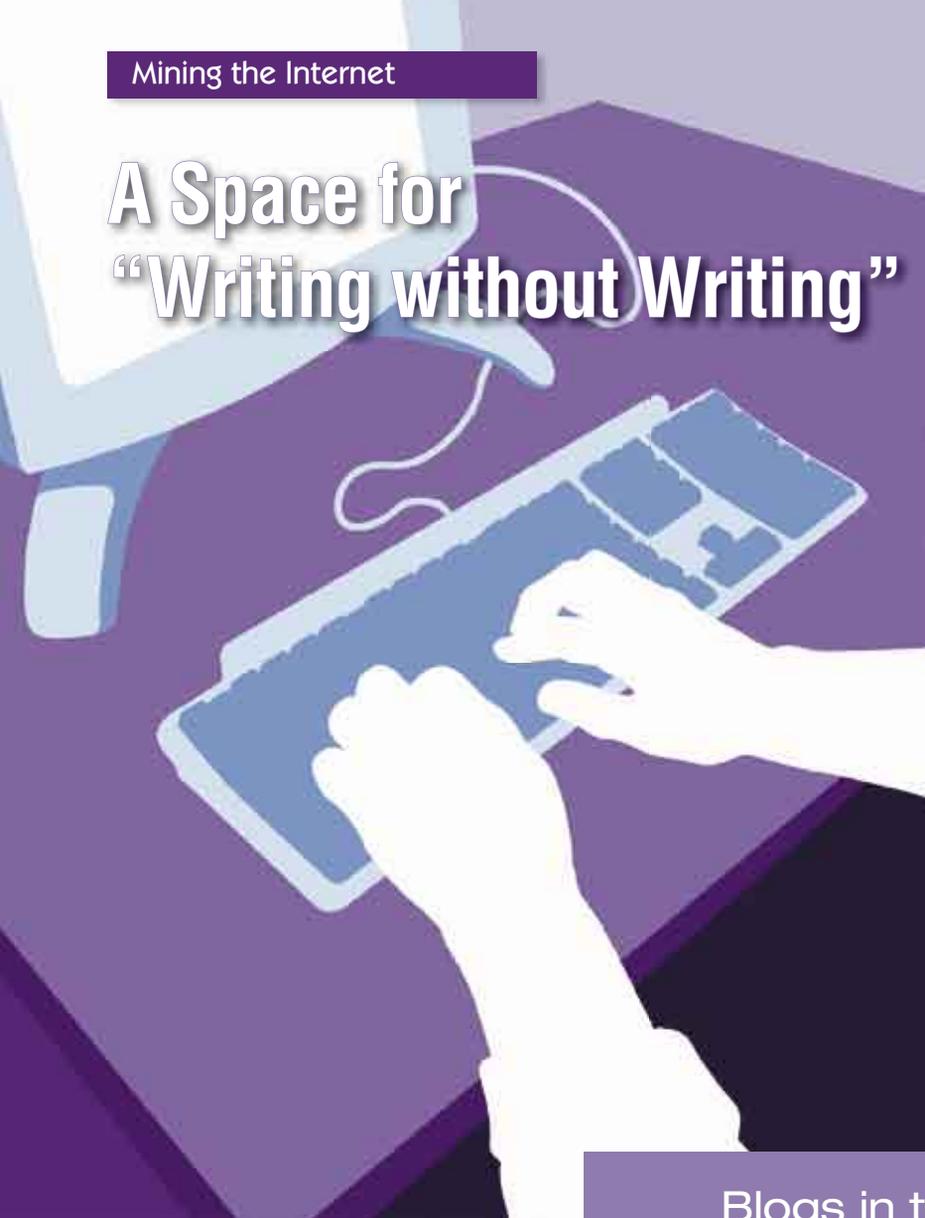


A Space for “Writing without Writing”



Blogs in the Language Arts Classroom

*By Sara Kajder
and Glen Bull
With Emily Van Noy*

Subject: Language arts, English

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators, library media specialists, tech facilitators

Grade Level: K–12 (Ages 5–18)

Technology: Internet, Weblogs

Standards: *NETS•S* 3, 4; *NETS•T* II (<http://www.iste.org/standards/>). *ELA* 6 (<http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.html>).

We first introduced use of Weblogs in the classroom in the September and October 2003 issues of *L&L*. Weblogs are a relatively new innovation, consisting of Web-based journals facilitated by software that generates chronological entries.

Weblogs, commonly shortened to blogs, have become enormously popular. At last count, several million users have engaged in the practice of blogging. This has led to increased levels of public discourse and discussion. It provides new channels through which news and information are disseminated outside the conventional mechanisms of traditional news media.

The long-term effect of blogs is yet to be determined. The phenomenon is so recent that its overall place on the Internet cannot be reliably assessed, and it is still evolving. However, teachers are already exploring instructional uses in innovative ways.

Starting Points

In Emily Van Noy's seventh grade English/language arts classroom in Charlottesville, Virginia, blogs are allowing student writers to come into their own. Students are using blogs as personal journaling spaces. Using Blogger.com, a free blog site, they set up individual accounts that offer inviting, immediate journaling spaces for both class content and, in some cases, related student interests and literacies. Initial prompts from Emily focused on class content and students' work as readers and writers.

In an August 13, 2003, *New York Times* column called "Can Johnny Blog?" Pamela O'Connor wrote "this may be the year that school blogs come into their own." In this column, we review some of the practical steps

involved in using blogs with Emily's students, as well as some of the instructional reasons for bringing blogs into her classroom.

Blogs developed through tools such as Blogger.com require no knowledge of HTML and provide students with the opportunity to publish through the stroke of a key. Blogs have led to a resurgence in journaling, through their accessibility, their audience, and their immediacy.

Bringing Journals Back

Our collaborator Emily is an experienced English/language arts teacher who is using blogs with student writers in the hopes of bringing informal journaling back into her English curriculum. In reflecting about her previous experiences as a writer and a teacher, Emily shared,

For the past three years, I have included a composition book as one of the supplies for my language arts classes. In my first year, this book was used for journaling. Twice a week the students would write for 15–20 minutes. I would give the students a choice of two prompts that usually required them to explain their opinion about a topic.

As the students were developing their moral selves, I wanted them to put the time and effort into thinking about what they believed and why. Some students thrived off of this writing time and used it to pour out their thoughts on the pages; others continued to hate writing, wrote as little as possible, and filled the remaining space with doodling.

As an idealistic first-year teacher, I planned on collecting the 80 journals, reading and responding to the students, making them explain further, think deeper. After I lugged the crates full of journals from school to car to home, I would spend a whole weekend, once a month, doing nothing but reading and grading journals.

Although in the beginning I did respond to the journals and form relationships with students through that exchange, I eventually looked for length and checked the pieces accordingly. I was becoming the type of teacher I dreaded becoming, grading on quantity rather than quality.

By her third year teaching, Emily abandoned journaling, refocusing her instruction around the writing domains in the Virginia Standards of Learning. She offered,

Twice each quarter, I would walk the students through the writing process, have them peer edit, and then grade their final products. My students became better writers, but I did not feel the personal connection that I did with my first group. Many of my students' end-of-year surveys reflected that they wished we had done more free writing.

I was left with many questions. How could I include informal journaling in my writing program? How could I save time, yet give meaningful responses to my students' journal entries? How could I reinforce correct capitalization and punctuation in my students' writing, especially when typed?

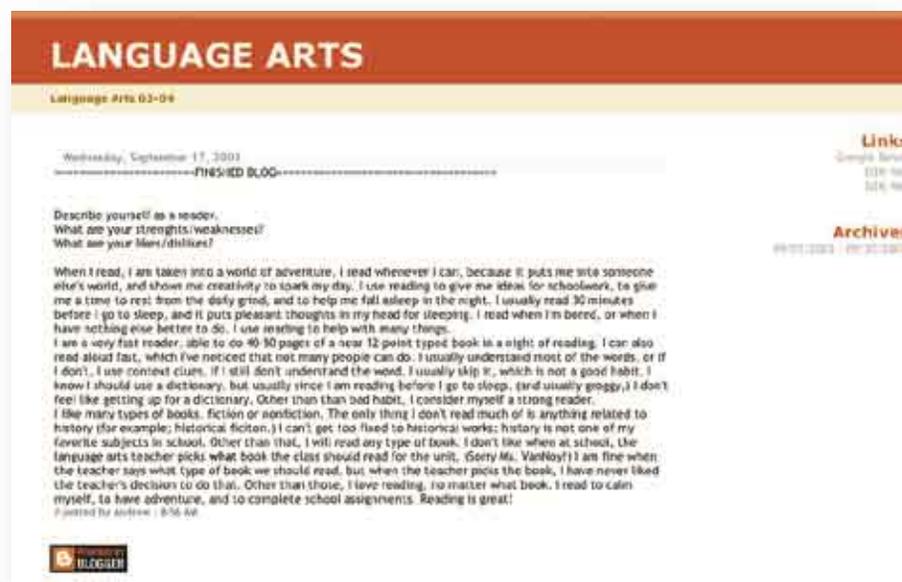
Emily first began using blogs in a Digital Storytelling Institute at the University of Virginia. Participating English and language arts teachers used blogs to detail their experiences in writing and developing a digital narrative. This led Emily to reemerge as a journal writer and to consider what role blogs could play in her students' writing.

The Nuts and Bolts of Getting Started

Good teaching requires effective planning, especially with the introduction of a new online writing technology. Bringing blogs into her classroom required Emily to manage student accounts and postings while developing compelling journaling activities that were essential to students' work in class.

She began with a parent survey in an effort to learn about the realities of students' access at home. In school, she worked to track down the status of her students' Web permissions forms. She explained,

Blogs have led to a resurgence in journaling, through their accessibility, their audience, and their immediacy.



My school streamlined the process this year and had all parents fill out permission forms for their children. This information was then put into a database that all teachers could access. Because I had explained the purpose behind blogging and the safety rules we were employing, some parents, who originally had not given consent, allowed their children to publish using Blogger. Plan B for students who still could not publish on the Web was word processing at home or school.

Step two involved setting up the actual student blog accounts. Though she originally planned to enter the information for each student account herself, plans quickly changed. She offered,

The first account I made took five minutes, and I soon realized that it would take me hours, if not days, to set up accounts for all 80 of my students. Blogs were something that were going to help me save time, not take up more of it. So, I took the students into the lab and walked them through the process.

Students established their accounts using a combination of their initials and numbers from their school ID. Emily advised them to use her school e-mail address instead of entering personal e-mail addresses. This was done both to avoid sharing personal information and to aid in troubleshooting when students forgot logins or passwords.

The final decision on Emily's part was whether to publish the students' blog addresses, making public what could be used as a private writing space. Because students were already equipped with a public writing tool through their use of Blackboard.com for threaded literature discussions, she chose to keep the blogs private.

Once the accounts were active, the remaining step was to meaningfully integrate journal writing into the curriculum. Early exercises were designed to encourage students to reflect on the work of an effective reader in their postings. Additional prompts focused students on exploration of themes and essential questions within the literature studied by the class. Subsequent activities challenged students to use the blogs as reflective space following literature circle discussions and other class activities.

Student Responses

After their initial blog posts, students were asked to complete an exit survey, examining their response to using Blogger.com as a journaling space and offering ways to make the experience more helpful. We expected the open-ended responses to be helpful in determining how we would proceed both with journaling assignments and our use of Blogger.com.

Students were unified in responding that they were drawn to writing in this new space. As Felisha offered, "it isn't boring—something different from pencil and paper." Students are writing more in their blogs because of the speed and ease of typing. They are also quick to emphasize that the blog is a way to regularly communicate with their teacher, something that the monthly grading of paper journals can often prevent. One student referred to the blog as a place for "writing without writing."

Volumes of writing research indicate that student writers, no matter how savvy, are often blocked by the intimidation of the blank page. This does not seem to be the case when students are writing within blogs. As Eric wrote, "using a blog is more fun, and I think it doesn't cause a writer's block."

Writing in blogs can lead to sharing ideas and work within communities, something students appeared hungry for within their posts. As Andrew wrote, the blogging experience would be made better if "a list of blogspot Web addresses were provided for classmates who want to share so that others in the class could read their opinions on different topics." Though Emily's design is for students to use the blog to express ideas they might not want to share with an entire class, the archiving feature does leave open the possibility to view by entry. Later assignments could allow students to gain public response, as

in the use of blogs outside of the classroom.

Bumps in the Journey

As with the introduction of any new technology into a classroom, the transition to working with blogs has not been without challenges. Though it is under what appears to be continual development, Blogger.com is still a relatively young tool. Student writers have come to it expecting the features found in conventional word processors, especially when it comes to spelling checkers. Emily explained,

With the first blog posting, I struggled to find spell check for the students to use. The version I had used in the spring had it, but that had all changed. The help menu showed me a picture that matched the old Blogger, and the Blogger listserv said it was only available on Blogger Pro, which cost money. I presented this problem to the students and made an interesting discovery. The Blogger page they were seeing at home on their PCs was different than what we were seeing at school

on the Macs. When I loaded Blogger using Netscape Navigator instead of Internet Explorer, I saw what my students were seeing at home: what I had considered the “old version” of Blogger. No spell check to be had.

Students have identified the need for online access to also be a sticking point when it comes to using blogs in a way that meets their needs as students and as writers. Daniel wrote that “having Internet access all the time” would make a significant difference in how he used the tool as a writer. To post to a blog, the student must be logged on to their Blogger.com account. Students have worked around this problem by typing entries in a word processor and posting from a bank of four computers in the classroom. However, the goal of posting to communicate and share ideas quickly is lost when students do not have ready access.

Several of my students are much more tech savvy than I could ever hope to be. I am going to rely on those students to teach me about the ins-and-outs of

Blogger as well. I set up a forum on Blackboard for my students to post their questions about Blogger as well as any tricks they had discovered for changing templates, adding pictures. And so on. Over time, I hope this forum will serve as a “Blogger how-to” for my classes.

Next Steps

Blogs are becoming an essential writing space in Emily Van Noy's classroom, both in terms of unique capacities of the tool and the instructional frame provided by compelling journal prompts. We're only just getting started and are at a place where questions far outweigh answers. Emily's list is long and reflective of our early stage: “How often will my students blog? How am I going to assess my students' blogs? What will the rubric look like? What is the most convenient and meaningful way to respond to my students?”

We are convinced that, as we continue to work with blogs in language arts, they will expand the possible ways in which we engage and lead student writers in the classroom.

Language Arts - Felisha's Blogs

The screenshot shows a Blogger page titled "Language Arts - Felisha's Blogs". At the top, there is a "blog spot" logo. Below the logo, there are sections for "School Links" and "Fun Links". The main content is a post dated "Wednesday, September 17, 2003" with the prompt "Describe yourself as a reader. What are your strengths/weaknesses? What are your likes/dislikes?". The post text reads: "I like to read, it's fun and enjoyable. I like being taken into the world of the book, take my mind off of anything that could be wrong in my real life. I also like reading because it helps me with my own writings and role-playing. One of my weaknesses is reading things that are TOO literate or reading aloud for long periods of time, even though I like reading aloud. I dislike reading out of a text book or anything boring." The post is attributed to "posted by Felisha @ 9:55 AM".



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