

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. This year, 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.

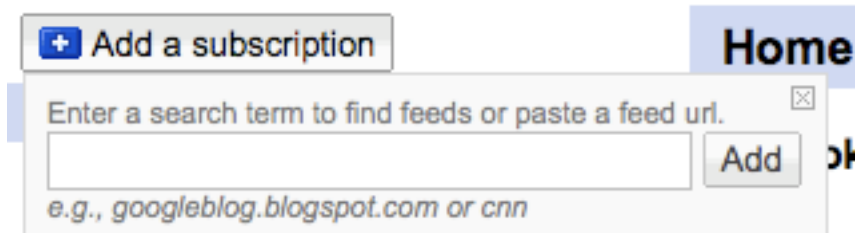
Creating an Aggregator Account in Google Reader

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.

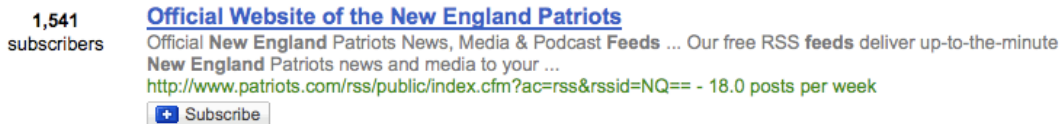
Finding Feeds

To find blogs to subscribe to, you can use one of the blog search engines to find sites relevant to your interests. Try Technorati.com, Feedster.com, and Feedminer.com. Or go to your favorite newspaper and magazine sites to find their feeds; almost all of them have one. You can do a Google search with the name of a publication (like New York Magazine) and add RSS to the search term to find the feed. Almost all blogs have an RSS feed symbol somewhere on the page. You can also get an RSS feed of Tweets on a particular topic or an RSS feed from a Delicious page. Many provide the simple option of going directly to Google Reader.

An easy way to start finding RSS feeds is using Google Reader's search feature.



After entering a search term, “New England Patriots” for example, Google Reader provides a list of feeds. The search for New England Patriots revealed 102 feeds. You can preview the feed and then click on “Subscribe” to automatically add it to your Google Reader account.



The Feed Discovery option allows use to search by keywords or by people who publically share their feeds. Public feeds could be a useful classroom tool or department tool; all contribute to and have access to a shared feed list. This could be useful for class research projects, wiki projects, or for department members wanting to provide current news and blog posts to other department members.

What is a Wiki?

A wiki is a website where content (text, graphics, videos, links) can be added or edited by anyone who has access to the site. Wikis are terrific for collaborative projects, group research, and branching stories. Compared to a traditional website, wikis are easy to create, ever-changing, collaborative and communal, and easily archived. Students can create their own textbooks in history, solve math problem sets, post science labs. While blogs tend to be owned by one person presenting his/her thoughts that others can comment on, a wiki is designed to be a group effort where students edit each other's work, add images and videos, and leave comments to track their editions and subtractions. While Wikipedia is the most well-known example of a wiki, there are now many wikis posted by students and teachers. The term wiki, by the way, is a Hawaiian word meaning quick, and it is the software that creates the actual wiki space. The beauty of a wiki is its quickness: no HTML programming is needed. Two popular wiki sites that allow educators to create free wikis are wikispaces.com and pbwiki.com.

Why use a Wiki rather than a blog?

Teachers ask this question all the time, and there is no easy answer because both platforms are flexible, frequently interchangeable. A blog with its post and comment format is less collaborative than a wiki. Blog posts are not designed for others to edit or add to the text; the comment section is usually the place for additional information. Wikis, however, allow for groups to work on and edit their writings as the history of each page will reflect the changes made. So, why use a wiki? The best answer is when you want the writing to be a collaboration amongst your students.

Uses of Wikis in the Classroom

1. A collaborative storytelling wiki-- with a class, a school, the world
2. A choose your own adventure story wiki
3. Study guides made by different groups of student
4. A History research project/textbook
5. A travel guide to the ancient world with different pages for culture, architecture, daily life, etc
6. Collaborative book reviews
7. A poetry anthology or poetry workshop
8. Science Lab Report
9. A Math textbook
10. An Election wiki: separate pages for each candidate and/or each issue
11. Summary of discussions of each scene in a play by Shakespeare or the chapters of a novel
12. Literary analysis of a poem with links to explications of figurative language
13. A virtual art gallery
14. Collaboration on class notes
15. Student Portfolios
16. Literature Circle
17. Technology Resources for Faculty and Staff
18. Individual Department Wikis to post links, resources, articles, etc.

Here is an example of a History Wiki project:

Welcome to our Cold War wiki.

History 9/10 will create a Cold War wiki. Each student has been assigned to a group, and each group is responsible for adding and editing information. The group can include outside links for further information.

The library has significant information in print. When you use information or links, please make sure that you are using reliable data.

Some resources:

- A CNN site on the [Cold War](#) might be useful.
- Another great site is the [Cold War Museum](#).
- The [Space Race](#), a National Geographic special.

Group Pages (you will be sharing your page with more than one group as each group will be assigned a different focus with the time period.)

[causes of the Cold War.](#)

[1945-1952](#)

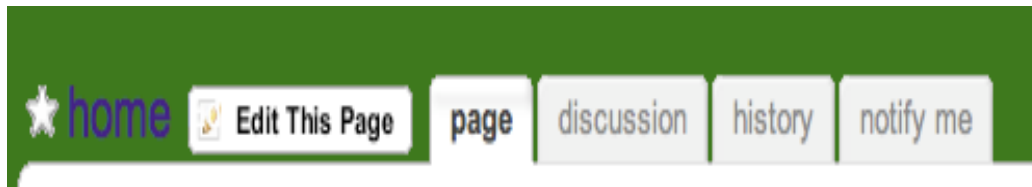
[1952-1960](#)

[1960s](#)

[1970s](#)

[1980-1991](#)

Simply click on the “Edit This Page” tab to add text, images, videos, and links.



The “History” keeps track of each addition and allows the editors to leave notes explaining their updates to each page.

Mar 8, 2007 11:53 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	history9-10
Mar 1, 2007 11:44 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	history9-10 "edited by ENB; added edit and add links of images and even video or music. We also want to establish how much space we have to write comments."
Mar 1, 2007 11:42 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	history9-10 "edited by ENB"
Feb 22, 2007 11:56 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	history9-10

Versions of each page can be compared side-by-side to keep track of changes and edits can be undone if necessary. Because wikis are created on-line, students can collaborate with students from other schools and other countries. Wikis are basically word processing documents that allow for multiple users and multiple interactions. Students can be assigned different roles--researchers, editors, fact checkers, designers--thereby allowing for different learning styles. Thus, the read/write web in action! Most important, blogs and wikis allow for authentic student writing.

Both blogs and wikis allow users to insert images, flash animations, YouTube videos, and slideshare presentations. More features seem to be added daily, including RSS feeds, avatars, and Twitter sidebars. While teachers are not always crazy about these apparent distractions to the task at hand, they can, in fact, enhance the multimedia nature of word creation that has become the norm for most students. It's a brave, new world.

What is Twitter and why should I care?

Twitter is a version of microblogging because a tweet shares one's thoughts and ideas but only within 140 characters. Twitter is also a form of IMing because tweeters can respond back and forth to each other, sharing ideas, comments and non sequiturs. Twitter is also a form of email, allowing tweeters to send direct messages to others. Twitter is also a form of social media, allowing tweeters to follow others and to create a personal learning network. In short, Twitter is a tool for communicating.

So why should educators care about Twitter? The first reason rests in its power to form connections amongst Tweeters. Following other educators willing to share their ideas, resources, links to useful websites, and to help problem solve issues, tech and otherwise, creates a powerful Personal Learning Network. Using the hashtag feature, teachers can "attend" major conferences simply by eavesdropping on the tweets of attendees. To be able to quickly find the solution to a problem, learn some new skill in Moodle, or learn about a create resource for teaching Shakespeare is nothing short of miraculous.

So why should educators care about Twitter? Twitter aligns with the 21st century desire to create global citizens. What better way to connect with an educator from China or a classroom in France than by sending out a tweet to one's personal learning network (PLN).

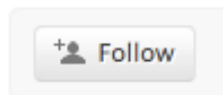
So why should educators care about Twitter? Twitter can be used to create a back channel of comments during a faculty meeting, a lecture, a class presentation. Educators and students can offer comments in the moment, creating a collaborative quality to a standard format.

So why should educators care about Twitter? Twitter can be used to create awareness about current events, trending topics, and media literacy. Tweeters now offer both commentary and first person accounts to make breaking news come alive. What better way to follow the zeitgeist of a culture than to follow hot topics trending worldwide. Why not compare a tweeter's account to a news event to a standard journalist's account. Why not follow the president, senators, and congressmen and women tweeting about the latest issues taxing our government (no pun intended). Why not follow political columnist responding to the day's events?

So why should educators care about Twitter? Twitter can be incorporated into many curriculum goals. Science classes can follow astronauts, physicists, and journalists who reported on medical news and information, Literature classes can use twitter to create reading circles or as reading journals. The Royal Shakespeare society is tweeting Romeo and Juliet; others are tweeting the thoughts of Oscar Wilde. Similarly, student can tweet as if they were the characters in a novel or a play. Many authors and poets now tweet; imagine striking up a relationship with a famous poet, willing to then skype with your class.

Getting Started with Twitter

Follow: to track the tweets of someone on Twitter; you can go to wefollow.com to find people to follow or find the followers of someone who interest you and then click the follow icon:

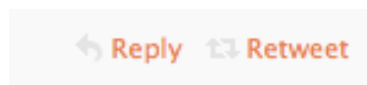


Follower: Someone that is interested in your tweets and is tracking your tweets

Sending a message with the @: The commercial at symbol is used to identify the user name of someone on Twitter, i.e. I am know as @summercore on Twitter. The "@" is also used to send a Tweet intended for a specific person. Whenever you use "@" in front of someone's user name that tweet will show up in their account, even they do not follow you.

Hashtag #: Using a hashtag is a way to help keep twitter organized for your personal tweets, class tweets, or to organize the entire conversation on twitter. It turns that phrase into a link to search for that topic. For example searching for #summercore will yield a list of tweets that people have tagged with that. It also helps to categorize your own tweets.

Reply: If you want to comment about someone's tweet or send a public message to them. You use @username and then post your comment. The person's twitter name will use part of your 140 character limit; you can also click on the reply icon that appears on the bottom corner of each tweet..



Direct Message: Think of it as e-mail over Twitter. If you want to send a private message to someone, send a direct message.

RT: Short for Re-tweet: If someone tweets something that you want to share, you put "RT @username" followed by their original tweet. Or click on the Retweet icon.

TwitPic and TwitVid: Third party websites that allow you to add pictures/videos to your tweets