

Blogs, Wikis, Twitter, and RSS

First of all, what is a blog? Blog--short for web log--is much more than an online diary; it is an easy-to-edit space that allows the posting of text, images, and videos, all entries arranged in chronological order. Blogs allow for the creation of individual posts and the ability to comment on each of the posts. Blogs have acquired a bad reputation. All the hoopla around Formspring, me and Facebook has made educators leery of incorporating blogs into their curriculum. Here is an anecdote that might change your mind. A sixth grade English teacher started blogging with her students about *Walk Two Moons*, by Sharon Creech; the teacher posted a variety of questions and images for the students to add their comments. One student ran up to her in the morning to ask with great excitement, "Are we blogging today?" The teacher laughed when she recounted this story because we both quickly realized that all the students were doing was practicing the writing of paragraphs, and we could not imagine the same student inquiring with great anticipation, "Are we writing paragraphs today?" We decided to keep the truth a secret between the two of us; the students would never realize that blogging = paragraph writing.

How are teachers using blogs?

Blogs can be used for writing collaborations, continuations of class discussions, comments on reading assignments, creative expressions of ideas, archiving student essays, real-world writing assignments, posting solutions to math problems, and lab results.

Blogs are conversations between the author and the commenter. They are powerful communication and publishing tools, assuring students that their writing is worth viewing. Blogs allow students to connect with each other by reading each other's thoughts and commenting upon them. They also can be aids in avoiding plagiarism because writing becomes public and viewable by peers and teachers. Blogs give students ownership of their writing. Many sites -- edublogs.org, for example-- provide free and easily-customizable blog pages.

Some ideas for using blogs:

1. Use blogs to archive student writing in any subject
2. Use the comment feature to provide writing analysis and feedback from both teachers and students.
3. Use the comment feature to allow students to comment on class discussions or a posted question.
4. Allow students to create their own blog in the voice of a character from a novel.
5. Use blogs to post assignments and class content.
6. Use blogs as reading journals.
7. Post math problems and use the comment feature for students to post their solutions.
8. Require all teachers to document their technology growth and projects on a blog.

Tips on using Edublogs

Edublogs provides free blogs for both teachers and students. Designed for educators, Edublogs provides many levels of security for viewing and editing the blog and for adding comments. Edublogs also provides the ability to add categories and tags to both posts and comments.

Steps for Registering:

1. Go to edublogs.org
2. Click on the SignUp for Free button



3. Enter your Username; this will also be the URL for your blog (i.e, summercore is my username and my blog URL is summercore.edublogs.org.) You can change the domain name on the next page, but then you will have to remember both a username and a URL. Enter all info and then click on Gimme a blog.
4. On the next screen, enter the title of your blog. This is not the title of your first post, but the title that will appear in your blog's header.
5. Select a blog type: teacher or student.
6. After you signup, you will receive a password in your email. Copy the password and then click on the link in your email to activate your blog. Paste in your password; one of your first steps will be to change your password to a word you will remember.

Steps for Posting:

The Dashboard, the menu system for edublogs, resides on the top of the window. To access the dashboard area, you need to either go to edublogs.org and enter your username and password or go to your blog and click the Site Admin link in the Meta Section of the blog

Write Manage Design Comments Supporter Stats

1. To create new posts, click on the Write Tab.
2. To edit posts, click on the Manage Tab.
3. To change the background, click on the Presentation Tab.
4. To edit comments, click on the Comments Tab.
5. To add functionality, click on the Plugins Tab.
6. To add graphics, in Write or Manage mode, click on the Tree icon and paste in the URL of the desired image. Change the dimensions if needed.
7. To add YouTube videos, in Write or Manage mode, click the icon and paste in the URL of the desired video.

Getting Started on Classroom Blogging

Before you start, you should create a class blog list of rules, one that anticipates, as much as possible, any difficulties that might arise. Detail the rules about photos, names, personal references, phone numbers, street addresses, or email addresses. Equally important is to make clear the rules about blogging and commenting etiquette; remind them that blogging is a public forum--even if the blog is gated, so it is available only to your class or to your school--so posts and comments must be thoughtful, considerate, and polite. Students should read and sign an Acceptable Use Policy for the blog, Teachers should create rubrics for posts: no IM talk, complete sentences only, a required length for posts and comments, an emphasis on original thought, the need for commenting students to address specific issues, words, or ideas in posts they have read. Finally, teachers should consider sending a letter home to parents, informing them of the creation of the class blog and the rules required for good blogging.

One recommendation is to start small with a teacher-created blog, rather than individual student blogs. Teachers post images, photos, quotations from a novel or history text, a math problem, a study guide question, etc.; students write comments for each post. This way, the teacher does not have to read through and manage multiple blogs, and student work is centralized in the comment feature. As the blog progresses, students can begin to add posts: summaries of the work covered each day or each week, a response to a reading assignment, an original drawing, a podcast teaching an important skill, the answer to a math problem. Students could also work in teams to cover a particular topic or theme. Only after all are comfortable with blogging, would I move to individual student blogs.

What else can be posted on a blog?

With the advent of more and more Web 2.0 sites that can interact with blog sites, blogs are no longer just about words. Posts can embed photos, images, flash videos, hyperlinks, links to YouTube videos, slideshare versions of a PowerPoint slideshow, podcasts, altered versions of YouTube through bubbleply and bubbleshare and many other Web 2.0 sites, and even clips from television shows using Hulu.com and its embed feature. You can also add a forum to your blog for discussions about a single topic.

More Ideas for blogging

1. Class Newsletter with an RSS link so parents can subscribe
2. Student Team Blogs: students collaborate on a project, each with a different role. The collaboration can be within a class, a grade, a school, a country, a world
3. Blogging Buddies instead of penpals
4. Current Events Study with posts and comments
5. Journal of a class trip

How does RSS fit into all of this?

Blogging is not just creating your own blog, it is reading the blogs of others. But keeping up with each and every blog can be time-consuming and frustrating. That is where RSS comes into play. What is RSS? It is an acronym that stands for either Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication, depending upon whom you ask. It is an XML (eXtensible Markup Language) format. The truth is that neither name makes any sense nor does the XML stuff, so just remember the RSS part and forget about the rest. And the rest is how RSS will make your life easier.

The key words of the process are Feeds and Aggregators. RSS creates feeds of updated material on all sorts of websites: newspapers, photo sites, video sites, blogs, wikis, podcasts and other audio files. Authors of these websites create a Feed source that readers can subscribe to (with no charge, of course, so the word “subscribe” is a bit misleading) so that the updates are constantly sent to one localized website. In short, RSS saves you time. Let’s say that you have a particular love of the New England Patriots, so you want to read six or seven Patriots blogs daily. You could bookmark each one, then click the links to go to each website. The problems? You have to click six or seven times; perhaps two or three of the authors did not update their blogs that day, so you just wasted your time going to that blog. But if you had subscribed to the RSS feed posted on each blog, you would have to go to only one web page (the aggregator) to read all of the updated information on each one of the seven blogs.

RSS feeds are proliferating on the web. Go to any newspaper and you will find a link for all the available RSS feeds. For instance, go to www.boston.com (The Boston Globe) and scroll down to the bottom of the page. There you will see two links:

[RSS feeds](#) 

Clicking either one will take you to a page showing all the feeds available from the Boston Globe.

RSS Sports feeds from Boston.com

Boston.com RSS sports feeds include the latest Boston Globe articles about the Red Sox, Celtics, Patriots, and Bruins, and headlines from the Boston Dirt Dogs fan site. [More information and answers about our RSS feeds.](#)

[Sports RSS feed: Red Sox stories](#)

Keep up with the 2004 World Series champs.

 

[Sports RSS feed: Bruins stories](#)

Now that they're back on the ice, don't miss a minute of Bruins' news.

 

[Sports RSS feed: Patriots stories](#)

With this feed, you won't miss any of the Pats' action.

 

[Sports RSS feed: Boston Dirt Dogs](#)

Updates from the blog-home of our beloved Sox.

 

[Sports RSS feed: Celtics stories](#)

Follow the Celtics on their quest for a 17th banner.

 

[More RSS: News feeds](#) | [Sports feeds](#) | [Entertainment feeds](#) | [Boston Globe feeds](#) | [Boston Globe columnist feeds](#)

Clicking on the Sports RSS feed for Patriots Story will lead to a page that lists the current stories, but the URL of that page is the key: `feed://syndication.boston.com/sports/football/patriots/patriots_rss?mode=rss_10` is the link which you will copy and then later paste into your aggregator to subscribe to that feed. If you then follow the same steps on `espn.com` and the `bostonherald.com`, you will not have to check each of the three sites on a daily basis to find late-breaking Patriots news; instead, you will go to your one aggregator site to view the constantly revised updates. Feeds can even be sent to your phone, PDA, or Blackberry.

Because RSS feeds are proliferating, you will see many different icons that indicate available feeds. For instance, in the Globe example above, you can click on the XML button or the My Yahoo button, doing the latter will send the feed directly to your Yahoo account. Below are some of the variety of feed icons you will see on newspapers, news agencies, blogs, magazine sites, video and podcast sites.



Using RSS Feeds in the Classroom

If you use blogs with your students, the uses of RSS will make your life much easier. Instead of checking out all 15-20 or even more individual student blogs every day, you collect their work in your aggregator using their RSS feeds. That way, you can scan through all of the class content in one place and read a particular post to comment on it.

RSS feeds are particularly helpful in aiding research projects. Students can create accounts in an aggregator to localize feeds for information about a topic. A student who is doing a project on global warming could create an RSS feed that would bring any news about global warming to the aggregator as soon as it was published. Or you can stay up-to-date on blogs that focus on teaching your subject or teaching with technology. You--or your students--could find blogs that chronicle first-person accounts of life in an area in the news--Israel, Darfur, South Africa, Iraq, etc. RSS feeds allow you to mine this information for “educational nuggets” to share with your classes.

Creating an Aggregator Account in Google Reader

There are many aggregators to use, but Google Reader is a good place to start. Setting up a Reader account is easy. If you have a Google account or a Gmail account, then you already have access to Google Reader. Google Reader then integrates with your iGoogle page, so your feeds can appear everytime you go to Google.