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Teddy Bears Go Blogging

Primary teachers are always looking for ways to make writing relevant, interesting, and purposeful for our beginning writers. Blogging has emerged as an online writing tool widely used by adults and youth, but does it have any potential for use with younger students?

As a teacher member of iEARN, I participate in a project that blends use of the Internet, global participation, and collaboration. The Teddy Bear Project, designed as an e-mail outreach campaign, aims to promote tolerance and education about other cultures. iEARN matches students from two classes (in my case, Australia and Canada) and the classes exchange teddy bears, along with mementos and information about each class and their country or region. The classes then create weekly e-mails to tell about the travels of the bears. They go home with children for sleepovers, travel to field trips and special events with the class, and often go on holidays with the children and their families. They participate in many aspects of the life of the children in the new country, and then report back to their home class about games the children play, foods they like to eat, and topics that they study in school.

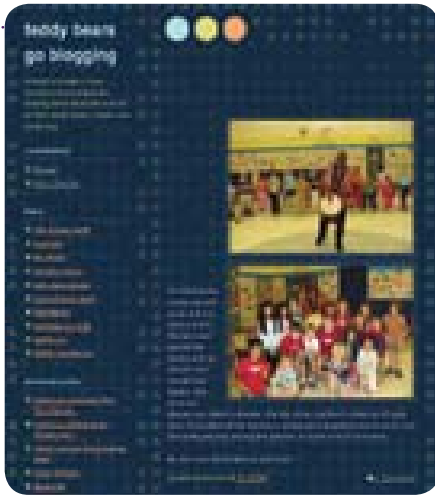
In the past I have participated using e-mail, but this year decided to propose the use of a blog to my teddy bear partner Jenny Sawyer because I have not always been satisfied using text-based e-mail with the younger students. She agreed, and using a free hosting service from blogger.com, we set up the blog very easily through the simple registration process and an automated invitation process to add members. Blogger provides all the

templates that you need, and after an initial period of exploring the site, it became as easy as sending an e-mail. Photos can be uploaded and easily attached to postings, and links can be provided as well. Initially, we decided to make our blog a "private" one, so that although it exists on the Web it is only open to registered users. We also decided that because we were working with the younger students, blog entries would be done with small groups or partners, supervised by the teacher. A simple spell checking feature is available, and this was a great time to teach students some editing skills. They were especially motivated when they knew that their work was being published on the Web.

Soon, however, students began to ask me if they could blog from home, so I explored another blogger feature called comment moderation. I changed the settings to allow anyone (not just registered users) to comment, which allowed students to make comments on any of the postings from wherever they had Web access. I then enabled the comment moderation button, which meant that I received an e-mail copy and the option to publish or reject the comment. This was a good way for me to screen the content for appropriateness and to make sure that Internet safety was a priority. Another free feature, audioblogger, allowed a teacher or student to call on a telephone, record a blog message, and have it recorded right to the blog; this is a great option for students who would prefer to record an oral message if writing or keyboarding is difficult.

The blog added a valuable dimension to a successful project for several

By Brenda Sherry



The Teddy Bear Project blog enhances communication between classrooms and cultures.

reasons. The focus was on the communication, rather than the technology. The actual posting became so easy for the second grade students that after some initial lessons it was easy for

partners to work independently with a final teacher check before publishing—putting control in the hands of the learners. Because the blog itself existed in a concrete place on the Web, students found it easy to go back over previous postings, reflect on what was there, comment when they felt motivated to do so, and even work from home if they wished. Despite the fact that Jenny’s Australian school year ended in December, my students continued to blog about Koala Lou’s travels in Canada and participated in our school events for the remainder of the year. Another exciting aspect of blogging was the opportunity to reach out to a wider audience in a very safe way. Parents and relatives were reading the blog and leaving comments, which caused quite a bit of excitement in

class! When my young writers received a “blogstorm” of comments they were very motivated to reply. Finally, the project was a safe and effective use of the Web for younger students. There were many opportunities to incidentally discuss appropriate use of the Internet with my students and to demonstrate its potential to go beyond classroom walls in a meaningful way.

Resources

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

Brenda Sherry’s blog: <http://www.mrssherry.blogspot.com>

The Teddy Bear Project: <http://www.learnonline.org/projects/teddybear.html>

Brenda Sherry is a grade two teacher in the Upper Grand District School Board of Ontario, Canada. As a technology teacher with 19 years’ teaching experience, she enjoys exploring the effective use of new technologies with students and teachers.



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