February 15, 2003

Writing With Web Logs

By Kristen Kennedy

An emergent genre is making a space for students to publish online.

The Web has opened up almost limitless possibilities for publishing. With so many online magazines, newspapers, and journals, there's no shortage of venues for both professional and practicing authors. Stephen King may be the best-known writer to dabble in self-publishing online, and many have followed his lead. Educators have also been using the Web to publish course descriptions and syllabi, while building professional development communities dedicated to sharing best practices.

Publishing student writing, however, has yet to gain widespread adoption in middle and high school English classes, a fact that seems particularly striking when you consider the advantages of inviting readers to respond to student-authored work. For starters, Web publication gives students a real audience to write to and, when optimized, a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback, mirroring the way professional writers use a workshop environment to hone their craft. Jeff Golub, technology spokesperson for the National Council of Teachers of English, says that the organization supports the use of Web-based publishing tools to celebrate and share student writing. Golub, who is also associate professor of English education at the University of South Florida, teaches future educators three central principles about encouraging student authorship: "Students will write when they have something to say, when they have an audience, and when they get feedback."

The challenge, as it so often is with new uses of technology, is integration. How do educators take advantage of the Web's publishing tools with limited time and resources and in keeping with the standards? Enter a promising new use of technology called Web logs—or blogs, for short. Part Web site, part journal, part free-form writing space, blogs have the potential to enhance writing and literacy skills while offering a uniquely styled form of expression.
What Is a Blog?

Web logs started out primarily as a self-publishing movement for both professional and armchair journalists making their voices heard in an open online press. For some, blogging—the act of writing and publishing to a blog—takes the form of a digital diary, such as those found at studentcenter.org. And for a handful of educators experimenting with this new genre, blogs offer them and their students an interactive and immediate publishing tool.

What makes Web logs unique is their emphasis on publication and their signature as a dynamic genre of Web writing. Forming the technical backbone of blogs are content management programs, such as PostNuke or UserLand’s Manila, that are built to be “personal publishing systems,” as UserLand president and COO John Robb puts it. No HTML is required, since these programs are designed to be as easy to use as a word processing application, but with additional collaboration and communication features. Manila, for example, can manage 500 individual student sites, discussion boards, mail bulletin functions, and digital portfolios all with site search and syndicated news stream capture capabilities.

Unlike most Web sites, which generally combine static and dynamic features, a blog is produced with an active writer in mind, one who creates in an online writing space designed to communicate an identity, a personality, and most importantly, a point of view.

Blogging in English Class

Will Richardson’s weblogg-ed.com is a virtual goldmine of blogging resources, including best practices, educator blogs, and technology recommendations for choosing content management tools. A Hunterdon Central Regional High School English teacher from Flemington, N.J., Richardson is among the few educators starting to explore Web logs in the writing classroom.

Blogging Tools

Check out these options for content management and online publishing.

Commercial blogging software can get you up and running faster and with broader functionality than some of the free offerings that may be full of advertising. UserLand.com, PostNuke.com, pMachine.com, and MoveableType.org offer full-featured publishing tools at reasonable prices.

Virtual learning platforms, such as blackboard.com and WebCT.com, also provide a variety of template-based publishing options.

Find free Web-based blogging tools at Blogger.com, LiveJournal.com, and Xanga.com; add features for a fee.

Blogs in Education

Visit these sites for models and best practices.

Check out Will Richardson’s professional and student blogs at weblogg-ed.com.

Web logs created by teacher Peter Ford and middle school students from the British School of Amsterdam.

Links to Pat Delaney’s insights and articles on blog technology.
Students in Richardson's American Literature course use their class blog to discuss The Secret Life of Bees with each other and author Sue Monk Kidd.

Journalism at Hunterdon is a paperless course, with all student work posted exclusively to a class blog. Working collaboratively, students select stories from online newspapers to post to their section, with group editors meeting with Richardson to choose the top story of the day. Individually, kids select a beat to cover throughout the quarter, collecting stories and then writing about them at the end of the term. Richardson has found discussion tools the most helpful feature of his Journalism Web log, noting that the online interaction "provided students an opportunity to articulate their ideas in ways they haven't been asked to before."

In American Literature, students post their responses to a class reading of Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees. The class blog includes commentary, criticism, and artistic interpretations of key passages and literary images from the novel. Best of all, students got to ask Kidd questions about her writing when she made a virtual appearance on their site. Meanwhile, Richardson has invited parents to read along with the class and publish to their own book club blog.

While only a few months into his blogging experiment, Richardson sees some impact on the way students are approaching their writing. "My kids are more aware of what they're writing and of the potential audience they're writing for," he says.

While still in the early stages, blogs in education are starting to catch on. The National Writing Project recently purchased server space to see how the medium facilitates dialogue and sharing of best practices among teachers who teach in writing-intensive classrooms. Last summer, students attending three local NWP Young Writers' Camps joined in online writing workshops using blogging technology. Camp teachers modeled this experiment after the NWP's E-Anthology, a Web log of educators working together to develop and support each other's writing.

The Politics of Online Publishing

If blogs are so easy to use and so invaluable for motivating student writing, then why aren't more students publishing online? According to Web log pioneer Pat Delaney, librarian at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco, Calif., and associate director of technology for the Bay Area Writing Project, "The barriers are permission and server space. Most schools want to set up an intranet where a Webmaster can approve new content and then push some of it live." But if you have 75 students all posting to a class blog, it's going to take a prohibitively long time to evaluate students' work, aside from the fact that publishing on a school intranet defeats the goal of publishing for a broad audience. Delaney adds, "If you limit students' power by wrestling over permission to publish, then they'll ignore technology use in school."
One solution adopted at King is to make sure all students posting online have parental permission and that they don't publish any identifiable pictures of themselves. Teachers can password protect their sites, as well. For those just starting to blog, Delaney suggests contacting their local National Writing Project office to inquire about blog-based programs. Free Web-based tools, such as Blogger and LiveJournal (see "Blogging Tools"), are also available.

If the fear of giving students an open forum to publish to their personal Web pages without an editor's approval keeps schools from exploring Web logs, consider that self-publishing encourages ownership and responsibility for content. UserLand COO John Robb notes, "Web logs are attached to an individual in the way a discussion board isn't. There are rules to using a Web log. If students break them, they can lose their site."

The impact of such technologies on students who've used them regularly offers a picture of what happens when they're given the freedom-and responsibility-to publish their own work. For example, student editors of the King online newspaper, after attending a school dance late one Friday evening, went home and posted their reports. "That never happens," Delaney says. "Not in middle school." Nadine G., a student from Richardson's Journalism class, wrote in her evaluation of the course, "My Web log became a personal voice for me, and I found I could express opinions, even in my class work. It also helped me organize all my work in one place."

**Entering a Conversation**

Creating online communities where student writing takes center stage means inviting audiences to read and reflect on published work. For educators, this involves reaching out into virtual and professional communities for collaborative opportunities. For instance, working writers and journalists could volunteer to serve as editors of student blogs. Additionally, alliances between K-12 and higher education would benefit preservice teachers who could gain valuable teaching and technology experience responding to student blogs, while students would benefit from having reliable readers critiquing and encouraging their work. A partnership of this kind started last fall between Middlebury College students and fifth-graders from Shoreham Elementary School in Vermont. Mentors guided students' writing using blog discussion and writing tools. Hector Vila, Ph.D., associate director of distance education for the Center for Educational Technology at Middlebury College, is convinced of the effectiveness of this emerging technology on K-16 education. "This is the sort of collaboration that will get technology into schools," he says.

**The Challenge of Assessment**

In many ways, blogs combine the best elements of portfolio-driven courses, where student work is collected, edited, and assessed, with the immediacy of publishing for a virtual audience. Content management platforms on which blogs are built make this entire process easier and more efficient. But while new uses of Web-based applications can make writing more real for students, educators will still need to consider how to evaluate what happens when students write online. Here are a few places to start when evaluating students' Web logs.

Start slowly by asking students to post once a week in response to a specific assignment. Allow them to customize and personalize their site as much as their Web log application and school policies will allow. With that freedom comes responsibility, so spend a class drafting the rules for publishing to their sites. Have each student sign a copy, and keep it on file.
Optimize the journal format by evaluating student writing over time, not just in one high-pressure testing event. Schedule several formal assessments during the school year at which time you can give a term grade that will be averaged with grades from subsequent evaluations.

Involve students in their own assessment. Assign a written self-evaluation students can submit before giving term grades where they reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Ask them to provide two examples of where their writing is strongest, where it's weakest, and what they need to focus on for the remainder of the course.

Encourage students' development of voice by giving two grades, one for grammar and one for style. Build rubrics that evaluate quality, not just quantity. Co-authors Stephen Valentine, a finalist in this year's T&L Ed Tech Leaders of the Year program, and Gray Smith write about this challenge in Writing in a Wired World: Improving Student Writing Using a Computer, forthcoming from Teacher Created Materials. To encourage substantive discussion in student message board communication, they've developed conversation assessments using a five-point rubric that outlines the key criteria for determining a student's grade, including use of evidence, engagement with the text, and whether or not a student responded thoughtfully.

Use models. Bookmark examples of well-written blogs. Take a class period to discuss what an effective post looks like. The same goes for examples of helpful reader response. If you use discussion board features to workshop students' writing, you also need to guide and reward the difficult work of learning how to give constructive criticism.

For additional digital writing resources, including sites where students can publish their work, visit us at www.techlearning.com.

_Kristen Kennedy is senior editor of T&L._

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