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The Prose of Blogging (and a Few Cons, Too)

by Rama Ramaswami

Can the technology often derided as the favored tool of lowbrow cyber rogues actually be used to improve student writing? Educators are beginning to demonstrate it can.

READY, AIM, BLOG

Bachenheimer and a group of high school teachers launched a project to see what impact blogging would have on student performance.

At the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, Principal Chris Lehmann champions integration of technology into all aspects of the curriculum. But he emphasizes that the educational purpose comes first. And that goes for blogging, too.

"We don't start out by saying we want to start a blog," he says. "We say, 'We want to do X or Y-- what's the tool that makes the most sense to use?'"

Lehmann views blogging as just one part of a holistic curriculum that he says should be grounded in technology. "The kids know the technology. What they don't often know is how the technology can change them as students. Just because they understand Facebook doesn't mean they understand how to be a better student of English or history.

"Blogging for the sake of blogging is fine, but what is the value added?"

That's a question educational blogging advocates are now coming around to answer, and the value they're finding may seem preposterous to those who associate blogging with barely literate loudmouths and cyber predators. Can this often belligerent wasteland of poor punctuation and indiscernible structure
actually help develop better student writers?

Barry Bachenheimer believes so and made an effort to prove it. Bachenheimer, director of instructional services for Caldwell-West Caldwell Public Schools in New Jersey and well known in educational circles for his own blog, "A Plethora of Technology," set out to show that blogging could improve students' writing skills by making them write more frequently and comment on one another's work. Last year, he began a project with five high school teachers in the district to study technology, specifically its effects on student achievement. One of the teachers, an 11th-grade English instructor, opted to determine if blogging could help students in the construction of a research paper. Would writing blog entries throughout the research process improve the quality of the final drafts that students submitted? "The teacher used blogs for the students to keep as a journal and flesh out ideas for point/counterpoint argument," Bachenheimer says. "There was interaction among the students and there was writing all day long, before school, during school, and after school. That was a bonus."

Blogging is relatively new, with little research to support its academic benefits, so Bachenheimer's study is an eye-opener. It showed that students who blogged felt better about writing overall, and about writing research papers in particular. Of the 25 students in the English class, 74 percent believed that blog posts helped them articulate their ideas better, and 68 percent said blogs helped them determine what to say. Another 60 percent felt blogging helped them begin writing their papers, which is compelling because 84 percent of the students said that the hardest part of writing a research paper is starting it. The students commented that blogs helped them organize their thoughts, develop their ideas, synthesize their research, and benefit from their classmates' constructive comments.

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Bachenheimer's group conducted the same blogging experiment in an AP Spanish class. Though the sample size was quite smaller than in the English class-- only nine students-- the feedback was similar. Fifty-five percent of the students agreed that blogging helped improve their Spanish writing skills. Eight out of nine (89 percent) believed that the responses they received through the blog helped them improve their writing. "Most of the students in my class demonstrated greater overall ease of expression, which became apparent in in-class, timed writing assignments," wrote the Spanish teacher, Elizabeth Coogan-Russell, in the survey. "Although there continued to be a number of errors in students' writing, I noticed fewer basic errors. Most students demonstrated increased and more accurate usage of newer, more advanced vocabulary. By the end of the research period, virtually all of my students showed an increased ability to meet the requirements of the AP Spanish Language exam."

Write More, Write Better

The results of Bachenheimer's project line up with a second recent study showing that students who blog also write more and write better. "Writing, Technology, and Teens," released earlier this year by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, reported that teen bloggers are far more prolific writers than their non-blogging counterparts. For example, more teen bloggers (47 percent) write outside school for personal reasons than do teens who don't blog (33 percent). What's more, 65 percent of teen bloggers consider writing essential to later success in life, compared to 53 percent of non-bloggers.

Those findings are expanded upon by a study involving University of Florida preservice teachers and published last year in the Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education. "Collaborative Blogging as a Means to Develop Elementary Expository Writing Skills" examined the
effects of collaboration via blogs between the preservice teachers and third-grade students at a west central Florida school. The 18 participating students were assigned to write a five-paragraph essay on a Native American tribe and create a related online presentation, all the while maintaining a blogging correspondence with the university students.

As the students posted ideas, comments, and questions, the preservice teachers would respond with suggestions. Then the students wrote the essay, one paragraph at a time, and posted it to the blog, receiving more feedback. The students were surveyed on their attitudes toward writing before and after the project. There were a number of positive responses. For example, before blogging, 39 percent of the third-graders said they liked writing at school; after the project, that number rose to 67 percent (12 out of 18). The researchers concluded the following: "First, general attitudes toward writing improved. Second, the quality of writing samples increased as compared to similar attempts from prior third-grade classes, as well as compared to previous writing samples within this group. Third, students remained motivated throughout the nine-week blogging project, primarily due to the excitement generated by each new comment from a college partner."

Kicking the Tires

EXPERIMENTATION IS KEY TO FINDING THE BENEFITS WEB 2.0 TOOLS CAN OFFER EDUCATION.

If there is ever to be total integration of social networking technology into the K-12 curriculum, there must be better communication between teachers and IT administrators, in the view of Kevin Honeycutt, a veteran K-12 teacher who is now a technology integration specialist at the Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas (ESSDACK). "The people who are so smart making machines work and the people who are so smart making education work don't always speak the same language," Honeycutt says. "We need to talk with the tech guys. Try things out, prototype a new thing." He cites Google Labs, which displays ideas and concepts that its maker is playing around with and invites users to comment. "We don't have a lot of time for prototyping, but if Google can do it, why can't schools?"

Blogs-- and their close Web 2.0 companion, wikis-- might seem daunting to some teachers, Honeycutt says, but it's critical to experiment with these and other technologies. "Every school district should try new things, kick the tires and bring that knowledge back to technology and the curriculum. If you keep early adopters from experimenting, you don't have access to a lot of new things. I almost wish there were some kind of hypothetical school where we could test our thinking."

Honeycutt believes that social networks such as Plurk and Twitter perform that role to some extent. Through these sites, he's connected with a group of 276 educators who share best practices and resources. "You can 'shoplift' from this group and once in a while put something on the shelf," he says. "You become braver and you try new things." For example, he says, a self-taught blogger could use his new skills to earn professional credits and thereby move up a notch on the teacher salary scale. ESSDACK has recently launched online professional development courses that offer credit for such self-directed learning.

In fact, educators say, blogs and wikis are perfect for experimentation because the software is readily available and often free. Unlike free website templates, which can be tricky to use and offer minimal functionality, a free blog or wiki offers a range of features and can be up and running in minutes. That's an irresistible draw for time- and resource-strapped teachers. "I've mostly used free programs for blogs
and also for web pages," says Catherine Tannahill, associate professor of educational technology at Eastern Connecticut State University. "I don't have a lot of time and I like the premade templates as opposed to having to devise every bit of [the blog or web page] myself."

While the improved writing skills were encouraging, they weren't entirely unexpected. The unanticipated results were even more striking: The third-graders transferred knowledge learned during blogging to other academic and social aspects of the classroom, such as building models of Native American villages during recess. Also noteworthy, the students developed their technology skills even though they didn't receive formal technology-related instruction during the project. The preservice teachers reported that the third-graders became more proficient at keyboarding, formatting, conducting internet searches, toggling between several open programs, and cutting and pasting content from the blogs to their presentations.

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Blog With a Purpose

The University of Florida study concluded that the blogging project serves as "an example of how to effectively integrate technology into the existing curriculum." It's a finding that gets to the heart of what educators like Bud Hunt-- and Principal Chris Lehmann earlier-- warn against: putting the technology ahead of the instruction.

"Blogging doesn't solve a problem just because you have the technology," says Hunt, instructional technologist at St. Vrain Valley School District in Longmont, CO. An avid blogger and proponent of teaching good writing in K-12 schools, Hunt believes that to be valuable as a writing aid, blogging should be weaved into other components of a classroom writing program.

"Too often in blogging, attention to pedagogy and the process of writing are ignored," he says. "Blogs should be part of a program that is focused on building a writing community of students, teachers, and other educators."

The purpose of this community, Hunt explains, should be to stimulate creative and reflective thinking, a process that a fascination with technology alone can sometimes mask. Not that blogging just for fun is a bad thing. "I'm fine with blogging for the heck of it," Hunt says. "I'm not fine with blogging for the heck of it and that's all we do in our language class. Blogs make more sense as cross-curricular tools. Students should think and write about what they learn across all subjects and grade levels. You want them to have learning and reflective activity in all situations." To ultimately be able to write in an authentic and meaningful way, he believes, kids should be blogging reflectively and across the curriculum all the way from kindergarten through 12th grade.

And even beyond that, in the view of Deb Marciano. It's been about a year since Marciano, associate professor of education and coordinator of elementary education at Washington College in Chestertown, MD, created the "Book Lovers' Online Gallery Blog" -- the BLOG Blog -- which represents her effort to connect her class of undergraduate education students with K-12 students, librarians, parents, and educators, as well as provide the K-12 community with an informed resource of children's books. The blog offers reviews of children's literature and is organized by both grade and category (e.g., picture book, poetry, Americana). Each review -- the blog has about 150 currently -- offers a short summary of the book as well as a suggested academic activity that might evolve from it, such as having student
readers write a journal entry based on the ideas in the book.

A believer in blogging's ability to improve writing skills, Marciano intended the BLOG Blog to also serve as an instructional tool. The brevity of the book reviews combined with the blog's target audience have worked to hone her students' writing style. They are not merely "blowing off steam," as Marciano says of the traditional function of blogging. "Blogging about books has made them more precise with their writing, more exact, more focused; they have to use their words more wisely."

She adds that the nature of the blog entries-- "short, sweet, and to the point"-- has also helped her students write better lesson plans: "They're learning this isn't their life story. I have seen an improvement in their [saying] what they want to say in a better and tighter fashion."

**Links**

- Barry Bachenheimer's blog
- Book Lovers' Online Gallery Blog
- Caldwell-West Caldwell Public Schools study
- Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education
- Pew Internet & American Life Project

Because of the wider audience it affords, Marciano believes blogging is a more instructive format for students than conventional classroom writing. "Writing should be for others to read. In classrooms, most writing is only for the teacher's eyes. Blog writing for schools can become a real-life experience in the writing process-- draft, edit, revise, publish-- with the capabilities of getting responses from others beyond the teacher."

Unfortunately, academic networking is not immune to the menaces of social networking, as Marciano found out soon after debuting her blog. The blog was besieged by spam, forcing her to shut off the collaborative component of the technology.

Fearing the site would be closed down, she contacted the site administrator, who turned off the "comments" feature. Since then, the blog has remained closed to feedback for the safety of the children who are reading it, Marciano says.

Still, even if her students can no longer hear back from their audience, they know it is out there, which compels them to give more consideration to their work. "Writers take more ownership of their writing when they know others will read it," Marciano says. "So I see blogging as a contemporary, real-life opportunity for writing development."

She argues that it is imperative for teachers to develop their own tech skills so they can bring technology's academic benefits into the classroom. "Now I want to look at other blogs and compare and judge ours. Inquiry leads to inquiry. We need to learn technology; otherwise, our students won't. We need to roll up our sleeves and do it as well."

**WEBEXTRAS**

If you would like more information on blogging, visit our website at www.thejournal.com. In the Browse by Topic menu, click on eLearning/Web.

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