in 1997 by UserLand and used extensively at first by Netscape, RSS has become a popular way to share content between web sites. It allows you to share the latest postings on your blog by showing them on a class web site, a personal home page, or anywhere else you would like to promote your students' work. Using the XML format, you can use RSS with or without a news aggregator (or news reader). News aggregators will download and display RSS feeds for you. A number of free news aggregators are available online, including AmphetaDesk, NetNewsWire, and Radio Userland. Some internet service providers will actually let you add RSS feeds to your web pages without the need for an aggregator. Check with your school webmaster to find out how this is best done in your school district.

The larger question educators must ask themselves is not "How does this work?" but rather, "Once I have my blog published what kinds of content do I plan to post there?" The most popular blogs feature new posts every day with all kinds of education-worthy topics for visitors to consider and respond to. One great resource to help you determine the course you would like your blog to take is Weblogg-ed.com <<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>>. Will Richardson of Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey hosts this blog about blogging in education. Here you can find ideas about everything from back-to-school blogging to writing for wikipedia. Not only can you read and glean from the expertise of colleagues already blogging, you can post your own observations and questions you will surely have.



When we think of blogging for education, our first notion may not be posting our own ideas on a daily basis. If our primary focus is instruction, then surely the first and foremost measure of any technology tool is how it can be used with students. Consider the possibilities:

- Blog as Classroom Chronicle

Not unlike Mrs. Leake's blog, consider how you might utilize a classroom blog as a tool for empowering student voices. Rather than making a blog that looks like a teacher-driven newsletter, why not allow students the responsibility of developing, posting and managing pieces on classroom happenings? Blog posts do not have to be extensive in length and they often invite responses which develop into a dialogue greater than the original post itself. As teacher, you would play the role of editor, previewing materials before they are posted and monitoring activity on the blog from day to day.

- Blog as Daily Journal

Consider a classroom blog in which each day a different student posts a prompt on a topic of their choosing to which classmates can respond online in the form of comments to the original post. By rotating the responsibility of posting the daily prompt, you will assure a fresh collection of ideas, and by allowing peers to respond to one another you will promote interest in reading and writing in high-interest topics generated by your students. To take this concept to a higher level, imagine each student in your classroom having their own blog to which they are expected to post as a daily journal writing activity. Students can view one another's ideas as they develop and offer feedback and encouragement selectively as they feel compelled to respond.

- Blog as Anthology

The culminating event of a writing workshop is the publication and celebration of student work. In days gone by this meant the amassing of many publishing materials so that students could publish their work in hard copy. Today we can rethink the whole publishing process by having students publish their work online. Imagine poems, stories, reports and research posted on your blog with a simply copy, paste, and the click of a mouse. Because blogs can post images as well as text, you can include student art work, digital photographs and even computer screen captures as part of a published work.

- Blog as Communicator

Five years ago Keypals were all the rage in education. Teachers sought one another out by interest or location and paired up students to email one another during the school year as digital pen pals. Just saving on time and postage made it seem worthwhile! But the reality of finding another class of similar size, age and interests who would follow through on their end of the Keypal commitment, not to mention the cumbersome job of setting up and managing email accounts for every student in your classroom, made it a lot of work. Today you can still communicate online with another class with a lot less effort – through a blog. Imagine one place both classes can come to post and respond to one another without needing to email. And because your blog will be accessible to everyone involved in it, monitoring student activity and facilitating discussion is accomplished with fewer steps and greater confidence.

- Blog as Collaborator

Being able to conduct online research, experiments, projects and simulations has always been a great feature of the Internet. Web-based communication tools such as chat interfaces, instant messengers, discussion boards and videoconferencing have helped to add a collaborative dimension to much of this work. Still each of these technologies require preparation and follow through which may be at the least labor intensive and at the most synchronous and high-bandwidth. Consider a blog where collaborating classes can post their data, ask questions of one another, synthesize ideas and plan for further investigation. Blogs are a highly interactive form of asynchronous communication, making them ideal for collaboration even across time zones and cultures.

The possibilities for integrating blogging into instruction are only limited by our ability to imagine uses for this new technology tool. The first step is to create a blog for your self. Get a feel for how to set one up, post messages to manage users. It may be a blog about a hobby or special interest outside of teaching. The important thing is to blog. Then, as you plan for instruction in the future, be looking for ways that a classroom blog and enrich and extend the good work you are doing with your students. Yes a blog can be a good public relations tool, but it can also be much more. Tied directly into your instructional goals, a blog can be an effective tool for successful instruction.