Blogs: Turning Technology-driven Social Fads into an Educational Tool

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I n recent years, web logging or "blogging" has become commonplace (Colgan, 2005). Bartlett-Bragg (2003) reported that over 500,000 blogs had been published to the internet. Blogs have become so popular because they create a venue for people to present, share, discuss, and comment on current events, world issues and each other's personal lives (Wiley & Martindale, 2005). Simultaneously, our K-12 students have gravitated towards websites such as MySpace and Facebook in order to communicate with classmates, family members, and others around the world. As these social networking tools permeate our students' social lives, we, as educators, must consider how these tools might benefit our students' academic experiences. Blogs have the potential to improve K-12 education and impact student learning. Below, I describe ways in which teachers can integrate blogs across the curriculum as a writing tool .

Background about Blogs

Martindale and Wiley (2005) describe the first blogs as websites that served as repositories that the web logger or "blogger" decided to include. Blogs have drifted away from their original use as a list of websites and now serve primarily as web-based journals that hold people's thoughts, pictures, video, and hyperlinks to other websites. Most blogging sites come with an editing tool that allows bloggers to enter information and link to other websites without knowing any hyper-text markup language (HTML). In essence, blogs allow people to publish their ideas on the internet, with only minimal technological skills needed. Since blogging facilitates the process of publishing information, teachers are then left to ask themselves, what can students blog about? Further, blogs facilitate asynchronous communication. Readers can view blogs and then post comments about the blogs. In essence, a web-based conversation develops between the blog author (or blogger) and the reader.

Blogs as an Educational Tool

Improving Student Learning by Writing (or blogging) across the Curriculum

Research indicates that students who complete higher-order tasks, such as evaluating, synthesizing, and applying information tend to have a deeper understanding of the content that they are working with, which in turn has led to an increase in student learning on student achievement tests (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Schacter, 1999). For over two decades, educational leaders have advocated writing across the curriculum as a means to improve students' literacy skills and develop a deeper understanding of various content areas (Bruce & Davidson, 1996).

Blogs can facilitate writing across the curriculum by giving students a method to publish their compositions, reflections, and opinions about content that they are learning in school. Students can write about various topics and share their work with an audience that consists of classmates, teachers, family members or others around the world. In addition to serving as a writing tool, using blogs to write across the curriculum increases the authenticity of the writing process, which raises student motivation and improves student learning (Bransford et al., 1990; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2002). Below I provide examples of how students can use blogs to write across the curriculum.

Social Studies

Fourth grade: While learning about Virginia's natural resources (Virginia Standard of Learning [VA SOL]: Virginia Studies 10), students gather information about their region of the state and post it on their blog. Information posted on the internet means that students across the state can view it and make comments about the information on the blog. Teachers can work with colleagues across the state on this project. By posting information and participating in other students' blogs, students develop a deeper understanding of the natural resources in both their region and other regions of the state.

High school: Throughout a course on state and federal government, students learn about the components of the Virginia and U.S. governments, their histories, and current issues. Students can gather information from blogs, online news sources or other educational resources. In order to effectively evaluate which sources are credible students will need to develop their information literacy skills and determine fact-based from biased resources. Students can then blog about their opinion or reaction to the topics that they are learning about related to state and federal government.

Science

Fourth grade: Students can use their blog to discuss projects, experiments or investigations that they are conducting (VA SOL Science 4.1). In alignment with current reforms in science education, students could blog about the entire inquiry process from identifying questions, making hypotheses, conducting experiments, and sharing their results. In addition to parents and teachers being able to comment and give feedback about the investigations, students would have a web-based archive of the entire inquiry process that they can revisit for subsequent projects or to prepare for tests.

High school courses: Similar activities can be done in high school science. However, high school students should be expected to synthesize and analyze information on a deeper level. There-

fore, science-related blogs should be more evidence-driven, in which students base their hypotheses and experimental designs on scientific theories or evidence from previous investigations. The process of writing a blog here is more for the author than the reader in order to help them form a coherent explanation about the investigation that they are doing.

Language Arts

Upper elementary grades: During the writing process upper elementary school students complete a near-final draft of their story and post it on their own blog (VA SOLs English 3.10, 4.7, 5.8). Middle school students in the same school district read the stories, give feedback, and help students make revisions (VA SOLs English 6.6, 7.8, 8.9). While students typically receive writing support from classmates and their teacher, the blog provided the opportunity for students to get feedback from older students, who are learning about editing and revising stories.

Middle school: Students can create a book review blog about books that they have read. After reading a book students can write a blog entry that summarizes and critiques the book. This process develops students reading comprehension (VA SOLs English 6.4, 7.5, 8.6) and their writing skills. Readers of this blog will benefit by gaining a better sense of each book prior to reading it.

High school: Blogs such as the Albany High Blog is a blog that the Times Union newspaper provided to high school students to share school-wide events and issues with parents, the community and alumni. The blog reads much like a high school newspaper online, giving high school students real-world experience writing news stories and editorials (Virginia SOLs English 9.6, 10.7, 11.7, 12.7). However, since their work is published on a blog, not a website, readers can post comments and feedback on stories that they read.

Mathematics

Elementary grades: Students can use their blog to communicate about what they are learning in mathematics class (Communication is an emphasis for each grade of the VA SOLs in grades K-5). For example, a third grade class in Georgia posted daily on a class blog to tell their parents what they were doing in mathematics class and how it applied to the real world. As part of their daily homework, students would go home and discuss the blog with their parents. Parents also had the option of making comments on the blog about topics.

Another mathematics-related use of blogs is a problem posting blog. In each grade level, the VA SOLs call for students to solve word problems. In this case, they are writing word problems and posting them on the blog for other students to solve. In order to create effective problems, students will have to solve them. Once the problems are posted, students that complete the problems can use the comments feature to post their answers and solution strategies that they used to complete the problem.

Strategies for Successful Implementation

Content and purpose

Students need to be given writing prompts or tasks that allow them to develop their higher

levels of thinking. Typically when students are given an open-ended task such as "write about what you learned?" students tend to simply summarize or regurgitate information. Just as in any other task, think of ways to probe students' understanding by having them synthesize, analyze and apply information.

Teachers need to assess where the value of blogging lies; whether it is the process writing the blog, writing for an authentic audience, or participating in a web-based conversation with blogs and comments. All three purposes are valuable and can impact student learning. However, the teacher needs to clearly make sure that students know what the purposes and the objectives are, so that students are not just blogging for the sake of blogging.

The audience

As one of my undergraduate elementary education majors told me, "Blogs are just glorified word processing if there is no audience." While this seems intuitive, it is critical that teachers create an audience for students' blogs. If the blog is not going to be read by anyone, is it beneficial for students to create one?

The audience could include parents, other students in the school, students at other schools, or another audience. Useful questions that a teacher might ask related to the audience include: What is the purpose of the blog? Who might benefit from the information on the blog? Who might be able to give valuable comments and feedback to the blog's author.

Comments

Blogs differ from other web-based texts in that readers' can post comments to blogs that they read. The comments feature facilitates two-way communication between the blog author and readers. Authors and readers can correspond about ideas and have a dialogue that is archived on the blog. A powerful way to teach students about internet etiquette ("netiquette") is to have them read blogs and talk about what effective and useful comments look like. Teachers need to emphasize to students the need to support their statements with facts, and to be respectful while they are posting comments to other people's blogs.

While the comments feature is very beneficial, there is the potential of spam appearing. Sometimes comments appear that are not appropriate for students. Most blog websites have features where people wishing to comment must sign-in to an account in order to post a comment. This is recommended, as it will prevent inappropriate comments appearing on the blog.
Student confidentiality

There are ongoing discussions regarding internet use about maintaining the confidentiality of students (e.g., Safekids). Blogs should never list a students' complete name or include any identifying information, such as addresses or phone numbers. Typically, teachers will register the blog with their name and contact information. This prevents anyone from discovering the identity for students.

School district support

Blogging needs to be an endeavor that is supported by school districts. With the onset of internet-based resources, such as streaming video, blogs and bulleting boards, internet filters and

school districts often restrict access to these sites. Whether this restriction is intentional or accidental, teachers need to be proactive in explaining the purpose and benefits of blogging, and how students' learning will benefit from the experience.

Conclusions and more information

   Numerous web-based technologies, such as MySpace, Facebook, and blogs are prevalent in our students' lives. This article provides some ideas for integrating blogs into K-12 classrooms. All of the ideas presented are based on the premise of writing across the curriculum, a process that requires students to use higher-level thinking skills to synthesize, evaluate information and then apply it in a written product. The links below (which can also be accessed via the *VSTE Journal* page on del.icio.us), provide resources to help teachers get started with using blogs in their classrooms. So what are you waiting for? Blog on!

Article Resource Links

http://del.icio.us/vstejournal/vol21_no4

Pg. 1   *MySpace:* http://www.myspace.com

Pg. 1   *Facebook:* http://www.facebook.com

Pg. 3   *Albany High Blog:* http://blogs.timesunion.com/albanyhigh/

Pg. 3   *Georgia 3rd Grade class:* http://www.bebo.com/Blog.jsp?MemberId=20499780

Pg. 4   *Online safety:* http://www.safekids.com

Using Weblogs in Education | http://www.weblogg-ed.com
   A website full of teachers' blogs and articles on how to use them.

Blogging Across the Curriculum | http://mywebspace.quinnipiac.edu/PHastings/bac.html
   A set of resources developed by Pattie Bell Hastings at Quinnipiac University about how to integrate blogs across the curriculum.

Educational Bloggers Network | http://www.ebn.weblogger.com
   A network of educational bloggers

Blogs as an Educational Tool

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