

# Educators as Content Publishers

by John G. Hendron

According to an online article by web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, “Hopefully, schools will soon begin teaching kids how to author hypertext and build good Web content. The ability to communicate online will be a key job skill in the new economy and also an important mechanism for self-actualization.” (Nielsen, 2000, ultimate section, Para. 1)

Since the mid-1990s, new tools have emerged to help assist users (young or not) in generating “good design” or “good HTML” in place of actually using the lingua franca of the web: Hyper Text Markup Language. Examples include products from Radio UserLand, Clement Mok’s Net Objects, and, of course, visual hypertext editors including Macromedia Dreamweaver, Microsoft Front Page, and even Microsoft Office applications.

The power of today’s Internet and related technologies easily offers publishing ability to students and teachers. Cell phones that can take photographs and PDAs that can perform wireless exchanges of pictures and text are just the beginning of what shall come. It should not be difficult within the next five years to take a short movie with such a device and upload it to a website without the use of a PC in the entire publication process.

In a recent article, Nielsen draws a comparison between the world of technology and the world of Harry Potter: “...In the Harry Potter books, the population consists of two distinct groups — a small group of wizards, and a much larger group of Muggles (standard-issue humans) who know nothing about magic or the dealings of wizards.” (Nielsen, 2002, ultimate section, Para. 1) With the tools becoming available to easily publish material online, one might say that teachers and students (the Muggles) are being offered the chance to dabble in wizard’s magic.

Nielsen’s hope in educating children about hypertext is somewhat self-serving as a usability expert:

If we reach children while they are young, they are more likely to be better than most adults today at creating their own Web content. Although most may never be great, many will be able to produce good content that will appeal to small audiences. Perhaps most importantly, a few will emerge who not only exploit the possibilities of content creation, but push it to new levels. (Nielsen, 2000, ultimate section, Para. 3)

Without Web usability, however, both organizations and users suffer throughout the Web experience.

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This article outlines the benefits of teacher publication in hypertext on the Web and one method or framework that can be used to achieve this. The rationale behind this can also be easily applied to student learning through their participation as content authors. Educators who often feel like Muggles in an ever-advancing world of “techno” magic will hopefully find a solution to the challenges they face.

What does a good Web site involve? Design and layout receive a lot of attention in books and in Web sites that give pointers in HTML, CSS, Javascript, and many of the other technologies that many teachers have no time whatsoever to learn. And while a good, accessible design is important, the content within Web pages is the most valuable asset of a site. What would happen if the process were distilled so that Web authors could work only with content?

One quickly learns an important lesson about Web usability: users do not like to read online. This will likely evolve over time, but instead of reading word by word in Web documents, most people tend to scan and skim. Instead of large paragraphs and a lot of text (at hard to read font-sizes and low resolutions), readers generally prefer shorter paragraphs, highlighted terms and concepts in bold face, and bulleted lists when they’re appropriate. It also turns out that Web users do not like to scroll a lot (never horizontally) and links at the end of sentences make the most sense.

Headings help a person scan the page for its major elements. Writing for the Web, therefore, is different than writing for a newspaper, an academic journal, or a paper in school. While some of these types of writings might be found on the Web, by themselves they serve as poor examples of how to write for an audience whose primary reading accessory is the mouse (For further reading on good writing for the Web, see *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*, by Price & Price, 2002).

For writing in such a way that is brief and to the point, the author might also like to link to other things on the Web. After all, providing links that relate to the topic at hand helps establish credibility. This is all part of being a good communicator. So what is the secret ingredient? The weblog. The Wizards of the Web are calling them blogs nowadays, and it is a genre unique to cyberspace.

A blog is an online compilation of entries, not unlike a diary. While some blogs on the Web are very personal in nature, others are related to specific subjects. In a given sitting, you may peruse a weblog on Mac OS X hints, or one focused on opening a new restaurant or another centered upon obscure and sensational news stories (“Man gets \$28 ticket for leaving headlights on” and the like). What blog authors put in their blog is left to their own choosing, but the format is usually organized in the form of entries, sorted by date and sometimes category.

What makes blogging possible is database connectivity. A person need only design a web page once and never has to redesign the page again. Weblog entries are entered into a database which regenerates the content in reverse-chronological order and posts it all on the World Wide Web. Examples of companies or tools available to create a blog include *Blogger*, *Movable Type*, *Greymatter*, *Radio Userland*, *b2*. The list is always expanding. Some of these products are free, while others can be purchased. Some applications must be

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installed on a computer, whereas others simply need to be configured. A search on Google or another web-based search engine is an easy way to get started (There are links to some recommended blog resources at the end of this article, however).

Alan November has said that he believes every teacher should have a homepage (November, 2002). In a recent article from his Web site, he draws a distinction between automating with technology and informing.

You get very different results when you informate. The real revolution is information and communication, not technology. Let go of the word technology. If you focus on it, then you'll just do what you're already doing. The trick in planning as we move forward is to think about information systems, whole systems of the flow of information and communication. (November, 1998)

He also calls for the need for teachers to share what they do: Teachers don't know how special they are. They wouldn't know because they don't have a collective sense. So one of the things we absolutely need to do if we are really going to support standards is build capacity so there is a collective knowledge and wisdom (November, 1998, section 3, Para. 2).

Blogging is one method towards sharing, informing, or just plain communicating and its ease-of-use compares with sending electronic mail. Teachers can use this Web publishing medium to easily share information for students, create links to websites for assignments, present their best practices and their lesson plans, show-off the fruits of their students' work, post digital pictures, and more.

The blog does several things to assist teachers in becoming good publishers to the Web. First, it promotes frequent entries. By updating the web page or site frequently, people are more often encouraged to visit and read what one has to say. Second, the blog promotes short, succinct entries. Teachers can provide either a few sentences or maybe a list. If a blog author has something longer or more formal to say, the text can be attached as a link. Third, blogs encourage the use of headings for each entry. Headings help users scan a web page for what is useful to them. Educators may publish content for students, parents, and other teachers. The multiple audiences can quickly read text they want to read if the blog design encourages fast scanning.

Fourth, weblogs put emphasis on content and not on Web design. Special training on HTML or a software editor like Microsoft's *FrontPage* is not required. In fact, someone else can design the page, and many blog products come with pre-designed pages for those with neither the time nor inclination to learn Web design skills. Recall that despite all the elaborate and animated graphics that can be seen on the Web today, it is the content that really counts. Finally, a blog encourages discussion about material available online. While some may resist screen-based material over printed materials, the Web offers many advantages. The ability to place links about material found elsewhere on the Web (hypertext) makes finding relevant material easy. The number of weblog tools that enable visitors to a web page to post comments is ample evidence of the interactivity the Web promotes.



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While some may be looking for other reasons why teachers should publish, other incentives prevail: the stimulation of the publication process for students. Students can use blogging in a variety of ways, and publication of student entries can be controlled on a closed-network server (intranet) to protect both students and a school. Expectations are raised when students have a teacher-generated model for publication on the Web. It will be the students, no doubt, who will “push [Web publishing] to new levels” (Nielsen, 2000).

This integration of technology takes advantage of new and emerging standards that take access to the Internet to a new level. Ultimately, by creating content through the genre or facade of a blog, teachers help fellow educators by sharing content and engaging students and their families through the Web medium.

## Article Weblog Tools

Blogger - [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)  
Blosxom - [www.raelity.org/apps/blosxom/](http://www.raelity.org/apps/blosxom/)  
Greymatter - [www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/](http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/)  
Movable Type - [www.movabletype.org](http://www.movabletype.org)  
Radio Userland - [radio.userland.com](http://radio.userland.com)  
SnipSnap - [snipsnap.org/space/start](http://snipsnap.org/space/start)

## Article Weblog Surfing

Weblogs.com - [www.weblogs.com](http://www.weblogs.com)

## Article Book Resources

- Doctorow, C., Johnson, J.S., Trott, M.G., Trott, B., & Dornfest, R. (2002). *Essential Blogging*.
- Price, J. & Price., L. (2002). *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
- Bausch, P., Haughey, M., and Hourihan, M. (2002). *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*.

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