

Chapter 4.5

Let Them Blog: Using Weblogs to Advance Literacy in the K–12 Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the use of blogs as an educational technology in the K-12 classroom. It argues that blogs can be used to promote verbal, visual, and digital literacy through storytelling and collaboration, and offers several examples of how educators are already using blogs in school. This chapter also reviews issues such as online privacy and context-setting, and ends with recommendations for educators interested in implementing blogs with current curricula.

INTRODUCTION

As Internet technologies continue to bloom, understanding the behaviors of its users remain paramount for educational settings. For teachers, parents, school administrators, and policymakers, learning *what types* of activities and applications students are using on the Internet is only the surface. Understanding *how* they are using these

applications can provide innovative strategies for learning environments.

Previously, many scholars have explored how Internet users communicate and present themselves online, using computer-mediated communication venues such as e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, newsgroups, multi-user domain (MUDs), and personal home pages to examine communication patterns, online identity construction, and even gender differences (Crystal, 2001; Döring, 2002; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003; Herring, 2000; Lee, 2003; Turkle, 1995; Witmer & Katzman, 1997).

Internet technologies continue to evolve, and it is important for scholars to examine the latest CMC arenas in comparison with past research in hopes of finding new ways to find creative learning solutions and enhance pedagogical method in educational technology. Weblogs, commonly referred to as *blogs*, represent one of the latest advances in CMC.

A blog can be simply defined as an online journal. Made up of reversed chronological entries

infused with text, images, or multimedia, blogs embody a place where individual expression and online community development coexist. Not only do the authors, or *bloggers*, post thoughts and feelings on a Web page for the world to view, but blog readers can comment, creating a dialogue between the blogger and the community he inhabits. Furthermore, bloggers link to other bloggers, creating an interwoven and perhaps interdependent online community of writers and readers. Blog popularity continues to resonate throughout the media, with many scholars suggesting an evolution in individual self-expression, education and research, online journalism, and knowledge management (Alterman, 2003; Blood, 2003; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Lasica, 2003; Moore, 2003; Mortenson & Walker, 2002; Oravec, 2002; Pollard, 2003b; Schroeder, 2003).

In a recent survey, Perseus Development Corporation found that among the four million published Weblogs, almost 53% are created by children and adolescents between ages 13-19 (Henning, 2003). With such a strong population of young bloggers, understanding its potential uses within a classroom remains an exciting prospect for educators and parents. Can blogs be used to enhance learning? In what ways can they be used in the classroom?

This chapter hypothesizes that blogs can be effective educational tools in the following ways: (1) they promote verbal and visual literacy through dialogue and storytelling, (2) they allow opportunities for collaborative learning, and (3) they are accessible and equitable to a variety of age groups and developmental stages in education.

In order to evaluate this hypothesis, this chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will provide a thorough explanation of what blogs are, fundamental blog features, how they are used, and the demographics of the blog population. Second, this chapter will define verbal, visual, and digital literacy, and their importance in learning. Third, it will explain how blogs foster literacy through

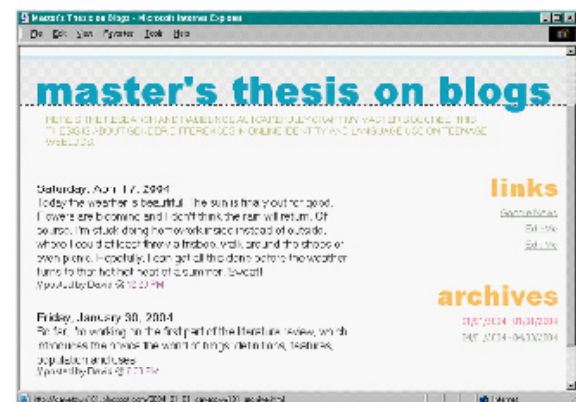
storytelling and peer collaboration. Fourth, this chapter will describe examples where blogs are used in K-12 classrooms, with an emphasis on the previous concepts of storytelling, peer collaboration, and literacy. Finally, this chapter will provide specific recommendations for educators and school administrators interested in implementing blogs in their schools and classrooms.

WHAT IS A BLOG?

Blogs are personal journals written as a reversed chronological chain of text, images, or multimedia, which can be viewed in a Web page and are made publicly accessible on the Web (Huffaker, 2004a; Winer, 2003). As depicted in Figure 1, blogs typically contain text in the form of a “blog post,” offer the ability for readers to comment or provide feedback, contain archives to past blog posts, and link to other blogs and bloggers.¹

Blogs are inherently different from personal home Web pages. First, bloggers post entries through manual software, such as a Web browser, or automatic software, which is downloaded off the Internet and used to instantly publish content to the Web. Therefore, bloggers do not need to understand HTML or other Web programming

Figure 1. An example blog



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