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The Educated Blogger: Using Weblogs to Promote Literacy in the Classroom

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This article explores the role of weblogs in promoting literacy in classroom settings. Literacy remains paramount in learning, not only for language development, but also as the foundation of all academic disciplines including science and mathematics. Storytelling ignites literacy and remains an important part of life from childhood through adulthood. Weblogs resemble personal journals or diaries and provide an online venue where self-expression and creativity is encouraged and online communities are built. Therefore weblogs provide an excellent tool where storytelling and literacy advance for both individual expressions and collaborative learning. Furthermore, weblogs can be used across academic disciplines, making it a viable tool for educational technologists.

The Internet continues to generate new applications that not only foster individual expression, but also cohesive community development. Current research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and multi-user domains (MUDs) have revealed interesting trends in the way individual identity is presented, language is used, and interactions have transpired (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, 2003; Crystal, 2001; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003; Herring, 2000; Turkle, 1995).

One of the latest developments in CMC is the weblog, or “blog.” Blogs are personal journals made up of chronological entries, not unlike a paper diary.

The features of a blog include *instant publishing* of text or graphics to the Web without sophisticated technical knowledge, ways for people to provide *comments* or feedback to each blog post, the opportunity to *archive* past blog posts by date, and *hyperlinks* to other bloggers. These features not only distinguish blogs from other forms of CMC, they provide new opportunities for people to present and express themselves online.

Adolescents make up a large part of the community of bloggers, often referred to as the blogosphere. *Perseus Development Corporation*, for instance, finds 51.5% of all blogs are being developed and maintained by ages 13–19 (Henning, 2003). A similar study finds that 40.4% of blog authors are under age 20 (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004). A visit to the statistics page of *Livejournal.com*, one of the most popular blog-hosted web sites, discloses the largest distribution of blog authors also falls below age 20¹.

Because blogs seem so popular with the youth, it is hard to ignore the implications for educational technology. Can blogs enhance learning environments? Can they be used in classroom settings? This article hypothesizes that blogs can be an important addition to educational technology initiatives because they promote literacy through storytelling, allow collaborative learning, provide anytime-anywhere access, and remain fungible across academic disciplines.

To justify this hypothesis, this article will proceed as follows: First, it will look at the importance of literacy in children and adolescent development. Next, it will juxtapose storytelling as a catalyst for advancing literacy. Third, it will explore ways in which blogs can be used in the classroom for both individuals and groups, and across several disciplines. It will also demonstrate some examples already in use in classroom settings. Finally, this article will conclude with recommendations and future research implications.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY

Reading and writing provide the foundation of education, and the basic requirements for all academic disciplines, including mathematics and science (Cassell, 2004). Reading and writing are often referred to as *verbal literacy*, and children begin developing this skill even before entering school

(Huffaker, 2004). Verbal literacy remains paramount for success throughout life—from the beginnings of education to the future employment of adults (Cassell, 2004). Therefore, its attention in educational environments will continue to take precedent for administrators, policy makers, parents, and teachers.

Technology has added a new type of literacy to consider. Sometimes referred to as *digital fluency*, this type of literacy refers to the ways people become comfortable using technology as they would any other natural language (Huffaker, 2004). Some scholars suggest digital fluency will be another prerequisite for sociability, lifelong learning, and employment opportunities (Resnick, 2002). The uses of educational technology have a two-fold advantage: they can promote the types of literacy traditionally encouraged in learning, as well as the digital fluency needed to prosper in the digital age.

Blogs represent a perfect medium for literacy. Authors must read and write as they would on paper, while increasing their comfort with computers and the Internet. Because blogs do not *require* exceptional technical skills, but still offer the opportunity to “tinker” using web programming languages for customization, blogs remain equitable for all age groups and both genders, and still provide a medium for learning programmatic skills.

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling can be considered as the first steps to developing literacy (Huffaker, 2004). The practice of telling stories allows children’s language and reading skills to grow (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). This may begin when a child and parent sit together to read a bedtime story, or when the three-year-old recounts the day spent with the grandparents. These stories, whether fictional, autobiographical or anecdotal, give rise to more mature narratives (Bransford et al.).

Storytelling does not end in childhood. Children, adolescents, and adults alike may find that stories help in understanding the world around them, and create or sustain relationships and contexts among peers. Stories also help children and adults express experiences and feelings in an engaging and entertaining way (Denning, 2001). Most importantly, it provides a

way to exercise imagination and explore creativity in language use (Cassell & Ryokai, 2001), a discovery process that advances literacy and language development.

Storytelling does not have to take place in oral situations alone. Reading and writing can be a venue for an author to tell stories while increasing verbal literacy. Using the Internet to communicate allows an author to use verbal literacy while extending digital fluency. Because storytelling is a self-initiating and self-sustaining way to advance literacy, its implementation in educational settings is an important consideration.

BLOGS IN THE CLASSROOM

Weblogs are an excellent way to fuse educational technology and storytelling inside the classroom and beyond school walls. Because their format is similar to a personal diary, where recounting tales and autobiographical events is prevalent, blogs provide an arena where self-expression and creativity is encouraged. Its linkages to other bloggers establish the same peer-group relationships found in nonvirtual worlds. Its “underdetermined” design, where a system is engaging, yet intuitive and easy to learn (Cassell, 2002), makes it equitable for many age groups and both genders, and simple for teachers to implement. Being situated within the Internet allows bloggers to access their blogs anywhere and anytime an Internet connection is available, an opportunity for learning to continue outside the classroom.

Blogs are both individualistic and collaborative. Blogs promote self-expression, a place where the author can develop highly personalized content. Yet blogs connect with an online community—bloggers can comment and give feedback to other bloggers, and they can link to fellow bloggers, creating an interwoven, dynamic organization. In the classroom, students can have a personal space to read and write alongside a communal one, where ideas are shared, questions are asked and answered, and social cohesion is developed.

Blogs can be multidisciplinary. Because reading and writing can be used in a variety of academic contexts, blogs are fungible across disciplines. Storytelling should not be relegated to language arts alone—students can

express their perceptions on any number of subjects. A science class, for instance, can give rise to an exchange of lessons learned after a scientific experiment. A discussion of fundamental concepts in mathematics could help students understand the logic behind the formula. Nonfictional stories can help students situate themselves in a particular historical or humanities context. A global blog could truly introduce students to international culture or politics. In short, any discipline can use blogs to approach a style of *meta-learning*, where concepts or contexts are discussed and articulated in both a personalized and group exchange, and ideas are built on previous educational content.

EXAMPLES OF BLOGS IN PRACTICE

Will Richardson's *weblogg-ed.com* collects information and dialogue on implementing weblogs in the classroom. Richardson, a teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey, uses blogs for both a journalism class and a literature class. In the journalism class, students collect news stories to write about and then edit each other's work. In the literature class, students comment and critique class readings. For Richardson, blogs allow his students to be more aware of their writing and their audience (Kennedy, 2003).

Blogs can be used in many different age groups. J.H. House Elementary School in Conyers, Georgia uses a blog² to encourage writing for third-graders. The teachers use to blog to spotlight select writings of children. Similarly, Buckman Arts Magnet Elementary School³ in Portland, Oregon uses blogs to create a portal for all classrooms. The blog links among each teacher, showcasing photographs, student artwork, and classroom news.

Blogs can extend past individual schools as well. The Galileo Academy of Science and Technology sponsors a *Li-Blog-ary*⁴, where research, reading and writing is promoted using blog software. Li-Blog-ary staff find blogs to be an effective tool in promoting literacy because of the effortless deployment and maintenance issues of blogs, as well as the focus on content, collaboration, and documentation of completed tasks⁵.

Blogs can be an effective tool for teachers. The *Entry Year Teacher / Mentor Blog*, for instance, uses a blog to "document, reflect, plan, mentor,

analyze and to communicate”⁶ between new teachers and mentors, providing guidance and support. There are daily discussions, advice for lesson planning, or preparing for certification exams, and even ways to save time. Users find this blog to not only be an effective form of communication, but also an excellent way to archive knowledge, creating an institutional history.

In these examples, the flexibility and scalability of blogs quickly emerge. Blogs are not limited to individual classes or even entire schools, resonating the power of online community building. Blogs can be used to promote reading and writing, to showcase the work of students, or to exchange ideas among students, teachers, or school administrators. In sum, blogs exemplify that online content creation is only limited by the creativity of its users.

CONCLUSION

Weblogs provide an excellent opportunity for educators to advance literacy through storytelling and dialogue. Storytelling and literacy are the foundation of language development, and more so, the foundation of learning. Telling stories remains important from childhood to adulthood because stories allow people to express experiences and feelings in an engaging way, help them to understand the world around them, and develop and sustain peer relationships. Furthermore, storytelling promotes verbal literacy, one of the most important aspects of education.

The characteristics of Weblogs, such as the personal space it provides and the linkages with an online community, create an excellent computer-mediated communication context for individual expressions and collaborative interactions in the form of storytelling and dialogue. Ease-of-use and anytime-anywhere access make blogs an excellent tool for educators. It's easy for bloggers to understand and easy for teachers to implement. It offers an environment where learning is not limited to the classroom; authors can access their blogs when an Internet connection is available. Finally, it's fungible across disciplines—it can be advantageous in the science class as it is in the creative writing class.

Many scholars expect the blogosphere to grow (Henning, 2003; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, &

Tomkins, 2003). Even current predictions at the size, from one million to almost five million (Greenspan, 2003; Henning, 2003)⁷ demonstrate the importance of studying blogs alongside other CMC, especially in light of the ways in which children and adolescents are using the Internet, and the ways in which school administrators, policy makers, and educators can harness CMC to promote learning.

Future research should include studies to reveal language acquisition or learning comprehension and retention when using weblogs. Likewise, understanding similarities and differences among gender, ethnicity, and age groups would help develop more personalized approaches to classroom implementation and enhance the applicability of weblogs in educational settings.

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Notes

1. <http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml>
2. <http://jeanie.tblog.com/>
3. <http://buckman.pps.k12.or.us/news/>
4. <http://www.galileoweb.org/galileoLibrary/>
5. See [http://www.galileoweb.org/galileoLibrary/stories/storyReader\\$187](http://www.galileoweb.org/galileoLibrary/stories/storyReader$187)
6. For more, see <http://www.edithere.com/eyt/about>
7. Also see <http://www.blogcensus.net/> or <http://www.livejournal.com/> for population statistics.