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The Joy of Blogging

When their audience is the whole world, students are motivated to be the best writers they can.

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A group of smiling and eager 5th graders bustles into the school's computer lab to check the latest comments that seem to magically appear on their blogs. A feeling of excitement crackles through the air as the sounds of clicking keys and oohs and ahs from the students fill the lab. The joy of learning surfaces as students exclaim, "I have five comments!" "I heard from someone in New Zealand." "I got my third comment from Lani." "I heard from a teacher in Canada." "I can't believe a high school student likes my writing."

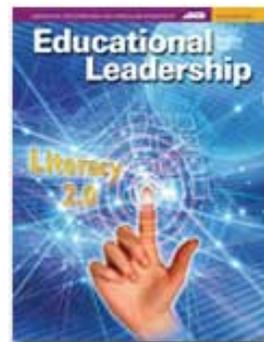
These 5th graders in a suburban elementary school in southeast Georgia have been engaged in a yearlong blogging project whose purpose was to create a space for the students to converse about what they were learning in class and beyond. The entire 5th grade class of 16 students meets weekly in a blogging project designed to improve their reading, writing, and communication skills.

What brought about this kind of learning? It did not just happen. The classroom teacher, instructional technology specialist, and blogging teacher had to create a purposeful learning environment for blogging and build a community that fostered respect and inspired students to want to continue to learn and blog about it. As the blogging teacher (Anne) and a university researcher (Ewa) who assisted with the project, we noted several key strategies that made this project successful.

Anni Argues for Water

I strongly believe that we need a water fountain at my school's playground. ... First reason we need a water fountain is because when we get thirsty we don't have to run upstairs. The water fountain will be closer to use. ... The second reason we need a water fountain is because it is healthy to drink water after you run or exercise.

In this post, Anni argued persuasively for water fountains on school playgrounds.¹ She gave detailed reasons supporting her case, and her post sparked many responses. Donna, a teacher in Australia, explained that water fountains are called "bubblers" in Australia and that each school has rows of bubblers outside for student use. She also provided another reason to



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support Anni's reasoning: "Adequate water consumption is required for optimal brain function!" Cordelia, a university student, added that "an outside water fountain would also eliminate (get rid of) hallway misbehavior." In her comment, Cordelia gave Anni additional support for her argument and taught her a new word (*eliminate*) that can substitute for a colloquial phrase (*get rid of*). Anni's post provoked thought among several university students who had not thought about the need for water fountains on school grounds. Anni has planted an idea that may carry these conversations to others.

Defining Blogging

Weblogging, or blogging, is a venue for writing in which an author or group of authors post their work to Web pages that display their posts in reverse chronological sequence. Blogs can be read by anyone with an Internet connection, although bloggers can set them up to be accessible only to those who have been given a password. We chose to leave our blogs open, giving students a worldwide audience.

Most bloggers set up their blogs to allow their readers to leave comments, and they also link to other blogs they like. These features encourage social networking and community building (Boiling, 2006; Huffaker, 2006). Anni's post on water fountains, for example, elicited comments from older students and from the other side of the world.

The 5th graders in our project were introduced to blogging by discussing the first post on a class blog that Anne established to instruct the class and share what they were learning throughout the project. The post guided students on a Web quest through which they explored the writing process and read student blogs, wikis on blogging, and a "blook" (a book created on a blog) that a previous cohort of students produced. Student groups brainstormed the things they had learned about blogging and created visual representations of their learning.

After students explored the blogging basics, they were ready to start writing on their own blogs. To get students started, we gave them writing prompts that covered current events, topics they were learning about in class, books they were reading, and passions they pursued. Students could also write persuasive pieces, like Anni's post on water fountains. We did not require a certain number of posts, but most students posted once a week, during the blogging class.

To encourage students to make thoughtful comments on their classmates' posts, we also gave them comment starters such as "I wonder ...," "After reflecting on your post ...," "Another thing to consider is ...," and "I don't understand ...". Students could choose how frequently to make comments and which blogs they wanted to comment on. Writing and replying to comments was a favorite part of the process and was usually the first thing students did when they came to blogging class.

Eddie Explores Math

Math is one of the most complex languages in the world although it doesn't seem like a language. Believe it or not we use math everyday. How do you think the things around you are made? Everyone uses math in the world, even other cultures.

This post illustrates how Eddie connected within-school education to the world beyond the classroom as he explored a question that intrigued him: How do you think the things around you are made? A high school math teacher, Mr. Kuropatwa from Canada, was drawn to Eddie's post. He agreed that "math is everywhere. Even in our own bodies," provided Eddie with a lengthy response about various mathematical concepts, and invited him to perform a series of experiments to explore his new learning. He gave an example of math in real life by discussing the Parthenon in Greece and the golden ratio. Eddie then undertook some independent research on Wikipedia to further his knowledge on these new concepts.

Building a Blogging Learning Community

An essential component of setting up this blogging community was thoughtful preplanning that included recruiting readers from outside the school who were willing to regularly comment on student posts. Recruits included students in Ewa's university classes, students in other blogging classes, retired teachers, and readers of Anne's professional blog. These commenters understood the goals and purposes of the project and set the stage for other readers who later found the student blogs and joined the conversations.

To prepare students to make their own contributions to the blogging community, we discussed how successful bloggers not only develop their own unique voice but also acknowledge others' voices by quoting and linking to other blogs and responding to readers' comments. As our students mastered these practices, they began to move from peripheral to full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They posted and commented more often and, more important, offered their own ideas and questions. They requested and embraced feedback, following Peter Elbow's (1981) advice to "use the power of an audience to your benefit instead of letting it get in your way" (p. 4).

Once students began posting, their readers contributed ideas and suggestions and, like Cordelia in her response to Anni's post and Mr. Kuropatwa in response to Eddie's post, informally introduced students to new words, concepts, and different points of view. They also provided links for students to further their understandings and frequently asked students for clarification and elaboration of their ideas. They posed questions to get the students thinking and respectfully pointed out grammar and spelling mistakes. By doing so, the larger blogging community made learning about language a creative, exploratory, and joyful process.

Students came to understand that grammar, punctuation, word choice, style, and syntax were not just a "teacher thing" but rather the means for effective communication. Students were motivated to write well on their blogs so that their posts could attract comments; learning about grammar and language usage had a "purpose and a point" (Peterson, 1998, p. 75).

Staying Safe

Because students' blogs were available for outsiders to view, we carefully reviewed guidelines for safe and responsible blogging. According to Huffaker's (2006) analysis of teen blogs, adolescents tend to disclose a great deal of personal identifying information online. Issues of safe, responsible use of the Internet need to be addressed directly and systematically in the

classroom, and as early as elementary school.

In our classroom discussion on safe and responsible blogging, we advised students not to reveal personal identifying information. If they received anything online that made them feel uncomfortable, they were to minimize their screens and immediately report concerns to the teacher.

Reflecting and Celebrating

Reflection on learning was a crucial component of conversations on the blog as commenters asked probing questions. But dialogue in the classroom was also essential. Students needed practice and guidance from their teachers to learn to be clear, convincing, and precise. Freewriting, as recommended by Peter Elbow (1981), helped student bloggers with "getting meaning clear" (p. 39) in their heads before they wrote their blog posts. Discussions about the meanings of words and language choice became important. The process of reflecting on past posts and comments from their readers and seeking guidance from their teachers helped students establish and sustain dialogue that led to learning.

In general, expectations were high, and teachers reinforced their belief in the students' ability to meet and even surpass their expectations. Teachers celebrated student achievements on the class's blog and displayed "photo people pictures" (see fig. 1) in the classroom each week to acknowledge individual accomplishments. This celebratory tone showed students that their teachers and peers valued their efforts.

Figure 1. Photo People



To affirm blogging successes, teachers posted student photos, labeled with their blogging success stories.

Student-Directed Learning

Although the pedagogy was purposeful and orchestrated, our learning activities were open-ended and full of choices. Students could pursue answers and direct their own learning. Not everyone was doing the same thing, but all were on a path to explore, experiment, and test their own understandings. As they considered reader comments and learned to express their own points of view, students had to deal with confusion, uncertainty, and not always having an immediate answer. Brain research indicates that growth is enhanced when students move beyond their comfort zones and into the unknown (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Jensen, 1994). Blogging lends itself well to this kind of exploration, and our blogging class revealed the possibilities and promise of such learning.

Endnote

¹ Student posts are in original unedited form. Student names are pseudonyms.

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