

Excerpted from

Web 2.0 How-To for Educators

Gwen Solomon and Lynne Schrum

Web 2.0 How-To for Educators is a practical guide that helps you use Web 2.0 tools in the classroom and professionally to connect, collaborate, create, and share information. Authors Gwen Solomon and Lynne Schrum provide in-depth information on a variety of Web 2.0 tools, including blogging, vodcasts, social networks, and wikis, as well as pulling together information from practicing educators on how they use specific Web 2.0 tools, such as Skype, Delicious, and Wordle.

In Chapter 1, the authors dive right into explanations of, and applications for, one of the most popular Web 2.0 tools—blogs. This excerpt will give you a taste of how the authors provide extensive information on each tool by answering the following questions: *What* is a blog? *Why* are blogs useful tools? *When* do teachers use blogs? *Who* is using blogs for teaching and learning? *How* do you get started with blogs? And, *where* can you find more information about blogs and blogging?



1

blogs

what is a blog?

Blog is a portmanteau of the words *web log*. It is a type of website developed and maintained by an individual using easy-to-use online software or a hosting platform with space for writing. Blogs feature instant publishing online and invite audiences to read and provide feedback as comments.

A blogger updates the page regularly with ideas, advice, suggestions, and other types of commentary. Entries appear in reverse chronological order, so the most recent entry appears at the top.

Blogs are primarily text, but they can include features such as videos, photos, charts, graphs, music, and other audio enhancements, such as podcasts. They contain links to other online locations and are often discussions of topics found at these links. Readers can write comments and engage in discussion with the blogger about the topic posted.

In the real world, blogs are extremely popular because they give a voice, platform, and audience to anyone who has an idea and wants to express it. Blogs have gained both respect and notoriety for such things as radical opinions, breaking news stories, insights into contemporary events and ideas, and political writing.

Educator-written blogs are often thoughtful, well-reasoned discussions of ideas. Because they are public, teachers who write blogs can gain a reputation as thought leaders and develop a following of other educators who read, think about, and comment on their posts.

Blogs offer considerable educational benefits for students as well. Because they are predominantly a written medium and are on public display, students have to learn to write carefully, think about their ideas, and communicate effectively.

Although having students communicate globally sounds beneficial, risks are involved; districts may want to use content management systems with internal blogging capability, or blogs designed specifically for education, such as ePals (www.epals.com), 21Classes (www.21classes.com), Class Blogmeister (classblogmeister.com), and Gaggle (www.gaggle.net).

why are blogs useful tools?

Blogs encourage writers and responders to develop thinking, analytical, and communication skills. Some characteristics of blogs make them excellent teaching tools.

Blogs are brief. They are usually relatively short posts of just a few paragraphs that are crafted to communicate an idea clearly and concisely. Because readers don't want to read long, rambling treatises on their monitors, students learn how to get to the point.

Things happen fast. Publishing is instantaneous. Students click Submit to see their blog online at once and feel that they've accomplished something. They can get feedback quickly, too.

Visual elements enhance them. Students can include images, video, and sound to enhance the meaning and to create and sustain interest. Blogs can link to other websites (and have them open in a new window) to provide more information, a related idea, or even a starting point for the writer's ideas.

Students become responsive to one another. Students think about their peers' ideas and ways of expressing them and then comment. Teachers can direct students to focus on the ideas or on the writing, or both. Thus, readers develop analytical skills and writers learn to be better writers and communicators.

The evidence exists forever. Blogs are stored online and remain as a portfolio of a student's ability to write, think, and communicate. Because they appear in reverse chronological order, the latest example is first. They are searchable, so refinements in student thinking can be identified.

when do teachers use blogs?

Classroom Integration

Classroom integration and writing instruction are natural uses for blogs. In the classroom, blogs are similar in concept to personal journal writing because they are often short, informal pieces of writing that can deal with personal topics and ideas. Even when they focus on serious topics, they are personal expressions of thoughts and ideas and contain opinion as well as facts. Although writing is most often the purview of English and language arts teachers, all subjects can involve written explanations of ideas and strategies. Blogging motivates students to tackle writing across the curriculum. The result can be that they think more clearly and organize their ideas more easily.

The difference between blogs and journals and essays lies in the public nature of blogging. With handwritten or typed journals, students write on personal topics and show selected entries to the teacher. With blogs, students write on topics—personal or assigned—with the understanding that a potential audience of at least classmates and parents, and possibly people from anywhere, can read it.

Their knowledge of an authentic audience means that students will work on their writing more than when the teacher is the only reader. In addition, their audience can engage with, and challenge, the blogger about the ideas presented using the comments box. Therefore, those ideas must be well reasoned. Teachers can use blogs for students to develop an ongoing conversation about a topic, theme, or concept.

The goal of writing teachers has always been to engender good writing habits in students. The writing process has been the traditional means to that end, and process writing involves engaging students in creating thoughtful expressions of ideas. The traditional steps include brainstorming, prewriting, organizing, writing, editing, and revising.

Brainstorming allows students to generate ideas around the topic and narrow the field to the most appropriate. Prewriting is guided discovery; students begin to focus on a concept and assemble ideas. Organizing involves formulating a central focus for writing and developing the details most likely to express that focus effectively. Writing is the main part of the process in that it means students explain the topic using the organization they developed and adding the details that make it clear and easy to understand. This part of the process also involves revising until a first draft is reached. Editing and peer editing refine that process even more; students learn to say what they mean by presenting it and getting feedback. The final step is to revise based upon recommendations.

The limitations of traditional tools have made the process complex, slow, and less than elegant. The nature of blogging changes the process; the tool's capabilities make it possible for students who engage in blogging to develop writing and thinking skills they couldn't achieve easily before.

Creativity

Freed of the constraints of solitary writing with the teacher as the sole judge of worth, students use blogging to post ideas that will be refined with the help of their peers over time because of the feedback loop possible with the comments feature. They can be creative when they know they can get feedback for their ideas and ways of communicating. They can use multimedia elements to enhance how creative the blog appears, with images, video clips, sound, and links.

Collaboration

One of the new skills students will need in the future is that of collaboration and the ability to work with colleagues to produce work that has shared authorship. Using the comment feature of blogging for peer review can help students develop the trust and ability to provide and accept constructive criticism in their learning community.

Communication

Blogging over time provides students with the ability to communicate effectively and to reinforce the experience. They share ideas and in the process must learn how to express them in exactly the words that their readers will understand. If they do not, peers will pose questions that serve to help them learn how and where to improve and refine their communication skills.

Connections

The public nature of blogs provides students with a wider world than the teacher as reader. Their audience can include people in the community and beyond and peers can be students around the world. Understanding that their words can have a global impact encourages students to hone the craft of writing.

Critical Thinking

Writing for an audience means thinking about the ideas first and then writing the ideas so that others understand what you mean. To accomplish this, students need to develop a logical set of facts, ideas, and persuasive arguments.

As always, putting ideas into words refines the writer's ability to think. Thus, writing is thinking critically.

Reading

Being part of a learning community in which students read one another's blogs adds the skill of information literacy: discerning fact from opinion, following the logic of others, commenting effectively, and being able to engage in well-reasoned discussions with others.

Digital Portfolios

Because blogs are archived, the audience—students, teachers, parents, and other readers—can review the change in thinking, analytical ability, writing style, and other intellectual development over time. Blogs can serve as digital portfolios of student work to demonstrate growth in skills of communication, collaboration, and critical thinking—all through a student's writing.

Professional Development

When educators write about their work or the ideas in education, they are performing reflective practice and developing their thinking about their craft. The audience becomes a personal learning community or network with whom they can share and learn and grow as practitioners.

English as a Second Language

Margaret McKenzie, district coordinator for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for the Cobb County School District in Marietta, Georgia, set up a blog (<http://flesolcobbcentral.typepad.com/esol>) as a means of communicating with the more than 200 ESOL teachers and other stakeholders in the district.

The blog allows me to not only post the official ESOL Department professional learning opportunities but [also] the latest news and research on strategies and resources for ESOL students and teachers. The blog assists me in helping teachers to be current in the ever-changing world of ESOL. (M. McKenzie, electronic communication, August, 2009)

The blog is a way to help teachers improve. The category “Strategies” provides information for teachers on current research-based strategies. The category “Spotlight” has teacher-submitted samples of successes. Some of the examples include student work. Says McKenzie, “It constantly changes as I learn more about what all of our teachers want and need.”

Online Professional Reading Group

Susan Quinn, at C. M. Russell High School in Great Falls, Montana, started an online professional reading group (<http://gfpsprg.blogspot.com>) for teachers to use to get recertification credit. She posts links to articles on the blog and formulates discussion questions. Teachers read articles, mostly focusing on school reform, and discuss them online.

The district did not have any online professional development (PD) in place, and Quinn would often hear teachers complain that they could not find PD that fit their schedule. So she lobbied to try an online option. She read through the articles and formulated questions to pose for discussion. She tried to create questions that force teachers to examine their own practice and discover how the concepts in the reading can be immediately applicable in the classroom.

Teachers really appreciate not only the flexibility of this option but also the other benefits of online learning—differentiated processing time, sharing ideas with colleagues they wouldn’t normally see, and time to process professional literature that might otherwise be overlooked. (S. Quinn, electronic communication, August, 2009)

who is using blogging for teaching and learning?

At-Risk High School Students

Cindy Jones Woods-Wilson worked with high school teachers and students as part of her PhD study of blogs as learning tools in a high school science class for at-risk learners. She set up the blog for students and assigned e-mail

pseudonyms as log-ins to avoid any of the usual boy/girl social interactions. This took place with 11th graders at Ponderosa High School in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Three times a week, for 45 minutes each time, and for five weeks, the students responded to a prompt she had posted. She kept track of where the teacher was in her curriculum, and the prompt was based on the curriculum students were learning. The prompts were posted the night before they were needed.

The students said how much the chance to “talk” about the topics anonymously helped them learn. In addition, the anonymous blogging provided a tremendous learning experience. The girls liked that they had a chance to “speak” without embarrassment. Several of the “oh-so-quiet” boys wrote the same. The teacher was amazed at the learning (C. J. Woods-Wilson, *electronic communication*, 2009).

Language Arts/Journal Writing/ Making Connections/Reader’s Response

Lauren Kelley, from John Wallace Middle School in Newington, Connecticut, wanted to give her students a real-world platform from which to support their state testing and district curriculum, with an emphasis on making reader-to-text connections. She also wanted a way to infuse technology into the classroom in an innovative, fun way that would motivate students. To accomplish this, computer resource teacher Terri Buganski helps Kelley’s students participate in a Reader Response blog using 21Classes (www.21classes.com).

The students are put into groups of three or four within which they share their thoughts and opinions. Each student reads a different novel. The groups’ membership changes every two weeks. This allows for increased social interactions among all the students. The students are required to have at least four entries and four comments based on their peers’ entries.

Each student’s posting is required to contain at least five “I” statements. This requirement is in direct alignment with state testing and the curriculum. Students are asked to make connections with the book, the characters, the setting, and more. Kelley says, “This activity impacts learning because our students are not only more willing, but also more excited to express their ideas using this type of platform.”

The students respond very positively toward this activity. They express excitement about using technology to interact and communicate with their peers. According to Kelley, “It has been such a success in this one class that my other class is already buzzing about wanting to participate in blogging” (L. Kelley, electronic communication, August, 2009).

Spanish Independent Reading

Carmen Maria Villalta Ochoa, from the Academia Britanica Cuscatleca in Santa Tecla, San Salvador, uses blogs with her sixth and seventh grade Spanish and humanities students for diary entries and independent reading reports to discuss their work and be involved more in the subject.

Independent reading is part of students’ daily assignment; they read for the first five minutes and when they finish each book, they write about it and others have a chance to comment on what they say and add more if they have already read it. Villalta Ochoa says, “We have had good results as more are reading the books they have commented about and they are continuously writing their comments” (C. Villalta Ochoa, electronic communication, August, 2009).

Eleventh Grade Health Unit on Child Development

Fern Entrekin, learning technologies coordinator, and Dusty McMillan, health instructor, from Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pennsylvania, created a blogging activity for their 11th grade health education students’ unit on Child Development and Parenting. Students visit a Head Start class for children aged 3 to 5. In the past, they wrote a paper about their visit. Now, they write a blog to allow other students, their peers, instead of just the teacher, to share their observations and provide feedback. They use the school’s eSchool Builder course management program for privacy and security. The object of the activity is to encourage discussions surrounding physical, social, linguistic, and emotional development of children newborn to age 5.

The students blog about what they learned about child development firsthand by interacting with 3-year-olds. Both the visit and the blog are real-world experiences, and students take ownership of their own learning. They were given directions on how to navigate to, and create, their blog and then respond to classmates’ blogs.

Blogs are a 21st-century method of communication. When students know they are writing for an audience wider than just their teacher, they tend to be more thoughtful about their writing. In addition, we felt it was important for our students to learn and recognize the difference between a social blog and a professional blog. Students were encouraged to use academic writing and part of their grade depended on the use of correct grammar and spelling. (F. Entrekin, electronic communication, August, 2009)

Students observed the children and discussed what they had learned from the experience. For example, one of Entrekin's students wrote about the two children she spent time with: "One was all about action and being active and the girl just wanted to be calm and talk and play with instruments. I'd never figure that I would learn so much from two kids I've never met before."

Compiling Research for a Project

Instead of taking notes on note cards or in spirals for their sophomore research paper, Melissa Lynn Pomerantz's students at Parkway North High School in St. Louis, Missouri, make their entire process public through blogging. The project is created online, and the information-gathering aspect using blogs is unique.

Pomerantz's reasons for doing research with blogs include

- ▶ An organizational strategy (through tags)
- ▶ An easy way for formative assessments (if I have their notes, they don't have them to work on)
- ▶ An interactive format (students and others can comment on blogs, providing encouragement, incentive, and direction)
- ▶ An easy way to check electronic sources (students link to all electronic sources in blog post)
- ▶ An effective way to share sources with other students (hyperlinks)
- ▶ An effective way to create a class community that is also a part of the larger world community

(M. L. Pomerantz, electronic communication, August, 2009)

Students blog about their research using one blog post per source. They take notes; use meaningful tags to help them organize; and practice summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation. They evaluate their sources and their findings and apply those findings to their central research question. They read their classmates' posts and comment on them, making suggestions for connections and other readings through hyperlinks, asking meaningful questions, and offering insightful questions. Adult volunteers comment on the blogs, and students respond to the comments, engaging in an academic discussion with people outside of their class and school.

Pomerantz finds major impacts on learning, including

- ▶ Engagement: students are excited to get feedback from others on their work
- ▶ Community building: students work together for a common goal and are happy when they can help other students
- ▶ Accountability: students know their work is available for anyone to see and so take more pride in it
- ▶ Ethical researching: students know they are linking to the original material, so cutting and pasting is not an option

(M. L. Pomerantz, electronic communication, August, 2009)

Science: Save an Animal

Kifi Kanagy's fourth and fifth grade students at Grandview Elementary School in Windsor, Colorado, use a blog for a project on animal extinction. This is the question they have to address: If we are only allowed to save one endangered animal, why should we save your animal? They had to write a paragraph explaining their position and providing compelling arguments. Their classmates provided many replies to each other's blogs (K. Kanagy, electronic communication, August, 2009).

Geography: Travels with Kyle

Sycamore Creek Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina, has a blog for their mascot, Kyle the crocodile, and his family of stuffed toy crocodiles

(www.kylecrocodile.com). It is used to expose students to the world outside of their immediate surroundings.

Teacher Matthew Clobridge explains this is a year-round school, so at any time one-fourth of the students and staff are on break and can take Kyle, Kirby, Katie, or Carlyle Crocodile with them on trips. Students have shared their travels to many places around the world. One crocodile has been stationed with a helicopter pilot in Iraq, another is on a trip through Asia with a FedEx pilot, and one went to the presidential inauguration.

Students are asked to take pictures and blog about their trip. They also ask questions about the location of their trip for students back at school to research and post on the blog. Students back at school respond to the blog post through the comments, or they work as a class with their teacher to answer the questions as a class.

Before taking the crocodiles on a trip, students are provided with a “croc care” sheet that explains what they are to do while on their trip. We try to ensure that no matter where the crocodiles travel, there is an educational benefit to it. (M. Clobridge, electronic communication, August, 2009)

how do you get started with blogs?

Creating a blog is relatively simple. We’ve included the six steps to creating a blog using Blogger, along with a screen capture of the start screen.

- 1 Go to Blogger (www.blogger.com/start) and sign in (Figure 1.1).
- 2 Fill out the form with your contact information.
- 3 Name your blog (you can change this later).
- 4 Enter a blog address (URL).
- 5 Choose a template (you can change this later).
- 6 Write your first ever post (you can delete this later)!



► Figure 1.1. Blogger start screen, www.blogger.com/start

Five Rules for Blog Commenting

Commenting on someone else's blog post is simple: read the post, write your comment, type your name, and click Submit. Doing it well takes practice.

- 1 Read the blog post carefully.
- 2 Consider its strengths and weaknesses.
- 3 Start with the strengths.
- 4 If you have something nice to say, say it—and give specifics.
- 5 If you have criticism, say it nicely. (Constructive criticism is helpful, not vindictive.)

Six Assessment Points for Student Blogs

- 1 How well did student writing address the curricular topic and/or discussion theme?
- 2 How well reasoned was the logic of what students wrote?
- 3 How well developed was the writing?
- 4 To what extent was their writing analytical about the topic?
- 5 How well did they communicate their thinking?
- 6 To what extent did their blog generate real discussion?

Starting Over

IF YOU'RE NOT HAPPY with your blog, you can delete it and start a new one later.

A Word about RSS

RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary) is a way to get regularly changing web content delivered rather than going to individual sites. Bloggers, websites, and other online publishers syndicate

their content as RSS feeds. Readers subscribe so that they can use an RSS reader to get the content they want regularly.

Blogger Jim Hollis writes:

How does [RSS] apply to education? Well, motivation is a key ingredient in learning and we, as educators, should do whatever we can to try to increase intrinsic motivation in learning. If we acknowledge that choosing “what” we want to learn and “when” we want to learn it are two factors that increase intrinsic motivation, what can we do to increase the positive influence of these two factors in the classroom? (Hollis, n.d.)

For example, Mary Schwander at New Hope-Solebury High School in New Hope, Pennsylvania, has students gather resources for a research assignment. In the process, they subscribe to RSS feeds on their topic so that they are updated as new information becomes available. Mary writes:

Using database subscriptions, students assign RSS feeds to certain keyword searches. It helps them in gathering resources and is much like having a personal librarian helping them to get information. (M. Schwander, electronic communication, August, 2009)

where can you find more information about blogs and blogging?

Blogging Tools

Blogger (Google):

www.blogger.com

Bloglines:

www.bloglines.com

Blogspot:

www.blogspot.com

CoverItLive:

www.coveritlive.com

LiveJournal:

www.livejournal.com

TypePad:

www.typepad.com

WordPress:

www.wordpress.com

Blogging Tools for Education

ePals:

www.epals.com

21Classes:

www.21classes.com

Class Blogmeister:
www.classblogmeister.com

Gaggle:
www.gaggle.net

Information

7 Things You Should Know About Blogs, EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (2005):
www.educause.edu/ELI/7ThingsYouShouldKnowAboutBlogs/156809

Education Blog Directory:
www.blogged.com/directory/education

Blogs in Plain English:
A video for people who want to know what is important about blogs:
www.commoncraft.com/blogs

Gwen Solomon has been the director of the websites techLEARNING.com, Digital Learning Environments, 21st Century Connections, and the Well Connected Educator. She is an author, editor of custom websites, presenter, and adviser to ed tech companies. Past positions include senior analyst with the U.S. Department of Education, coordinator of instructional technology planning for the New York City Public Schools, and founding director of New York City's School of the Future.

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