



Learning with Blogs and Wikis

Technology has made it easy for educators to embrace continual professional development.

Bill Ferriter

Few ideas about teachers' professional growth resonate with me more than those of Richard Elmore, professor of educational leadership at Harvard, who has gone as far as to argue that school structures make learning for adults unlikely at best and nothing short of impossible at worst. In a 2002 report for the Albert Shanker Institute, Elmore wrote,

As expectations for increased student performance mount and the measurement and publication of evidence about

performance becomes part of the public discourse about schools, there are few portals through which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools; few structures or processes in which teachers and administrators can assimilate, adapt, and polish new ideas and practices; and few sources of assistance for those who are struggling to understand the connection between the academic performance of their students and the practices in which they engage.

So the brutal irony of our present circumstance is that schools are hostile and inhospitable places for learning. They are hostile to the learning of adults and, because of this, they are necessarily hostile to the learning of students. (pp. 4–5)

To assert that schools are hostile to learning is a bold statement—but if you've worked in education for any length of time, chances are you were nodding your head as you read Elmore's thoughts. Adult learning is often pushed aside in schools as educators sprint through the day, worried about leaving no child behind.

The few moments that we can steal for professional development are usually spent in sessions with experts, pitching the latest silver bullet. Teachers rarely get to self-select learning opportunities, pursue professional passions, or engage in mean-

ingful, ongoing conversations about instruction

What makes professional development even more frustrating to practitioners is that most of the programs we are exposed to are drawn directly from the latest craze sweeping the business world. In the past 10 years, countless schools have read *Who Moved My Cheese?*, studied *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, learned to have “Crucial Conversations,” and tried to move “from Good to Great.”

Although most of my colleagues recognize that business-driven reform efforts are likely to have little effect on student learning, they are largely unwilling to challenge the status quo. “Nothing’s going to change,” they insist. “This is how professional development has always been done. Just bring a big stack of papers to grade, and you’ll keep busy.” A history of poor professional development experiences has left them jaded and stagnant, groaning when given “opportunities to learn.”

Changing Times, Changing Tools

Times have changed in two significant ways, however, since Elmore began describing the hostile learning environments that have often held schools back. First, there’s a new emphasis on the importance of collaborative learning among members of close-knit teams in schools. School leaders are beginning to believe in the human capacity of their faculties and are structuring opportunities for teachers to reflect on instruction together. These joint efforts are targeted and specific, increasing educators’ motivation and engagement.

Second, digital tools now help fulfill Elmore’s desire for fresh “portals through which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools.” Specifically, thousands of accomplished educators are now writing blogs about teaching and learning,

bringing transparency to both the art and the science of their practice. In every content area and grade level and in schools of varying sizes and from different geographic locations, educators are actively reflecting on instruction, challenging assumptions, questioning policies, offering advice, designing solutions, and learning together. And all this collective knowledge is readily available for free.

With the investment of a bit of time and effort, I’ve found a group of writers to follow who expose me to more interesting ideas in one day than I’ve been exposed to in the past 10 years of costly

irrelevant org) forces me to think about driving school change from the system level; and Nancy Flanagan (http://teacherleaders.typepad.com/teacher_in_a_strange_land) helps me understand the connections between education policy and classroom practice. John Holland (<http://circle-time.blogspot.com>) and Larry Ferlazzo, Brian Crosby, and Alice Mercer (<http://inpractice.edublogs.org>) open my eyes to the challenges of working in high-needs communities.

What’s more, the readers of my own blog challenge my thinking in provocative comments day after day. Mike, a

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professional development. Professional growth for me starts with 20 minutes of blog browsing each morning, sifting through the thoughts of practitioners whom I might never have been able to learn from otherwise and considering how their work translates into what I do with students.

This learning has been uniquely authentic, driven by personal interests and connected to classroom realities. Blogs have introduced a measure of differentiation and challenge to my professional learning plan that had long been missing. I wrestle over the characteristics of effective professional development with Patrick Higgins (<http://chalkdust101.wordpress.com>) and the elements of high-quality instruction for middle grades students with Dina Strasser (<http://theline.edublogs.org>). Scott McLeod ([reader from Texas, jumps in on conversations regarding teacher empowerment. K. Borden, a parent from the school district in which I work, pushes my thinking about holding schools accountable for improvement. Steve, a school district leader in North Carolina, lends expertise to conversations about curriculum, and Bob Heiny, a longtime education researcher, has unique perspectives on the classroom uses of technology. I’ve met only a few of these people in person, yet they are a vibrant part of my own professional learning and growth.](http://www.dangerously</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Reading Blogs

Whenever I suggest that peers embrace blogs as a source of continual learning, however, their first reaction is typically, “I don’t have the time to visit a dozen Web sites every day to read articles—

I've got plans to write, papers to grade, parents to call, and a family to raise!"

That's when I introduce them to RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed readers. Feed readers are probably the most important digital tool for today's learner because they make it easy to sift through the amazing amount of content that is being continually added to the Internet.

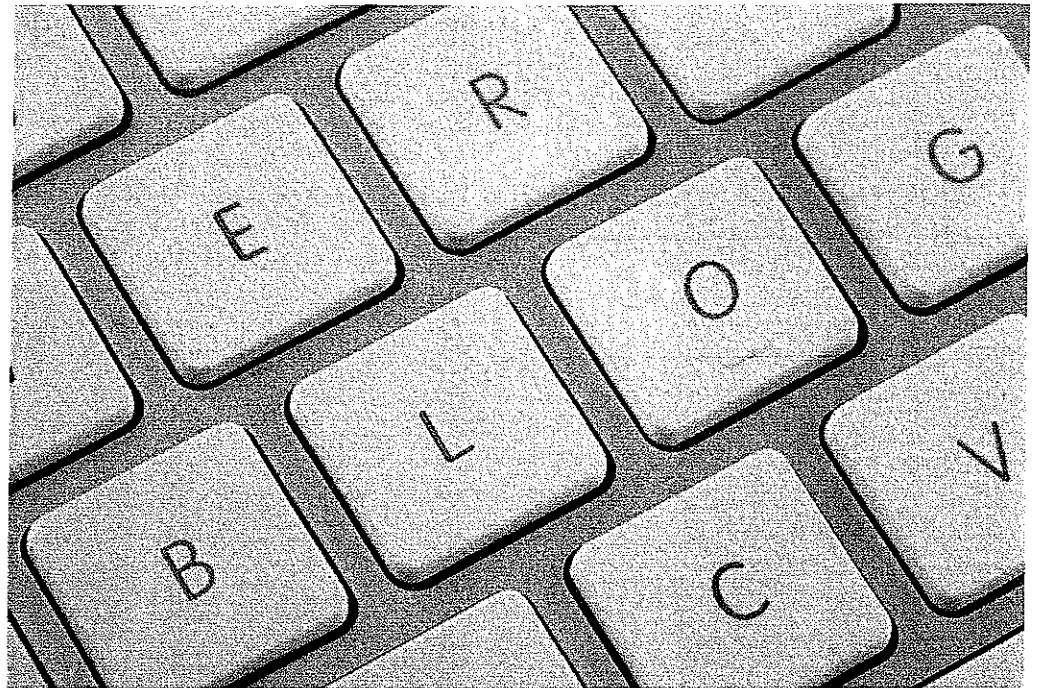
Also known as aggregators, feed readers are free tools that can automatically check nearly any Web site for new content dozens of times each day, limiting the amount of time spent browsing and customizing learning experiences. With a feed reader, learning from edubloggers goes from a frustrating search through thousands of links to quickly browsing the thoughts and ideas of trusted writers.

Although there are dozens of different feed reading services to choose from, Pageflakes (www.pageflakes.com) is my favorite primarily because it has a visual layout that I find easy to read. Pageflakes has also developed a teacher version of its tool (<http://teacher.pageflakes.com>) that includes an online grade tracker, a task list, and a built-in writing tutor. What I like best is that interested Pageflakes users can actually write a blog and create a discussion forum directly in their feed reader, creating an all-in-one digital home for the reading, writing, and speaking opportunities of both teachers and students.

Getting Started as a Reader

To incorporate blogs into your daily efforts to grow as a professional, consider the following steps:

- Start by using a feed reader as a learning tool for a few weeks. Find several blogs that target educators in your grade level or content area and organize them with an aggregator of your choice. The search for blogs probably best begins at the Support Blogging



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wiki (<http://supportblogging.com>), which includes a list of hundreds of blogs broken down into specific categories, such as education blogs, principal blogs, teacher blogs, classroom blogs, and librarian blogs. Aggregator services—such as Pageflakes, Google Reader (<http://reader.google.com>), and Bloglines (www.bloglines.com)—have extensive tutorials designed to help new users create a collection of active feeds.

If you're not sure where to begin, explore the blogs that I've organized in my professional Pageflake at www.page

flakes.com/wferriter/16618841. I read these blogs all the time. Some leave me challenged. Some leave me angry. Some leave me jazzed. All leave me energized and ready to learn more. School leaders may be interested in the collection of blogs at www.pageflakes.com/wferriter/23697456.

- Dedicate a few minutes each day to browsing the changing content in your aggregator. Notice how new posts are added automatically. Make a commitment to reading two or three entries each week. Find topics that motivate you and challenge your thinking. Leave comments for the authors and see whether they respond. Engage other readers in conversations or friendly debate.

- Tell others how much you enjoy having your thinking stretched by the blogs you read. Use your enthusiasm to generate buzz about the potential for making professional learning organic, easy, and fun.

- Share your feed reader with your learning team and begin to explore together. Ask peers about the most interesting articles they're reading. Make it a

point to talk with a colleague about a shared blog post at least twice each week.

Over time, you'll start to see a real change in the quality of the conversations that you're having with your peers. Instead of simply chatting about your weekend, you'll find yourself debating the merits of the new practices that you've stumbled across online. For perhaps the first time, your learning team will work from a common foundation of challenging ideas that can stretch your cooperative thinking and growth.

Writing Blogs and Wikis

Although reading blogs is the best way to start incorporating 21st-century tools into your plan for professional learning, writing your own blog about instruction can be equally powerful. Bloggers spend significant time pushing their own thinking—and having their thinking pushed by others. They respond to comments and link to other writers, connecting to and creating interesting ideas. Some develop curriculum and instructional materials together. Others review resources and debate the merits of the individual tools of teaching. Philosophical conversations about what works in schools are common as teachers talk about everything from homework and grading practices to school and district policies that affect teaching and learning. Blogs become a forum for public articulation—and public articulation is essential for educators interested in refining and revising their thinking about teaching and learning.

In today's digital age, free digital tools like blogs and wikis ensure that your voice can be heard without cost. All you need are a few good ideas, a bit of determination, and some basic word-processing skills.

Writing Blogs

If you're confident in your writing ability, consider starting your own blog.

Public articulation is essential for educators interested in refining and revising their thinking about teaching and learning.



Although becoming a blogger may sound intimidating, most blog services are user-friendly. After you create an account, you'll be working in windows that look like those in any word-processing application. Familiar toolbars enable you to change fonts, add links, and center content. When you're finished writing, click on a "publish" button and your work is automatically posted to the Web.

Explore the following blog services:

■ **Typepad** (www.typepad.com): Typepad is a blogging service that requires a paid subscription, but it may be worth the investment because it comes with a broad range of technical support and file storage options that free blogging services don't always provide. I've chosen Typepad for my own blog, *The Tempered Radical* (http://teacherleaders.typepad.com/the_tempered_radical).

■ **Blogger** (www.blogger.com): The main advantage of Blogger is that it's a free Google product. Google users need only one username and password to sign in for all of their Google services, which makes it as close as you can get to one-stop shopping for digital tools. For an example of Blogger in action, check out *The Fischbowl* at <http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com>.

■ **Edublogs** (www.edublogs.org): Edublogs is one of the only free blogging services that is completely dedicated to educators. The advantage of

creating your own digital home with Edublogs is that you'll be instantly connected to a community of like-minded writers who might just become your readers. For an example of Edublogs in action, check out *In Practice* at <http://inpractice.edublogs.org>.

Writing Wikis

If you've just begun to dip your toes into the digital waters, work with your peers to create a collaborative writing wiki. Wikis are editable Web sites and, like blogs, they require little technical skill to master. Wiki toolbars look just like those in common word-processing programs; when you're finished saving contributions to a wiki page, your work is automatically posted online.

The difference between a wiki and a blog is that wikis are designed for collaboration among groups of users. Anyone with the shared wiki password can edit the content on a wiki at any time. Wikis also provide discussion boards for every page, enabling users to engage in ongoing conversations about their developing project. Some teams of teachers—such as the teachers creating *Digitally Speaking* (<http://digitallyspeaking.pbwiki.com>)—use wikis to reflect on the characteristics of effective instruction. Others use them to create warehouses of materials among teachers working in the same content area (<http://cesa5mathscience.wikispaces.com>) or as a source for teachers and

teams creating entire classroom textbooks (<http://anawiki.wetpaint.com/?t=anon>)

Consider finding a few peers to write about teaching and learning together. Divide your topic of interest into subtitles or sections. Teachers could be responsible for creating content for their area of expertise; they could generate key ideas, add links to external resources, upload appropriate documents, or embed interesting videos. Then allow users who are fluent with language to polish your final text. Find members who are sticklers for spelling and grammar and turn them loose.

of the most intriguing. With an emphasis on tools for collaboration and professional templates, Wet Paint wikis will make you look good. For an example of Wet Paint in action, check out the Anawiki at <http://anawiki.wetpaint.com>

Elevating Voice, Improving Practice

Although I enjoy the opportunities for reflection and articulation that digital tools have made possible, I see even greater potential in using blogs and wikis to gain influence as a teacher leader. Early on, I realized that I had

with their comments—and to enjoy the challenges that others make to their own electronic thinking. At the same time, my students are learning to create, communicate, and collaborate—and to manage and evaluate information found online.

All these skills are essential for students to succeed in the most progressive workplaces today and the most common workplaces tomorrow, in which corporations open their companies and encourage digital collaboration across borders, primarily because they recognize that the human capital beyond an organization will always be greater than the human capital within. As Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, authors of *Wikinomics* (2008), write,

A power shift is underway and a tough new business rule is emerging: Harness the new collaboration or perish. Those who fail to grasp this will find themselves ever more isolated—cut off from the networks that are sharing, adapting, and updating knowledge to create value (Kindle location 268–271)

Blogs and wikis are changing who we are as learners, preparing us for a future driven by peer production and networked learning. All you need to get started is a willingness to explore and a sense of the kinds of tools that make this work easy. ■

References

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No longer do teachers have to sit unsatisfied, wishing that we had more influence over our profession.

On a wiki, the writing process is far less intimidating than on a blog because you're not responsible for an entire selection all by yourself. Instead, you'll reflect with colleagues—which in and of itself is a powerful form of professional growth.

Several wiki services are available:

■ **PB Wiki** (<http://pbwiki.com>): This is quickly becoming one of the most popular wiki services for educators because it's just plain easy to use. For an example of PB Wiki in action, check out Stay Current at <http://staycurrent.pbwiki.com>.

■ **Wikispaces** (www.wikispaces.com): This is one of the first wiki services that educators embraced. As a result, there are literally thousands of Wikispaces that you can look to for samples of what's possible. For an example of Wikispaces, check out Digiteen at <http://digiteen.wikispaces.com>.

■ **Wet Paint** (www.wetpaint.com): This is one of the newest wiki services available to educators, but it's also one

valuable experiences to share with everyone from parents to policymakers. Now, in just over two years, my blog has attracted nearly 350 regular readers. No longer do teachers have to sit unsatisfied, wishing that we had more influence over our profession. Blogging has made it possible for all of us to be publishers and to elevate our voices to improve classroom practice.

Digital tools have also changed who I am as an instructor because I've introduced these tools to my students. Together, we use feed readers to explore collections of student blogs (www.pageflakes.com/wferriter/20982438) and organize resources on topics connected to our curriculum, such as biofuels and global warming (www.pageflakes.com/wferriter/22534539). We write a classroom blog reflecting on current events (<http://guysread.typepad.com/theblurb>) and use wikis to collaborate around content (<http://carbonfighters.pbwiki.com>). I teach my students to challenge the thinking of digital peers