

Blogging in schools

Michael Tunks

You may already be into 'blogging' as a consumer or reader of other peoples' blogs. I followed, in awe, the blog of young, lone sailor Jessica Watson (www.jessicawatson.com.au) as she passed through the point in the Southern Pacific Ocean that marked her farthest distance from land and then rounded the treacherous Cape Horn.

Blogging advocates cite the engagement benefits, pointing out that blogging integrates the learning areas of IT and literacy in a current and familiar medium for students.

What is blogging?

Information technology today allows students to access and share information, including their personal opinions and thoughts, with others instantly and in entirely personal literacy styles. The term 'weblog' first appeared in 1997 referring to web pages that "logged" links to other websites. This has been truncated to 'blog' and now refers to sites largely devoted to "logging" personal opinions and sites of individually compiled information with links to related websites and supporting material. A recent census estimated there are over 80 million blogs worldwide.

Blogs depend on the dynamic interaction of the blogger or author writing a "post" or blog entry that then elicits written responses and feedback from readers of the blog. Regular contributions from the blogger are a key ingredient for keeping readers interested and responsive.

Blog topics can vary widely from the narrated journey of someone trying to achieve a goal, e.g. weight loss or sailing around the world, to working one's way through a cookbook (the movie, *Julia & Julie*) or a question and answer format on a specific topic.

Some teachers ask students to choose topics from news items and to use writing skills they are currently learning.

Is blogging educational?

Advocates of blogging in school are enthusiastic about the excitement and engagement of their



students in both the technical (IT) aspects of layout, presentation and also the literacy aspects of purpose and audience in their writing (posts). Students regularly ask if they can work on their blogs and are keen to see if anyone has responded. They are enthusiastic for computers, writing and "opinioning". Connectivity between student-student, teacher-student and parent-student are enhanced with blogging enabling work to be displayed, ideas expressed and enjoyable school activities and learning shared.

Research also supports the measurable educational benefits of blogging in schools. Some research suggests that blogging can be used positively to enhance the teaching and learning of language. Others found that encouraging blogging (a) allows teachers and students to

share information and ideas, and (b) lets others comment or respond to their postings. Such feedback encourages writers to think about how they are expressing themselves. Also, blogging can have a noticeable positive affect in the classroom if persistence is encouraged.

How to blog

What do I need?

The most essential element is blogging software. Most are freely available on the internet (e.g. Google Blogger) and most state education departments provide suitably protected, child-safe blogging platforms.

The second essential element is an audience. This can be class members commenting on each other's blogs or you could set up an inter-class

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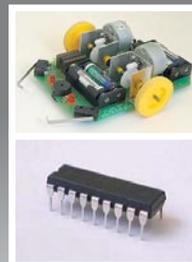
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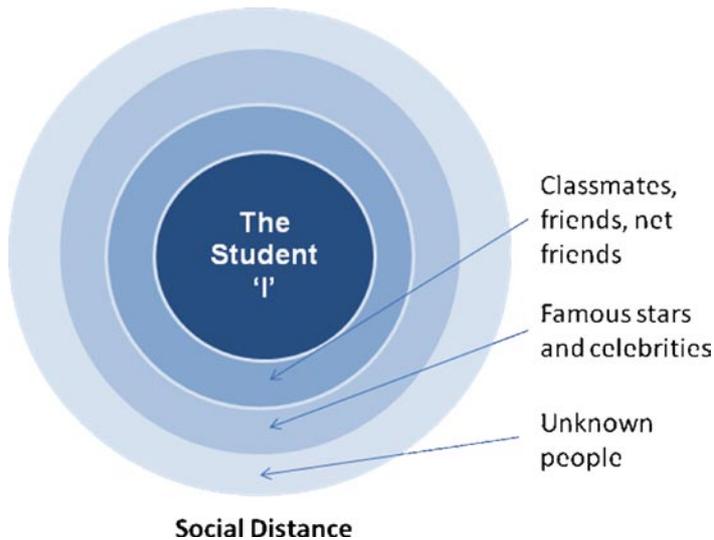
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As student confidence with communicating via blogging increases so their social distance reach increases.

arrangement with another group of students anywhere in the world.

A four-level interactive blogging model has been proposed by researchers.¹ At levels one and two, most entries are one-way, i.e. audience feedback is not the main aim. The third level sees two-way exchanges of short duration. And the fourth level features a diverse flow of information and ideas. This fourth level is probably beyond the scope of school activity, however, the first three levels provide adequate opportunity for incorporating blogging into the curriculum.

This four level approach also fits nicely with a “social distancing” hypothesis which proposes that there are varying stages of outreach for student involvement in blogging. The first stage is purely personal, or the “I” stage, evolving to classmates, friends and net friends, then to famous stars and celebrities, and finally to unknown people (Fig. 1).

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Teacher preparation

The truth of the matter is that your students are probably already involved in blogging outside of school. Whereas many teachers feel stressed with their school load and cannot envisage incorporating blogging (or any of the other new IT ideas) into their teaching strategies. Indeed, as Barbara Ganly, an educational blogger, writes (<http://bgblogging.com>) “But now things feel more urgent suddenly, as though we’ve reached a crossroads. Much is in flux. Much is under threat. My students have changed, for one thing, these young ones are now true digital natives and what that means has collided with our present model of education, exploding into an alarming reality.”

For some teachers staying on top of new internet technologies while focusing on the basic curriculum is a challenge.

References

- 1 The impact of blogging on Hong Kong primary school students’ bilingual reading literacy. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 2010; 26 (2): 164-179.



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