

STUDENT WRITING BLOG IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Kyle Minner

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Abstract

In my content area of English education, I feel that writing is an essential process which students must learn. In today's electronic society, people are more and more often using writing (emails, memos, etc.) to communicate instead of face to face or over the phone. Writing is therefore essential to not only the classroom but also to any occupation. To that end, I would like to create for my classroom a blog where students can post their writing projects. In this space, students can help each other edit, revise, and comment on each others' writing, hopefully creating excellent writers. Not only that, but with such a tool, students are able to construct their learning process and truly come to own their education.

Tech Module: Blogging in the English Classroom

Introduction

In 2006, Time Magazine revealed that the esteemed Person of the Year was, in fact, you. You who have discovered and utilized various Web 2.0 tools and have thus changed the landscape of water cooler conversation forever. The you that Time spoke of is, of course, all of us; we are the new generation of technology users and it is up to us to use it effectively in the classroom to enhance learning. One such tool that lends itself very well to an English classroom is the almighty blog.

As a tool in schools, blogs are already relatively widespread. They are being used for classroom updates which both parents and students can read, areas where students can retrieve and post assignments, and for students' personal work. The most important thing that a blog does for a classroom, however, is that it creates a community among its members. This community, when created effectively, can be an incredibly trusting place where authentic student learning flourishes.

Blogging 101

According to Wikipedia, a blog (or more formally a Web log) is a website on which members post regular entries. These entries can be text, pictures, videos, audio, or other media, in any combination. The beautiful thing about blogs is that they are a very fluid medium with which to create a community.

Creating the website of the blog is relatively simple. First, simply create an account at any number of blogging websites. The most popular site tends to be www.blogger.com, though www.edublogs.org is a site created specifically for education-based blogs. After you have created your account, follow the simple on-screen instructions, giving your new blog a name and a web-address. You are then given options of templates for your website, which vary according to structure and color. Of course, you can change your template later or even create your own custom template. After completing this step, you are ready to start writing.

However, when implementing this in a classroom, you as a teacher are likely desirous of student input. The final step to create your community of scholars is to change the privacy settings. First, click on the

*<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

settings tab, followed by the sub-tab of permissions. At this point, you can add authors (if you want your students to be able to write and post their own threads) and choose who is able to view the blog. This step is vital for trust and privacy issues, especially if students are posting their own work to the site.

Although the above description is for www.blogger.com, there are other sites that can be used also. Here is a site which describes how to set up a blog at <http://www.classblogmeister.com/>:

<http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com/2006/02/how-to-set-up-classroom-blog-using.html>¹

Other websites that help demonstrate how and why to create blogs are:

http://teachers.henrico.k12.va.us/henrico/morris_j/blogging/index.htm²

This site from staff development in Henrico County helps spell out the purpose of blogging in the classroom, how to set up a blog, as well as examples of how blogs might be used. I like that this site is very simple to navigate, yet it contains links to incredibly helpful and useful sites such as possible lesson plans that can be used right away in essentially any class.

http://jeffreyhill.typepad.com/english/lesson_plans/³

This blog is a demonstration of the type of collaboration that can take place among many people throughout the world. On it are countless lesson plans that have been posted by individuals, as well as links to other sites that contain even more lesson plans. Although many of these plans really have nothing to do with blogging as a topic, I found this site to be a good example of how to set up a blog, as well as to demonstrate the usefulness of the tool for educators.

http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_6/huffaker/index.html⁴

I found this article to be very interesting because it cites much research done that determines that blogging in the classroom can help advance literacy in students, especially through the use of storytelling and dialogue. Not only that, but it provides many sources and examples of effective classroom blogs that demonstrate the research being done.

<http://www.my-ecoach.com/online/webresourcelist.php?rlid=4992>⁵

This site provides many links to various blogging sites, including the two mentioned in Blogging 101. It also has links to useful classroom examples and tips for teachers on how to set up their own blogs.

<http://supportblogging.com/?token=4d80768dfd3e794598e4288c80c5c97d>⁶

An incredibly useful wikispace, this site provides loads of information about blogging for educators, blogging for students, and blogging in general. An entire day could be spent researching all the links to lesson plans, blogging sites, and useful tips and tricks spread around this single website.

Bloggng in the Classroom

The classroom environment is an excellent source for any number of blogs. The one that I see most often is a teacher's blog giving updates on class information. Homework is often posted daily and news for parents is also readily available. This type of blog is very simple to create and maintain because only one user updates it regularly and there is little need for privacy of student information.

Another use is for students to actually post their own homework assignments and easily receive grades. One teacher simply grades assignments as they are posted and comments on the post with the grade. This form of blog can be as simple as a single blog with multiple authors or as complicated as a community of blogs where each student controls the content of his or her own website.

The use that interests me most as a future teacher is to use a blog as a forum for students' writing projects. Because of the public nature of a blog, students can post their work for peer review by others in their class. This, of course, means that the teacher must have a highly structured and private site or network of sites in order to have proper oversight of projects. In order for the online community to flourish, appropriate comments to each other's work is essential and knowing that the teacher will be reviewing and possibly grading should help students focus the purpose of their posts.

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The major problem with blogging in the classroom, however, is precisely that. How exactly should a teacher provide the necessary oversight without limiting student creativity and the free flow of ideas? Most teachers who have class blogs require a minimum number of posts, such as a student must post ten times a month. While this is usually effective in making students post something, the something that they post is often not worthwhile. This leads to necessary quality checks by the teacher and assignment of grades as opposed to just completion. Depending on the purpose of your blog, you may not want to devote that much of your time to grading blog posts. A balance must therefore be struck.

My thinking on a solution is that for every final draft of a paper a student turns in, he or she should also include a reflection on the process of writing that paper. Questions such as whether or not student input was successful, what it was like using the blog, and what the student learned about him or herself as a writer can be answered in this section. If every student does this and the reflections concerning the blog are positive, then one can safely assume that the community is flowing smoothly and oversight can be limited. However, if reports come back negative, then more authoritarian actions may be needed on the part of the teacher.

There are thousands of examples of classroom blogs on the internet, but here are a few good ones that I have found:

<http://millersenglish10.blogspot.com/>⁷

This space is a prime example of a blog for an English 10 class on which assignments are posted and students complete the work all on the same page. It is an incredibly easy site to navigate, where the assignments and their due dates are clear. The site also has several useful links, such as one to the class wiki, vocabulary lists, and honors class material. Furthermore, the purpose of the blog is stated directly up front.

<http://mrscaldwell0.edublogs.org/>⁸

This is a further example of a blog where assignments and corresponding student work are displayed. Something more distinct than Mr. Miller's English 10 blog, however, are class updates that students need to know but not necessarily respond to. In this case, the blog is used more as a communication tool and it is used very effectively.

<http://mrscsclassblog.blogspot.com/>⁹

This blog is for a fifth grade classroom and is an excellent example of using many types of media all on one page. Text, video, and pictures are all used to great effect. This is also a further example of the blog as a communication tool.

<http://itc.blogs.com/minds/>¹⁰

This blog also demonstrates effective use of different media types, this time also including podcasts and audio. Mainly, this seems to be a place for the teacher to provide feedback on student work, but is also a communication tool and a place to post the actual student work.

A Few Tips

1. Have a distinct purpose for your blog and make it known to your students and their parents or guardians.
2. Use a site that is easily edited with little to no confusion.
3. Ensure the privacy of your students and your classroom.
4. Know how to use the technology properly and demonstrate that for your students.
5. Set clear guidelines and rules for student use and make sure you enforce them. The students have to know the blog is an extension of the classroom and not a place for them to just network.
6. Above all, encourage creativity in your students and allow their personalities to come alive on sites they have constructed as a community of learners.

⁷<http://millersenglish10.blogspot.com/>

⁸<http://mrscaldwell0.edublogs.org/>

⁹<http://mrscsclassblog.blogspot.com/>

¹⁰<http://itc.blogs.com/minds/>