Blog On

Building Communication and Collaboration among Staff and Students

Weblogs, or blogs, are springing up all over the Internet, but their introduction into the educational arena affords this communication tool a new format and set of users. Generally, blogs have been considered a personal online journal where outside users can comment on an individual's postings. Blogging as a classroom application allows for enhanced comprehension and communication among students as well as the ability to build deeper understanding across the curriculum. Creating a collaborative learning community brings a whole new life to blogging.

Blogging to Support Learning

At my school, Oakdale Elementary, a public school in Maryland, blogging is now a common term used by students and staff alike. Using this forum for teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and student-student communication helps build an awareness and understanding of blogs and how they can benefit the instructional program of a school. Educators want their students to be excited to learn and participate in class activities. Effective use of this technology, by bringing children and adults together in an online setting to build communication and deeper understanding, truly motivates children to learn and grow. Technology can help support and enhance the development of reading, writing, and the language arts, which are the foundation for success in school and in life. The use of blogging in a language arts program can be a wonderful way to enhance student understanding in a real-world application. This article highlights several models, many of which I have effectively used to build motivation, support student learning, and support ongoing staff development. I also share some successful strategies for incorporating this tool as well as how it can be used in a broader educational arena.

Individual Blogs

Currently a majority of the blogs posted on the Internet are formatted as individual blogs. In this format, users set up their blogs as a place to journal, respond to others, or post resources. The online diary gives writers the means to produce daily reflections and make them available on the Internet. This model is perhaps best used with older students who can establish their Web space, build an online portfolio, and use the space to post work or ideas commenting on the blogs of other classmates. As an elementary school teacher, I found this model to be inappropriate for the instructional levels and abilities of my students as it can be very time consuming, with minimal benefit.

Classroom Blogs

The classroom model of blogging, when used appropriately, helps build communication and collaboration among students. Classroom blogging can take place in a lab setting or on classroom computers where students use a rotation or sign-up schedule. In my third grade classroom, prior to blogging, students used reading response journals as a portion of their independent work time while I worked on a guided reading group lesson with the rest of the class. Once I introduced the class blog, students' motivation and excitement levels rose dramatically. The class blog consisted of messages with a reading or writing strategy focus such as sharing examples of descriptive writing from self-selected texts where students explained their examples and commented on whether other's examples truly helped them apply visualization strategies. (This posting extended the topic of the group's guided reading lesson.) Students also shared word attack strategies describing how different techniques helped them discover the meanings of words. Another topic

of discussion coincided with a class analysis of Black Eyed Susan Award nominated books. Students read and rated books individually but then were able to continue and extend the discussion online as they explained what qualities they look for in good books.

While blogging, students respond to the messages as well as to one another. Handwritten reading response journals allow students to communicate only with the instructor. Students are motivated not only by the use of technology and the ability to type rather than use pencil and paper but also by the audience they have when writing online. Students begin to learn from each other as they make connections, ask questions, and draw conclusions while blogging.

Following is a message thread showing A.M.'s posting on how to attack unknown words and some responses to the posting. Students use initials rather than names for safety reasons.

"In some books that I (A.M.) read I come to words that I don't know. One of the books is *101 Dalmatians*. Also when I come to words that I don't know I either read the sentence and see if the word that I was thinking of makes sense or I make the word into chunks."

A fellow student responded, "I disagree A.M. because every time I make the word into chunks it doesn't help. I find it easier to put a word in that makes sense or look the word up in the dictionary."

Another responded, "I agree with you A.M because I also break my words into chunks. For example, on/o/mat/o/pei/a. The first time I saw that word I did not know what to do. It was too hard to sound out! First,

I tried guess and check. That didn't help though so I tried chunks and I guessed my word and I got the word right! That is how I normally figure out words!"

This quotation is a prime example of the growth my students made last year. This child's response is typical of the type of deep thought and dialogue that was happening on a regular basis by June from most of the children in my class. As educators we hope that all children make this kind of growth each year, which is possible via the dialogue created through a tool such as a blog. The combination of guided reading groups, literature

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Subject: Language arts

Grades: K–8 (Ages 5–13)

Technology: Weblogs

Standards: *NETS•S* 3; *NETS•T* I,II; *NETS•A* II (http://www.iste.org/nets/).

circles, readers' workshop, and blogging makes for a wonderful literacy-rich environment where students and teachers are constantly talking about all of the things good readers do while reading.

Using this blog, students have been able to delve further into topics discussed in class and then talk to each other to share ideas and grow as learners during a time of day where they were normally working quietly and independently. Students can direct their own learning as the computer brings them in contact with information (and people) not available in print. As students communicate in the blog, they question and challenge each other's thinking, leading to deeper and more meaningful interaction than previously afforded during individual journaling.

In response to a message I posted asking students to recommend books to other children in the class, one student wrote, "I agree with C.T. because interesting events do happen in *The Boxcar Children*, but C.T. needs to tell an example. An example could be in the Boxcar Children book number 3 they go to an island for Joe's birthday party. They have to dig for objects in the cave and Benny gets to blast the cave. That is very exciting!"

Collaborative Blogs

A collaborative blog is one in which students from one class work with students from another class, either within the same building or from another school. Elementary students can be paired with middle or high

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school students, where the older children can act as mentors or coaches for the younger children. The model used in my school consisted of a combination of face-to-face and online meetings between my third graders and two classes of second graders. The combination of formats helped build rapport between students, making it easier for them to communicate with each other as well as to build motivation. They were excited to read and respond to their new friends' postings.

The collaborative experience was themed around an outdoor habitat that was created outside of the school last year. Students had the opportunity to visit the habitat and record their reflections. The reflections were then posted to the collaborative blog where they shared what they had experienced. Later, the students read to learn about wetlands in a cooperative project and chatted with a soil conservation expert both in person and online. Finally, they completed a descriptive writing project based on the habitat. Those writings were posted and available for student editing and comments. Students read the book *Water Dance* by Thomas Locker and wrote a poem in a similar style while in the habitat. On the blog, students shared their poems, read and

commented on other students' poetry, and reflected on the actual writing process—whether it was easier to write about nature while surrounded by it in the habitat, and whether being there helped them come up with descriptive words and phrases for the poems. One student wrote, "Mrs. P, I think it was easier to write in detail about nature when I was surrounded by it because I could actually hear, smell, and feel the detail and when I was in the classroom I could only remember the detail."

The motivation of the students, based on their excitement and enthusiasm levels, seemed to grow even more when a new group of children was brought into the blogging experience. One child stated in a video interview, "I like blogging … it's very creative because you can talk from person to person. Our old blog you could usually just talk to our classmates but now we can talk to a whole new class."

Staff Development Blogs

In a workplace setting where professionals are isolated from each other for the majority of the day, effective use of a blog is one method of bringing educators together. The typical workshop model of professional development does not meet the needs of most teachers. This one-shot approach does not provide the sustained support that is required for long-term changes in instruction. In an effort to raise student achievement at my school, particularly in the area of the special needs population, two new models of professional development were adopted. The first was a study

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group model, whereby the staff of the school was allowed to choose a topic of study for the year. These groups met once a month during allotted faculty-meeting times to learn and share ideas based on common needs and interests, with each section having the common theme of differentiated instruction. The Technology Study Group was formed to have teachers begin to effectively integrate technology into instruction to increase student achievement. Each month I would co-facilitate the group's study of a new technology-related topic, and group members would then meet online to discuss the results of application in the classroom setting.

Blogging provided a means of ongoing communication with other group members that would not otherwise be available for an entire month until the next face-to-face session. The blog setting provided a forum for rich dialogue, sorted by multiple topics, as well as an online source of related materials. We posted articles, presentations, and sample lessons for members to review and on which they could reflect as they tried out new strategies in their classrooms and participated in discussions. After learning about the software program, Kidspiration, during the study group, and trying it out in his classroom, one teacher commented, "Kidspiration has many features that are already in place for students to take advantage of. For example, students can create their own graphic organizers that work best for them in doing a writing assignment or any other type of research assignment. This would benefit all types of learners and would also assist with learning disabilities. Great program!"

In another staff development opportunity, teachers were released for a half-day training on Universal Design and were then introduced to their blog. As teachers began to implement the concepts acquired during the training, they logged on to the blog and began commenting, questioning, and reflecting. Many teachers began sharing ideas for meeting the needs of all of the diverse learning abilities in their classes and even began sharing materials. "M - I really like this idea! Do you use this for read alouds or small group instruction? I'd love to see one of your boards to get an idea."

As a facilitator of a blog, it is important to summarize main ideas and themes and pose probing questions to keep the dialogue flowing. Ideally, the sense of community would bring teachers back to the blog often to check for new posts and responses, but when initially starting out with a new technology it may be beneficial to provide ongoing technical support and direction as well as motivation to keep teachers blogging. In addition to monthly incentives (prize drawings), we placed a hyperlink to the blog on the school network's Internet page for easy access and sent out regular e-mail messages to keep the blog fresh in teachers' minds. Overall, the concept of blogging as ongoing support has been extremely beneficial as the staff tries to make long-term change in instruction.

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Resources

Audioblog: http://www.audblog.com/
The Educational Bloggers Network: http://www.ebn.weblogger.com/
Schoolblogs: http://www.schoolblogs.com
Tblog: http://www.tblog.com

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