Abstract: The Weblog’s evolution has become one that enhances curriculum, supports cognitive abilities, and creates a positive learning community. In addition, writing skills of elementary age students can improve because the tool excites the student and is already a familiar mode of communication. Current research shows that a simple accessible technology tool, the Weblog, has a prominent place in today’s technologically savvy classroom. This paper examines the process of blogging to improve writing skills in the elementary classroom.

Introduction

Children today are impacted by the glitz and speed of high tech television and video games. Our society is inundated with media representations that can be accessed twenty four hours a day. The social networks of the Internet are bringing the world closer together. It therefore comes as no surprise, when given the choice in the classroom, that students choose the tools they already use for communication and play. The challenge as a classroom teacher then, is to provide experiences for students that are not only developmentally appropriate for student writing skills, but embrace and exploit innovative technologies. It just so happens that the technology tools that students choose are those they use, like laptops, handhelds, cell phones and other mobile technologies. The novel wares of technology have evolved from desktops to laptops to wireless systems to handheld devices, in which online social networks and Web-based learning environments have been established (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004). Martindale and Wiley (2004) suggest the Web is one of the most accessible technology integration pieces available for classroom use. Weblogs, or blogs, as noted by Barger (1999), have an evolutionary history beginning in 1997. Barger (2002) and Winer (as cited in Martindal & Wiley, 2004) provided early definitions of blogging. Winer (as cited in Martindal & Wiley, 2004, ¶ 3) suggested that blogs are,”… a continual tour, with a human guide who you get to know.” They feature many guides with audiences who run them (Winer as cited in Martindal & Wiley, 2004). According to Ferdig and R’ehler (as cited in Ferdig & Trammell, 2004) blogs have the potential to create active learning situations, encourage integrated learning, improve student and teacher interaction, boost cognitive processing, and improve writing skills. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the learning experience of children, specifically for writing, through classroom blogging that at its core, is as an authentic platform to read and write on.

The Pedagogy of Blogs

The pedagogy of blogs can be successfully linked to Lev Vygotsky and his Social Development Theory. Vygotsky, on challenging Piaget’s theories of cognitive development believed “the life long process of development is dependent on social interaction and that social learning actually leads to cognitive development” (Vygotsky, 1978). This experience is called the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky describes it as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers"
In other words, with peer interaction and teacher facilitation, learning is heightened. It is this Zone of Proximal development that closes the chasm between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Vygotsky’s theory can be dramatically illustrated through implementation of educational blogs in today’s classrooms. According to Myers & Cereijo (2006), the theoretical framework that supports children from communication to learning must involve transformative communication. In typical classroom environments, there is staunch resistance to this notion. Communication in classrooms is generally viewed as transmission of information, usually from teacher to pupil. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that even the meager conversations that occur daily in a classroom become the cognitive roots and scaffold for learning. In fact, communication through assiduous interactions is the thread that supports learners toward more cognitive prowess; communication occurring naturally but harnessed through a process called blogging.

**Instructional Techniques For Blogging**

Educational blogging uses three instructional techniques described by Clark and Mayer (as cited in Glogoff, 2005). These techniques include: (a) receptive techniques, (b) directive techniques, and (c) guided discovery techniques (¶ 7). Understanding the learning techniques provoked through blog usage suggests they are a valuable learning tool for today’s classrooms. In light of these learning techniques, children seemingly take on one of three learning roles through blog exposure. A child is (a) the author, whereby the child writes an entry, (b) the contributor, in which the child reads other comments and respond appropriately, or (c) the reader, in which the child is more passive and uses the entries as a knowledge source (King, 2009). Yet, it is more than cognitive learning that is established through guided processes and social development. The blog, in its most basic existence, is about reading and writing.

**Literacy and Blogging**

In research adjoining technology and literacy, Leu and Kinzer (2000), discovered that “the convergence of literacy instruction with Internet technologies is fundamentally reshaping the nature of literacy instruction as teachers seek to prepare children for the futures they deserve” (p.111). Through successful Weblog projects, Kajder, Bull, & Van Noy (2004) noted that children were seemingly eager toward writing on their classroom blog. This renewed enthusiasm for writing is echoed by Mireille Guay, an educator at St. Joseph in Quebec City, as cited in Downes (2004), who advocates that Weblog exchanges are remarkable vehicles that create a population of learners whereby participants learn more about each other through the give and take communication highway a blog provokes. The Weblog is a venue where participants can discover in a risk free way the commonalities and differences that exist between each other. All participants have the same room to voice their opinion. Clearly, as suggested by Guay, as cited in Downes (2004), a Weblog creates a fair circumstance for all students to share their thinking and learning. It is a common notion that more writing creates better writers. Blogging gives children a purpose to write and a captive audience to share their writing. From an educational stance, blogging is grounded in educational theory and method. From social interaction to cognitive learning, blogs are a strong learning tool in classrooms. Moreover, an intentionally conceived by-product of blogging is improving elementary students’ writing skills. Glewa & Bogan (2007) agree, aside from self-expression and community building the common themes resulting from blogging suggest that children become conscious of the “impact and quality of their writing using a technology based tool” (p. 47).

**Storytelling**

A vehicle for self-expression is storytelling. Through the blog entries, children were essentially telling stories, such as they do in an oral fashion in traditional classroom settings. Huffaker (2004) puts forward that in emergent literacy, storytelling is the initial stage that provokes a strong literary knowledge base. Digital storytelling via a blog, therefore, benefits children by supporting digital fluency as well as progressing literacy and language development. As well, storytelling is an autonomous, self-sustaining task and should be an important deliberation for classroom teachers with regard to its orchestration in the classroom.

**Collaborative Blogging**

Huffaker (2004) advises that blogs in the classroom serve a variety of meaningful purposes. Huffaker (2004) touts that blogs are “individualistic and collaborative” (p. 94). Thus, they are a tool that differentiates
instruction through the process in which they are utilized. Children create a blog entry individually, yet, by doing so, are thrust into an online community where ideas are shared, reflected and commented on. Blogs as a process create a differentiated option for children. As a curriculum piece, blogs offer a multidisciplinary context. Since blogs are at their most basic, a reading and writing venture, they are manageable across all content areas.

At their purest, blogs create readers and writers within a classroom. Drexler, Dawson, & Ferdig (2007) suggest that blogs provide a practice venue for literacy. Blogs also create an effective vehicle for reflective feedback. These tasks are indicative of the writing process being utilized, and thus, promote blogs as once again supporting literacy growth. In a study of a collaborative blogging effort between third grade students and preservice teachers, Drexler et al (2007) had findings that create a research based scaffold in supporting blog implementation into an elementary school classroom. Of importance was the suggestion that collaborative blogging created improved attitudes toward writing in children. Furthermore, technology as a vehicle for writing became a motivator. Children were more appreciative of the reflective feedback process rather than the technology itself. In this manner, technology becomes transparent. The focus is on learning not merely technology usage. Lastly, the amount of writing and the worth of writing increased for children through the collaborative blogging project. Aside from the intended outcomes mentioned that blogging gives rise to, current research suggests that there are additional unintended outcomes that give blogging a strong case in elementary classroom. Drexler et al (2007) note that the asynchronous fashion in which blogs can be accessed create an immediate extension of classroom curriculum.

Writing Skills and Blogging

Writing is the basis for all communication that in turn develops cognitive processing. While emphasis is usually in middle and secondary grades studies show that elementary students who develop strong writing skills perform at higher levels in all the content areas and are better prepared to (Drexler, Dawson, Ferdig, 2007). Furthermore, Richardson (2006), suggested that blogs served as a constructivist tool for learning where students learn as they construct knowledge from ideas and shared information from other student work. Drexler et al added, “…Blogs archive the learning that has taken place and provide a historical framework (2007, p. 141). What results is virtually all learning styles are represented and potentially accommodated, while blogging, because all students have a voice and while unique, they are heard. A study by Drexler et al revealed that third grade students attitudes toward writing substantially increased with a marquee statement, “I like writing at school” (page 149). Intended results from the same study include: (1) Collaborative blogging helped improve student attitude; (2) feedback from collaborative blogging increased student motivation to write (and not the technology); and (3) collaborative blogging improved student writing while supporting development of related skills and knowledge. Unintended results included: (1) students transferred knowledge learned to academic and social areas; (2) student technology skills improved during collaborative blogging; (3) students developed visual literacy skills as they transformed their essays to online presentations; and (4) collaborative blogging enabled differentiated instruction to insure that everyone met with some level of success.

Sylvia Read echoes the sentiments of many elementary school teachers who use blogging, “Young adolescents grow as writers when they write their blogs, and their technology skills also grow as they manipulate the look of their blogs, update the features they include, and trouble-shoot problems” (Read, 2006, p 42). McClay (2005) noted, “While young adolescents’ identities are notoriously shifting and developing, their writing skills provide stable artifacts of identity and accomplishment at a particular moment in time-at once a gift to self, a recognition, and a nostalgic remembrance.” He continues, “These writings are the artifacts that mediate and record moments of self” (McClay, p. 93). Still, the focus is on improving writing skills and student motivation. Armstrong, Berry and Lamshed (n.d.) created an electronic learning journal. The results for students included making meaningful knowledge from information learned, focused student thinking, encouraged them to review and revise, and they were able to order relevant information for use later. Borja (2005) noted that, “…K-12 educators are using Web logs, or ‘blogs’ for short, to foster better writing, reading, communication, and other academic skills” (2005, ¶ 3).

The benefits of blogging are many. Children respond to agenda items that are important to their specific lives. Blogs create acceptance among diverse viewpoints in which children are sharing opinions and reflecting on others thought processes. Blogging creates genuine opportunities for children to contribute. As Ferdig and Trammel (2004) praise that blogging forces connections beyond the standard student teacher relationship. Furthermore, the global audience suggested by blogs permits a wider audience to provide positive comments and reaction to students, therefore evaluating writing on a large scale. Other potential benefits noted by Fernette and Brock Eide as cited in Richardson (2006) include the promotion of higher level thinking skills, the promotion of more creative thinking,
more access to better information, and a combination of independent and collaborative interaction. Improving writing skills of elementary students then isn’t a by-product of using the blog but a clear and measurable outcome.

The Process

Establishing a blog for the elementary school is not an arduous process but one that takes organization and patience. The benefits for students regarding improving writing skills are immeasurable. Uniformity and consistency are important characteristics of a school’s presence. Blogging is one tool that will allow for uniform and consistent communication and presentation. Aside from the uniformity, blogging provides an authentic audience for reading and writing. Furthermore, an important nuance of blogging is the social element within the classroom it creates. It is this nuance as well as the more pervasive notions of blogging that make this project so significant. The mechanics of blogging are merely the stepping stone to more cognitive processes. Uniformity and consistency are important characteristics of a school’s presence. Blogging is one tool that will allow for uniform and consistent communication and presentation. Aside from the uniformity, blogging provides an authentic audience for reading and writing. Furthermore, an important nuance of blogging is the social element within the classroom it creates. It is this nuance as well as the more pervasive notions of blogging that make this project so significant. The mechanics of blogging are merely the stepping stone to more cognitive processes.

The plan for a blog at Bullard Elementary School in Kennesaw, Georgia was designed by Mrs. Valerie King. It included the following steps, create the blog, a plan for managing it and implementation. A model for blogging was “Learn How to Blog” http://www.learnhowtoblognow.com/learn-how-to-blog/typepad-tutorial-learn-to-blog-using-typepad by Chris Abraham. It provided a slow paced step by step walk through every stage of blogging with Typepad. This software was selected because it is the school district’s software of choice for blogging. With subtle tweaks, the training could be utilized with alternate software if the facilitator chooses. The major components of the process included: creating a new Weblog, creating a new blog post, adding files, photographs, or video, and management of a blog. The management of the blog will be comprised of reading the acceptable use policy for the county school district and creating a personalized statement for parents and children. Those who create blogs for the classroom may choose to model the policy based on LARKS for students and PEGS for parents that is based on Cobb County, Georgia system policies. These acronyms were created to explain the acceptable use policy in simple terms. For students, L stands for Legal. Children must understand the legal ramifications of copyright infringement, harassment, etc. while using technology. A stands for appropriate. Children need to be taught what the expected appropriate behavior is when using technology. R stands for responsible. Children need to be taught what being a responsible user of technology means. K stands for kind. When children are collaborating face to face, the classroom expectation is kindness. Therefore, in a virtual setting, such as a blog, the expectation is also kindness. S stands for safety. Children need to be taught the safety rules of using the internet. The expectations through the acronym LARKS encompass the general categories that internet usage plans or policies state. Parents will also be charged with understanding acceptable use through the acronym PEGS. P represents possibilities. This includes any technological arena children may be exposed to; e-mail, blog discussion boards, Internet data bases, museums, and many other repositories of information. The more specific the list, the more informed parents and children will be. E represents expectations. Expectations include behavior and school rule expectations when using technology. This includes the notion that utilizing technology is a privilege and not a right, and if abuse, the privilege will be taken away. G represents guidelines. Guidelines include the straightforward rules such as storage, illegal copying, and the use of inappropriate materials or language. Lastly, S represents signatures. Permissions include the signed forms by parent and student providing for an understanding of the classroom policies, and the permission to utilize student work or likenesses. Providing acceptable use policies and guidelines for blogging help create a seamless integration of blogging in the classroom. After the workshop on creating acceptable use policies, participants will view a power point created for children to introduce blog expectations in the classroom.

Creating a new Weblog involves an understanding of the Web presence created when designing a blog. In learning how to post new blog posts, participants will learn how to use the rich text editor embedded within Typepad in order to display information. Enhancing blog posts through document uploads and photograph or video insertion will also be a hands-on modeled presentation.

Students and Blogging

Blogging is a flexible medium and can be adapted easily to the elementary classroom. Through blogging, students are able to communicate and collaborate as suggested by one of the national education technology
standards. One standard states, “Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others” (NETS, 2008). The elements pertaining to this standard include interacting and publishing with peers and communicating ideas effectively to various audiences, two benchmarks that can be sustained through blogging in a classroom. Another standard directly related to students and blogging efforts in the classroom centers around digital citizenship. Blogging is an open forum that prohibits censorship and invites commentary from a vast audience. Therefore, to implement blogging in a fashion that supports digital citizenship as suggested by NETS, it allows for students to “advocate and practice safe, legal, and responsible use of information and technology” (NETS, 2008) as well as “exhibit a positive attitude toward using technology that supports collaboration, learning, and productivity” (NETS, 2008). The free structure of blogging supports many more elements as described by the NETS, however, the above mentioned are characteristically innate with blogging.

Teachers and Blogging

Teachers are also exposed to national educational technology standards. Through blogging, teachers will be able to “facilitate and inspire student learning and creativity” (NETS, 2008). This is highlighted through the national educational technology standard element regarding the use of collaborative tools to encourage and enhance student reflection. The blog, when established and managed efficiently is a remarkable tool for collaboration and reflection. In addition, teachers that implement blogging are supporting technology standards by modeling cutting edge use of relevant technology. The collaborative possibility through blogging supports the following element: collaborate with students, peers, parents, and community members using digital tools and resources to support student success and innovation. Again, blogging is limitless in its support of national standards. Due to its divergent nature in application, blogging can be morphed into a standards based effort with proper curriculum planning and vision.

Blogging, an engaging communicative and expressive tool in the classroom, is also helping schools 'Go Green' in light of the recent focus on helping the environment. Teachers are finding innovative ways to create quizzes, exams, and discussion pieces by integrating Google Documents into a blog posting. A recent literature study with the novel Leapholes has fourth and fifth grade students reflecting on the novel's content on an embedded document that is automatically sent to a teacher's e-mail that can then be downloaded into .pdf or MS Excel, eliminating paper altogether. Furthermore, parents are using the Blog to fill out student information sheets allowing teachers to create an electronic database and then integrate this into an email distribution list.

A daily live news production at Bullard Elementary School in Kennesaw, Georgia is now integrating blogging as a discussion forum during several morning broadcasts. All children can "blog" answers to weekly trivia, weird, wacky, what?? (a "can you guess this" picture), and various other questions or ideas. The Blog houses weekly script changes to students can read the document directly off the blog to practice their delivery. In its infancy, it is a one way communicative device, while news broadcasts comment on individual postings and remind students that answers must be complete, with grade level appropriate spelling, and sentence structure. The blog that supports daily news production is http://bllblogs.typepad.com/bullard_news_network/. Mrs. King’s classroom blog is located at http://bllblogs.typepad.com/valerie_king/.

Conclusion

Blogs encourage children to reach their cognitive potential through social interaction via specific learning tools. Children become subject matter experts through what Blood (2002) coins, “scouring, filtering, and posting” (p.33). Children utilize multiple resources, analyze the information, create an opinion, and share that opinion with others. Indeed, blogs create a sense of ownership in learning. Children respond to agenda items that are important to their specific lives. Blogs create acceptance among diverse viewpoints in which children are sharing opinions and reflecting on others thought processes. Blogging creates genuine opportunities for children to contribute. As Ferdig and Trammel (2004) praise that blogging forces connections beyond the standard student teacher relationship. Furthermore, the global audience suggested by blogs permits a wider audience to provide positive comments and reaction to students, therefore evaluating writing on a large scale. Other potential benefits noted by Fermette and Brock Eide as cited in Richardson (2006) include the promotion of higher level thinking skills, the promotion of more creative thinking, more access to better information, and a combination of independent and collaborative interaction. Blogs have limitless possibilities with regard to context, curriculum, and community. In short, the active and contributory use of blogs in a class context can be a powerful and effective instrument to improve writing skills in the elementary school classroom while providing a number of ancillary benefits that help students develop. Plus,
students already favor this technology which in turn provides credence to the notion that teachers should embrace the tools that students choose.

References


