

Daniel DeLuca

The word 'blog' has entered the public consciousness. In 2004 Merian Webster named the word "blog" the word of the year. An accepted shortening of the word weblog, blogs have quickly gained a huge following across the Internet. Often characterized as merely a set of personal comments and observations, blogs are a medium that is increasingly defined by format and process and not by content. (Downes, 2004) This freedom allows blogs to meet the needs of the most casual journal keepers, serious scholars as well as the needs of teachers. According to the Pew Center for Internet research, a full eight percent of Internet users publish a blog. (Lenhart, 2006) Amazingly nearly 27 million adults in America regularly read a blog. (Lenhart, 2006) Although blogs have also started to appear in schools no one can say how many educational blogs exist, however their use is certainly growing rapidly. (Downes, 2004) At the time of this essays authorship, my small website with virtually no promotion has 1040 registered teachers, and over 11,000 students in the system. Last week the homepage to my website was loaded nearly 9,000 times.

Adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the blogosphere. Perseus Development Corporation, for instance, finds 51.5% of all blogs are being developed and maintained by users aged 13–19 (Henning, 2003). A similar study finds that 40.4% of blog authors are under age 20 (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). A visit to the statistics page of Livejournal.com, one of the most popular blog hosting web sites, discloses the largest distribution of blog authors also falls below age of twenty. (Huffaker, 2005)

While the technical requirements to establish and operate a blog have long been known, research is still ongoing in its effectiveness as a teaching tool. One of the first

Daniel DeLuca

areas in which blogs are being embraced in school is in the field of writing instruction. Recent reports published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown that nearly 70% of students in grades 4-12 could be categorized as “low achieving writers.” (2002) This trend is particularly disturbing in adolescence where literacy rates continue to remain stagnant despite recent improvements to elementary literacy. (Graham & Perin, 2007) In response to these statistics, several organizations have published recommendations on how to improve writing among high school and middle school students.

One prominent report presented to the Carnegie Corporation of New York by Steven Graham and Dolores Perin makes several general recommendations without mentioning web logs. However their recommendations do make a strong case for the use of blogs in writing education. Their general recommendations include the following;

- Collaborative Writing, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
- Word Processing, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
- Writing for Content Learning, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material.

The most obvious application of blogs in supporting the recommendations made above is through its use as an online word processing platform. However, what advantages do blogs possess over offline alternatives? The possibilities are numerous; one theory put forth by David Huffaker levies the power of storytelling. The practice of storytelling allows children’s language and reading skills to grow. (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking,

Daniel DeLuca

1999) This process does not stop in childhood; storytelling continues to be an effective way to encourage creativity in language use. (Cassell & Ryokai, 2001) According to Huffaker, blogs provide an ideal medium for this type of storytelling, as they are both individualist and collective. (2005) Students can have a personal space to post their stories and ideas, yet those ideas can be shared communally throughout the class instantly.

Blogs are first and foremost a self-publication vehicle. (Downes, 2004) While the ease in which students can publish their own work to a wider audience is fantastic, sharing a student's work with the class does not in itself create collaboration. To increase the usefulness of blogs in a classroom environment, especially in literacy education, collaboration must be possible. A study published in the Journal of Library and Information Science Research attempted to discover just how much collaboration exists in an active classroom blog. The study authored by Hazel Hall and Brian Davison attempted through empirical means to answer the three following questions.

1. To what extent can blog technology serve as a means of encouraging interaction between students in a module cohort?
2. What are the consequences of this interaction in terms of peer learning and peer support?
3. Do students using blogs experience benefits comparable to those identified with traditional learning journals?

After examining and categorizing nearly 1000 student responses to fellow class member's blogs the study was able to come to several conclusions. The researchers found that blogs encourage positive and productive exchanges in an educational setting. (Hall &

Daniel DeLuca

Davison, 2007) They also found that blogs greatly enhanced peer aid in clarifying the purpose and concepts of what was covered in class. (Hall & Davison, 2007)

While blogs are understandingly a language/writing based instructional medium, my research and personal experience suggest that blogs can be utilized across subjects and departments. There are accounts of students as young as fifth grade sharing mathematical problem solving strategies. (Downes, 2004) Many science, music and social study teachers have also signed up for my site at Classchatter. While each teacher brings their own creativity and expertise to the use of blogs in the classroom, it seems inevitable that all this writing can have nothing but a positive effect on literacy.

There are some concerns regarding the use of blogs in a secondary education classroom. It is always vitally important to protect student privacy for both legal and ethical reasons. This is doubly important when materials are posted on the Internet, the most public of forums. The federal law regarding student privacy is known as The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). It is important to note that FERPA was ratified before the invention of the Internet. Many of its provisions therefore are awkward to use with modern educational technology. FERPA outlines that personally identifiable student information may only be released in two situations. First schools may release “directory information” if certain conditions are met. Directory information includes a student’s name, address, email address, and similar information. (Baskin & Surratt 2001) Schools may also release student information with parental consent. A student’s work is protected under this provision. Any work that is personally identifiable should not be posted to the public. This includes work that is posted online such as in a blog. Work that

Daniel DeLuca

cannot be identifiable to a student can be posted for public consumption. (Baskin & Surratt 2001)

There is little case law involving FERPA and student blogs. However, the legal departments of several universities have produced guidelines for their faculty. The University of North Carolina's published guidelines state that students may create and maintain blogs in a classroom setting if the blogs are only viewable to fellow class members and the instructor makes no evaluative statements in the blog. (Drooze, 2007) Despite this "loophole" it would appear that prudence would dictate that parental consent be collected before an elementary or primary school educator starts blogging in his or her classroom.

Another concern when making use of the Internet mandatory in the classroom is the "digital divide." This idea stems from statistics that suggested that Internet access is not equitable across socio-economic classes. As a result technology such as the Internet can actually exacerbate inequality and create classes of "information haves and have-nots." (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001) However, statistics suggest that this "gap" is rapidly closing. The latest data released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that 73% of adults are Internet users. Even more impressive a full 88% of adults ages 18 – 29 are Internet users. (2007) The numbers of Americans who have access to the Internet is actually higher than the reported user rate. (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001) As America rapidly approaches universal Internet access some observers note a new "digital divide" in which inequalities exist among which Internet users can reap the full benefits of Internet usage. (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001) It therefore stands to reason that the use of

Daniel DeLuca

blogs in schools lower this inequality by promoting a fuller “digital fluency” among students. (Huffaker, 2005)

There have also been concerns raised that blogs are not the most effective choice for online collaboration. These educators find that blogs are more often used as a publication medium and promote ‘individualistic’ dissemination of ideas. (Krause, 2004) Fellow class members can only comment on another student’s blog, this essentially makes them guests of the publisher. This inequality does not foster dynamic discussion. (Krause, 2004) Educators such as Krause insist that mailing lists and forums provide a more open platform for group collaboration.(2004) Also, critics may point out that there is very little data to suggest that blogs promote the type of deep reflective thought that blog proponents often claim. In fact some studies while finding positive aspects to blogs, have noted a lack of increased reflective thought. (Hall & Davison, 2007) It is clear that more research needs to be done on the effects of blog usage in a general education classroom.

Personal Reflection

There is an incredible amount of enthusiasm around the web for using blogs in the classroom. There is surprisingly little information or discussions on how to correctly use blogs in light of FERPA regulations. With blogs currently being used in only a small number of primary and secondary classrooms, I believe this has slipped under the radar of the education community. As blogs will undoubtedly become a more popular option in the wired classroom, I believe appropriate usage should be encouraged now before bureaucratic and legal challenges arise. During my redesign on ClassChatter.com I should make every attempt to encourage FERPA compliance by site users. Some ideas include the following;

- Only allowing numeric identity markers for students in the site.
- Provide a private forum for student assessment.
- Assignment blogs that remain private from the entire class.

In response to claims that blogs do not foster collaborative and dynamic class discussion, I plan to make variety of blogs to meet the needs of the educator.

- Topical Blogs work like forum postings allowing students to have a discussions and make blog postings in a shared space
- Assignment blogs and completely private and allow teachers to offer private evaluation and grading.
- Customizable Personal blogs that allow varying levels of privacy and interaction.
- Allow/Disallow Comment Posting
- The ability to hide student names or id's

Daniel DeLuca

Another important question is whether I should allow teachers to publish student work to the Internet at large. Also, if posted to the Internet should the ability to leave anonymous Internet comments be included? Of course these would be made options for the teachers who are moderating the blog, however these options inherently increase the privacy concerns of the site. The next step is to take my findings and extrapolate them when putting together a survey for my most active users. The main focus of my survey will be privacy concerns. However, I will also survey teacher's user habits. My goal is to make a more effective site that will meet the needs of widespread usage within public schools.

Daniel DeLuca

References

- Baskin, J. & Surratt, J. (2001) Student Privacy Rights and Wrongs on the Web The School Administrator September 2001
- Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., & Cocking, R.R. (Eds.). (1999). How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school. (Expanded Ed.). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Cassell, J., & Ryokai, K. (2001). Making space for voice: Technologies to support children's fantasy and storytelling. *Personal Technologies*, 5(3), 203-224.
- DiMaggio, P. & Hargittai, E. (2001) From the 'Digital Divide' to 'Digital Inequality': Studying Internet Use as Penetration Increases Princeton University Center for Arts and Cultural Policy, Working Papers Series 15
<http://www.princeton.edu/~artspol/workpap15.html>
- Downes, S. (2004, September/October). Educational blogging. *Educause Review*, 14_26.
- Drooze, D. (2007) FERPA Privacy Checklist for Online Course Hosting Retrieved From:
http://www.ncsu.edu/legal/legal_topics/ferpa/ferpa_forms/FERPA_Privacy_Checklist_for_Online_Course_Hosting.doc

Daniel DeLuca

Graham, S. & Perin, D. (2007). Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools – A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Harper, Vernon-B., Jr (2005) The New Student-Teacher Channel T.H.E. Journal. v33 n3
p30-32 Oct 2005

Herring, S.C., Scheidt, L.A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004, January). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. Paper presented at the 37th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37).

Huffaker, D. (2005). The educated blogger: Using weblogs to promote literacy in the classroom. AACE Journal, 13(2), 91-98

Lenhart, A & Fox, Susannah (2006) A portrait of the internet's new storytellers Pew Internet and American Life Project

Wang, K. T. et al., (2007) A blog-based dynamic learning map, Computers & Education
doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2007.06.005

Wilcox, Clayton (2006) Blogging with the Doors Open School The School Administrator. v63 n5 p14 May 2006