

Weblogs as an Educational Tool

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Introduction: Weblogs and the Read/Write Web

Web logs, Weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known, have been around since the early days of the Internet, the term initially referring to lists of links to sites visited by an Internet user. Web users could publish their own content on the Internet if they had some knowledge of HTML coding language to design their pages and a knowledge of FTP to send files to a server. Although relatively low, these barriers to entry were high enough to effectively limit the potential for “micropublishing” on the Internet by the average user. In the late 1990s, however, software was developed that began to simplify and automate the process of publishing content on the Internet. With the emergence of companies providing not only the software that allowed users to create content, but also providing space in which to publish it at little or no cost, the seeds of today’s blogging boom were sown.

Will Richardson gives this general definition of Weblogs

In its most general sense, a Weblog is an easily created, easily updateable Website that allows an author (or group of authors) to

publish instantly to the Internet from an Internet connection.⁽¹⁾

Blogs have given anyone with online access a publishing tool which costs little or no money, involves no more technical knowledge than sending an email message, and provides access to a potential audience of millions worldwide. Reducing barriers to entry was like the opening of flood gates and Weblogs became the latest disruptive technology. In 2004, the Miriam-Webster dictionary named “blog” its word of the year and the media was full of news of this latest phenomena.⁽²⁾ That this new form of publishing has been enthusiastically adopted was confirmed once more in October 2006 when the Internet search engine, Technorati, which specializes in blog related searches, announced that it was tracking over 57 million blogs. Of these, 19.4 million were being updated at least once a month and with 100,000 new blogs being created every day, the “blogosphere” was doubling every 236 days.⁽³⁾

It wasn't only due to the ease of use and low cost of blogging that accounts for this enthusiasm. The man credited with creating the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee has said that his original intention was to “make it a collaborative medium, a place where we can all meet and read and write”.⁽⁴⁾ He continues to discuss the interactive nature of the blogging medium,

The idea was that anybody who used the web would have a space where they could write and so the first browser was an editor, it was a writer as well as a reader. Every person who used the web had the ability to write something. It was very easy to make a new web page and comment on what somebody else had written, which

is very much what blogging is about.⁽⁵⁾

A powerful, and many would argue the key feature of Weblogs is that they enable authors to not only to publish content, but also allow their readers, through comment functions, to give that author feedback, share additional information or alternative viewpoints and point him and his readers to other related resources. In short, Weblogs are an interactive medium. Thus Weblogs are one of an array of Web tools that are helping to making Berners-Lee's vision of the Read/Write Web a reality.

The breaking of the monopoly of traditional media outlets and the advent of media content that is "created, distributed and owner by the consumer"⁽⁶⁾ in general and Weblogs in particular have had an enormous impact on the fields of journalism, politics and business; an impact that perhaps surpasses the expectations of even their strongest advocates. There are also many enthusiastic advocates of the role that Weblogs can play in the classroom and many who are already putting them to work. Will Richardson is one of the strongest of these advocates and although he says that education has been somewhat slower in considering the potential of the Read/Write Web in the classroom, he writes:

[Weblogs have]... the potential to radically change what we assume about teaching and learning, and it presents us with important questions to consider:

What needs to change about our curriculum when our students

have the ability to reach beyond our classroom walls? What changes must we make in our teaching as it becomes easier to bring primary sources to our students? How do we need to rethink our ideas of literacy when we must prepare our students to become not only readers and writers, but editors and collaborators as well?⁽⁷⁾

David Warlick adds his own argument for why educators should make better use of blogging techniques when he argues,

“Weblogs are natural for the classroom, because blogging is about literacy. To blog is to read and write. When students are blogging as a class they are writing in order to read, and reading in order to write. It is in a real sense, a self-sustaining instructional activity of literacy.”⁽⁸⁾

I often overhear students in my classes asking other students, “What is a blog?” and the most common reply is, “It’s just like a diary online”. This image of the blog is, particularly in Japan, very prevalent. Catherine Seipp writes that after the September 11 terrorist attacks, which most commentators agree was a major milestone in the march of Weblogs into the mainstream, Weblogs shifted from being a personal journaling medium to “a Web journal that comments on the news... with links to stories that back up commentary and evidence”⁽⁹⁾. Although there has been a shift in the content and perception of role of Weblogs, a very large proportion of Weblogs are still what can best be described personal (though interactive)⁽¹⁰⁾ journals other commentators take issue with defining Weblogs by their content alone; “Blogging is something defined by *format* and *process*, not by content.”⁽¹¹⁾

Not all posts are equal

This format and process lends itself to what Richardson describes as “connective writing”⁽¹²⁾. The original Weblogs were lists of links to sites an Internet user had visited. There are still many Weblogs today that are little more than lists of links. Richardson contends that this does not constitute blogging into its fullest sense, nor either journaling or posting regular class assignments to a Weblog. To Richardson, blogging starts with reading, and that to be able to blog, students have to learn to read carefully and critically, assessing and assigning value and authority to various texts; articulating their thought processes and connections with links to the sources of the ideas that they express- all the while the student should be aware of the wider audience that they are (or may be) potentially speaking to.

Once the post is published, where a traditional school assignment might end, only in need of a grade and their teacher’s comments; blogging continues. If and when a fellow class member, someone in the local community, or a complete outsider writes a comment on the student’s post, it takes on a whole new life. Richardson describes true blogging as providing “links with analysis and synthesis that articulate a deeper understanding or relationship to the content being linked and written with potential audience response in mind” and complex blogging as, “extended analysis and synthesis over a longer period of time that builds on previous posts, links, and comments”⁽¹³⁾.

“A truly constructivist tool”

Any content the teachers, students or administrators put out on the

World Wide Web, is out in the world, and becomes a part of the body of knowledge that the Internet represents. Once this content is “out there” beyond the walls of the classroom or school building, it can be read by anyone in the world who has access to a computer, and importantly commented upon, commended, disagreed with, or built upon.

Richardson sees the key to the potential of Weblogs as a powerful classroom tool being that “they demand interaction”, and it is this that makes them, in his opinion, a truly constructivist tool for learning. According to “‘father’ of constructivism”, Ernst von Glasersfeld,⁽¹³⁾ its two main principles are

1. Knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the cognizing subject.
2. the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thomas and Henri-Augstein expand on the idea,

For education to be an enriching experience the meanings that emerge must become **personal**, and they must be significant and important in some part of the person’s life. Meanings must also be **viable**; that is they must prove useful and effective in mediating one’s transactions; transactions with stored knowledge, with people and the world around.⁽¹⁵⁾

Richardson points out that the new, and huge, potential audience for the

work of students can be a great motivator as it adds a considerable degree of authenticity to learning tasks. Lowe and Williams found that “by extending the discourse to a large community outside the classroom, our student bloggers regularly confront “real” rhetorical situations”⁽¹⁶⁾ and point to Kenneth Bruffee’s emphasis on the importance of students making their work public to receive feedback “on the grounds that public writing in classrooms deemphasizes teacher authority and promotes student-writers’ abilities to see themselves as responsible writer and to view writing as a social activity”⁽¹⁷⁾.

Seizinger introduces an example of this authenticity helping to create strong feelings of ownership and an evolution of a community of learners around assignments set by instructor and author of edublog *Blog of Proximal Development*, Konrad Glogowski, when a group of students lost their blogs when transferring platforms. In the interim the students were required to write their assignments in Word, and it is instructive that one student is quoted as making the observation, “It was like - like talking to someone who was not listening”⁽¹⁸⁾.

According to Seizinger group blogs can facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge. She sees “constructive learning aspects of collaborative learning, meaning-making, reflection, information resources, and the creation of metacognition about working together and audience awareness”⁽¹⁹⁾ in a class described by Tom Nelson⁽²⁰⁾ in which he divided the class into small blog groups. Of course, now that student generated content not only goes out into the world, the world can now come into the classroom, opening up opportunities for collaboration between students from across the globe, and the participation of

experts in the fields being studied. Based as I am in the city of Hiroshima, a center of peace education, I can well imagine the impact on overseas students who might be studying the atomic bombings in Japan of collaboration and exchange of ideas with students in Hiroshima. Likewise students studying issues in the Middle East might, for example, greatly benefit from collaboration with students both in Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. In addition to the insight such contacts can provide, as Richardson states, “learning to work with far-flung collaborators is becoming an important literacy,”⁽²¹⁾ in an increasingly global society.

The ability to write and receive comments on Weblogs is one of their key features. and they can be powerful motivators and feedback tools. Comments are directed directly at the student so are therefore highly relevant and personal and foster reflection.

Weblogs can allow students who are less inclined to speak to contribute to classroom discussions and can lead to a greater sense of participation. Lowe and Williams quote one student as saying, “I like blogging because I believe it to be a positive experience for shy people. At times I don’t speak up in class because I get frightened. It’s much easier for me to express my opinion on paper and it’s easier for me to take criticism on paper. I think blogging will bring up new ideas that might not have been spoken in a class environment. Many people aren’t as intimidated to speak their mind online.”⁽²²⁾ Use of Weblogs may also encourage more considered contributions as students can add their ideas after having given the issues under discussion some thought rather than making contributions “off the top of their heads”.⁽²³⁾

Last, but certainly not least, Weblogs can help teach students the new technologies and literacies they will need to make the most of opportunities to benefit from an information society. This information society they need to be a part of to be competitive in the workplace, is growing at a seemingly exponential rate. As more and more information comes online “it is imperative that we give our students the skills to analyze and manage it and ... “blogging” can go a long way to teaching skills such as research, organization, and synthesis of ideas.”⁽²⁴⁾

Possible applications of Weblogs

Class blogs. These are generally teacher-led (in a Japanese university such as Hiroshima University of Economics these might work as Seminar group blogs)

- post class or seminar related information
- follow up discussion of topics covered in class
- post questions concerning class topics received from students and invite classmates to respond
- post assignments which students complete on own Weblogs
- showcase examples of good student work (from in class or from individual student Weblogs)
- provide online readings for students to read, reflect on and discuss (in class or through comments)
- create a class or seminar newsletter
- link up with a “sister” class elsewhere in the country or overseas
- post your own thoughts on how the class is going and invite feedback

Student Weblogs (each student creates their own Weblog)

- to allow them to learn how to blog
- complete class assignments
- create a portfolio of their work
- express opinions on topics studied in class
- post about news items related to classwork or personal interest
- provide feedback on class activities and teaching methods

Shared Weblogs

- collaborative project work in small groups
- show case product of project-based learning
- complete a WebQuest or hypertext activity

Evaluation of sources

A corollary of a situation in which anyone can publish anything about anything, subject to no editorial control, is that most published material is now suspect. Established “big media” and publishing outlets have long had a monopoly on what becomes news and what is published for us to consume. This has been described as media as lecture rather than media as conversation, however, despite some well publicized instances of “trusted” media outlets getting things wrong and plain falsification, the fact remains that, in general, reputable media outlets have built that reputation on a history of rigid editorial quality control.

In his book *We the media* Dan Gilmor writes:

Being a reporter involves some basic practices. When I see or hear

about something I think may be worth reporting to my audience, I verify it, or quote credible people who should know, or go to the source. If I link to something intriguing on my blog but don't know whether it's true, I offer that caveat. Generally, I don't just repeat an anonymous posting. If the fact didn't come out of a source I trust, I check it out.⁽²⁵⁾

Users of online information need to develop similar filters. They need a hierarchy of trust.

Steven Downes goes even further. In his well received Weblog post *Principles for Evaluating Websites*, he places responsibility for determining whether or not something read is true or not with the reader/writer. Even information from an authority you trust must be carefully evaluated. Downes provides some excellent guidelines for determining who to trust about what, and a key point he makes is that the way you learn to trust someone is through repeated contact and that this is a very personal process; the better you get to know a website, the more easily you can determine whether or not to trust it.⁽²⁶⁾

There is also the danger that the giants of Internet search are so ubiquitous that our students believe that using them gives them access to all available online information, and that that information can be taken a face value. Meredith Farkas and Jimmy Atkinson point out the dangers of confining one's online research to these search engines, effectively cutting out the "invisible web" to which they do not have access - "The invisible web comprises databases and results of specialty search engines that the popular search engines simply are not able to

index.”⁽²⁷⁾ Teachers must acquaint themselves so that they are able to help their students navigate the world “beyond Google”. That said, the user friendly interface that familiar sites such as Google provide can be utilized, via customizable search boxes added to school or class websites or blogs - which are limited to searching sites and databases which are selected by the teacher.

It is perhaps to be expected that students are more likely to start with an Internet search on a topic than they are to head to the library, and also that they are likely to use the first resource that they come across in a search performed on one of the popular commercial search engines. On of the teacher’s most important tasks is to give students knowledge of resources beyond Google, the skills to use them, and the ability to assess the authority of sources and how they can be used in conjunction with traditional academic sources so that they can become “truly information literate”⁽²⁸⁾.

No easy solution

The experience of the many educators who have tried to employ the use of Weblogs in the classroom has by no means been universally satisfactory. O'Donnell points to educators who found blogging projects did not fulfill their high expectations complaining that Weblogs did not help facilitate discussion, while Weblogs may have lower technical barriers than standard web pages technological hurdles remain, and that assigned blogging ends up being forced writing.⁽²⁹⁾

The progression from simple posting to complex blogging will inevitably take time. The picture of the situation in the classroom

often painted is one of Prensky's "digital immigrants" (teachers) desperately trying to catch up with "digital natives" (students) who are completely at ease working with the digital technologies they have grown up with.

This is not always the case, and time is needed for students to come to grips with Weblog technology, come to an understanding of what blogging is and then work on finding a voice within the conversation. O'Donnell cautions that blogging cannot easily be modeled on other forms of teaching and learning technology, and it requires teachers as well as students to explore a different set of strategies. He suggests that blogs in higher education might most effectively be employed over a whole degree course over which "the blog would evolve together with (and record) the student's learning and practice experience"⁽³¹⁾.

The open-ended nature of Weblogs also presents challenges to how teachers assess student work. If the actual posting of a piece of writing is only a midway point in the blogging process, it seems that giving that piece of writing a grade prematurely puts an end to the process. Konrad Glogowski is experimenting with a system of assessment that he hopes will allow the process of blogging to continue and encourage students to set their own goals and monitor their own progress rather than "making [their] work conform to some standard imposed by the teacher"⁽³²⁾. Glogowski's ongoing attempt to set up a framework for evaluation is an example of the way educators themselves are using Weblogs as spaces to reflect on their teaching and develop their ideas in the light of feedback from readers through the comments section, and it is instructive that it is not only the institution for which he works that expects grades, the students do too; "They want to know what

their work is worth. They have been trained, unfortunately, to equate learning with a letter or a percentage. It's not learning, in their view, it's not school, unless there's a grade attached.⁽³³⁾"

Conclusion

Weblogs in the classroom have the potential to enhance student learning in positive ways. They can encourage targeted and critical reading of texts from a variety of sources and help hone writing skills in the production of authentic pieces of writing about which students have a strong sense of ownership. Blogging can provide an opportunity to develop skills to assess authority of a variety sources and encourage students to become more information and media literate. Maximizing potential benefit, however, involves the development of assignments and curricula that would allow students the opportunity and the time to develop their own voices. Only then would they be able to experience the rewards of participation and collaboration that blogging offers.

Further Research

Blogging has become a mainstream phenomenon and it is being used by many enthusiastic educators in their classrooms. Although there is a large amount of high quality reflective writing by educators who are putting Weblogs to work in their classroom in their own Weblogs, there still remains relatively little refereed academic research on the implementation and effectiveness of Weblogs as a tool in the classroom. More rigorous research into whether the claims being made for the use of Weblogs in the classroom can be supported is required. I am particularly interested in how the use of Weblogs might work in a Japanese higher educational setting in both the native Japanese

language and in English as a second language.

Notes

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