Blogging with young students

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Last week one of my eight-year-old students emailed me to ask for assistance with her personal blog. In a few days, my class is skyping with a third grade class in California, USA. On any given day, step into my classroom and you'll find students independently operating the interactive whiteboard, computers and iPod touches. A further use of technology and one that's central to my students' learning is our class blog. Every day, my students and I update our blog, view and comment on other class blogs, reflect on our learning and make connections between our lives and the rest of the world. Technology is a big part of my daily classroom program and my students reap the rewards of being 21st century learners. I wouldn't have it any other way; perhaps after reading about my journey with blogging, you will see why.

What is a blog?

The word *blog* is short for *web log*, a website that is like an online journal. Blogs feature posts, which are regularly written, updated and displayed in reverse chronological order for readers to view and, if they wish, comment on. Anyone can have a blog, there are many different free blogging platforms available online, and there are blogs about every topic you could possibly imagine!

I team teach my class, 2KJ, with Kathleen Morris and her class, 2KM. This year we have a combined class blog, our blog address is *http://2kmand2kj.global2.vic.edu.au*. We publish about three posts per week, with Kathleen and I taking turns to write the posts. At this stage, our students' role is to *comment* on posts, as they need to build their writing skills before they can write blog posts. Our posts generally focus on what is happening in our classroom, so we write about specific classroom activities, school events, examples of student learning, updates on projects etc. Our posts feature photos, videos, slideshows and other embedded web 2.0 applications where relevant.

How did I get started?

I have been teaching for eight years, and while I have always had a personal interest in technology and use technology in my everyday life, my use of technological devices in the classroom extended only as far as basic programs on the computers.

It all changed three years ago when Kathleen showed me the blog she had just set up for her class. Her excitement was contagious as she showed me the various features and I began to see the possibilities of what a class blog could offer my students, their families and the community. I set up a blog for my Prep class and gradually began learning the basics, often in my own time. A few parents looked at the blog, a couple of people left comments, the kids enjoyed seeing their photos posted on the blog and I was starting to see how a blog could positively contribute to my students' lives.

Fast forward three years and I have become hooked on blogging and have instilled a passion for blogging into my Grade Two students. It is now embedded in my daily program and my students

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surprise me every day with the knowledge they acquire through our blog. We have a global audience across many countries and hundreds of visitors view our blog each week.

How do you blog?

There are many free blogging platforms available online. In Victoria, Global2 (formerly Global Student) is an Edublog campus site which is supported by the Victorian Education Department. Go to *http://global2.vic.edu.au* to quickly and easily set up a blog. Once a blog is set up, you can:

- choose a theme to personalise the appearance of your blog.
- add pages to your blog. These contain static information which readers may want to access regularly (eg. timetables, student profiles, websites to visit etc). They are usually found as tabs across the top of the blog.
- write a welcome post, introducing your class blog to the online world. Remember, each time you write a post, it will appear at the top of the blog. Any static information you want people to access regularly should be written in a *page*.

It is essential to get parent permission for all of your students before you begin the blogging journey. A great part of blogging is that you can display photos and student work but as the blog is a website available for anyone to view, parental permission is required. In my experience, all the parents have been happy for their children to be involved. (Note: you are able to control whether your blog comes up in search engines such as *Google*. I believe that a global audience is crucial to developing a successful blog so I enable my blog to show up in online searches.)

There are many new skills to learn when you begin your blogging journey. It is important to focus on learning one thing at a time; otherwise, it can seem overwhelming and unmanageable! When you view established class blogs, you will see many embedded web 2.0 applications, making it seem daunting for beginners. Start slowly and build your skills gradually. There is excellent online support at The Edublogger website *http://theedublogger.com/*.

One of the key advantages of blogging is the connections made through comments. Initially, it is important to have students and their families viewing the blog and leaving comments. This helps to attract a larger, global audience. For student learning to truly prosper, it is also important to make connections with other class blogs. The interaction of thoughts, ideas and opinions between teachers, students, their families and, eventually a global audience, is a powerful means of learning for students.

Each morning we check the comments we received on our blog overnight. This often leads to interesting discussions. For example, on a recent post, one of our students was involved in a commenting conversation with Mrs Yollis, a third grade teacher in California, USA. In their conversation, they discussed various places and attractions in America and Australia. As a whole class, we got a world map up on our interactive whiteboard and pinpointed the states and attractions in both countries. A simple look at our blog turned into an interesting and in-depth lesson about geography!

I have found that students really get into blogging when they can learn interesting facts about the lives of children in other schools. Collaborating and connecting with others enhances the blogging experience and makes it a more dynamic experience. You can begin a blogging relationship with other classes by simply leaving a comment on their blog. They might then check out your blog and comment, thus the friendship begins! An easy way to 'meet' other classes through blogging is to check out the Edublogger list *http://theedublogger.com/check-out-these-class-blogs/*.

What are the benefits of blogging?

It was during 2010, while working in a double classroom with Kathleen Morris, that blogging really took off for me, and I discovered the huge benefits it could offer my students.

The five main benefits of blogging we have found are:

1. Improvement in students' literacy skills: Blogging is directly related to literacy. We begin our literacy block every day by writing posts, reading and replying to comments on our blog and learning



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from other classes by reading *their* blogs and commenting. The presence of a global audience makes blogging a very authentic way to teach literacy. Through commenting on blogs, our students have conversations with educators and students from all over the world.

Observing the improvement in students' writing skills is truly rewarding. We explicitly teach about writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading, using paragraphs, vocabulary, developing a 'writing voice' and more, through commenting on blogs. The contrast in the students' comments from the beginning of a year to the end is incredible. Below is an example of one students' writing development through commenting.

> I just love being in your grade and cannot wait to learn all about aboriginals love Bianca (7.02.10)
>
> @ Naomi,
>
> Thank you for your wonderful comment about your years at school.
>
> Yes, school has changed in some ways and in some ways things have stayed the same. How wonderful you were able to play the recorder.
>
> What a messy job it would have been to clean the duster. You would have been covered in chalk dust.
>
> School is so wonderful because of the wonderful use of computers and iPods and of course, technology.
>
> Good to hear from you!
>
> Please visit our blog again,
>
> From Bianca (25.11.10)

2. Making global connections: As a young child, my knowledge of geography was very limited. The concept of 'the world' was quite foreign and abstract to me. Now, through blogging, my students have a great understanding of the continents, time zones, countries, capital cities and how various cultures live. Our class has several fantastic relationships with classes in America, Canada, New Zealand, China and of course, Australia whom we *skype* regularly. The students readily and naturally make numerous comparisons between their lives and the lives of other children, thus bringing the world to life and enriching their understanding of the world in which we live.



[Images: Kelly Jordan]

3. Cyber safety: Our blog gives us an authentic context in which to learn about cyber safety. Students learn the rules of netiquette and appropriate online behaviour including the importance of not revealing personal information in blog comments.

4. Parent involvement: Many of my parents subscribe to the blog (an email alert is sent whenever a new post is published) and comment regularly. Blogging allows parents, especially working parents, who may otherwise feel removed from their child's schooling, to observe what is happening and interact with the classroom. The door of the classroom is now truly open; parents and family members love it.

5. Students' technology skills: I take every opportunity to explicitly teach skills in ICT that will help students become 21st century learners. Specific skills students develop include typing, navigating blogs and websites, troubleshooting, using keyboard shortcuts, following web links, searching on Google, and using the help function in programs and websites. Last year I helped several students set up personal blogs. I taught them the basic skills to initially set up and navigate their blogs. They learned many new blogging skills independently and the quality of their blog posts was amazing. These particular students learnt how to use a variety of web 2.0 tools and attracted global audiences. Some of these students were even nominated in the 2010 Edublogs Awards. Now, these same students are teaching their new teachers how to blog!

Global Projects

Once you have an established class blog and have made strong connections with other classes, you may wish to begin getting involved in global projects that further enhance learning. Kathleen and I, along with our classes, have been involved in several very successful *global projects* over the past 18 months. We are currently involved in two global projects.

1. Flat Stanley: After reading the book *Flat Stanley* (by Jeff Brown), we are collaborating with a class in New Zealand. Each student made their own 'flat person'. The two classes then exchanged 'flat people'. Now, our students each have a flat person to look after and are writing diaries to document what the NZ flat people are getting up to here in Australia. Soon the flat people and the diaries will be once more exchanged.

2. The Postcard Project: Over forty classes worldwide have signed up to a postcard exchange project developed by New Zealand teacher, Sarah Leakey. The postcards, which describe each student's town, are a wonderful way for students to learn about geography and descriptive writing. Read more about the Postcard Project here: *http://leakeysblog.edublogs.org/the-postcard-project/*.

The highlight of our global project experience occurred last year. We wanted to use our blog to do something that would make a difference so Kathleen created the Ugandan Global Project. Our class joined forces with a few of our blogging buddies in America and China to raise money for a primary school in Uganda by holding a run/walk. We raised a total of $20,000, which was a phenomenal effort. (The school in Uganda is still amazed and grateful for what we achieved.) Students involved in the project learnt about life in a third world country, how they can contribute to change, and the meaning of social conscience. We formed a new blog for the project *http://ugandanglobalproject.blogspot.com/* where each class published posts about the project, and about life in their own countries.

The global projects we have been involved in have been independently organised; however, there are online organisations such as *http://www.iearn.org.au/*, *http://www.epals.com/* and *http://www.ozprojects.edu.au/* that have ideas for projects and classes you can be matched up with. It's simple to sign up and get involved.

My top tips for class blogging

- Start slowly—Focus on learning one or two new blogging skills each week.
- Make global connections—Student learning is so much more meaningful and authentic when you interact with a global audience.
- Reply to comments—It is essential that you/your students reply to comments on your blog posts so that you have *conversations*. This is where the learning really comes to life.
- Learn online—Get involved in blogging by reading other class blogs, signing up to Twitter to learn from other teachers who blog, participating in online PD sessions, or doing your own research.

In my eight years of teaching, nothing has been as meaningful, authentic, powerful and enjoyable for my students and I, as blogging. Blogging has effectively flattened the classroom walls and opened up my classroom to the world, providing my students with endless opportunities to share, create, collaborate and connect with others. Joining the blogging world with my students has been such a rich and diverse experience. I look forward to seeing what else we can learn and achieve together. TEACH

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