

Blogging, but not for England: a Year 10 venture

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Overview

Keen to encourage reluctant students to write, Martin experimented with blogging with his Year 10 group. Although the results were patchy, a number of particularly resistant students became engrossed and a group of six boys then devoted considerable time to writing posts on a regular basis. His lively account explains the basics of blogging, including some pitfalls to avoid. He concludes by recommending that teachers plan short term, easily managed, targeted blogging activities with extension potential for key groups; his next step involves opening the blog up for student book reviews.

Introduction

I teach English and media at a small 11-16 technology college on the South Coast. In a town assumed to be genteel, ageing, and possibly prosperous we have the usual comprehensive intake of some bright, high-achieving students and a majority of resentful writers.

Aims

Following the initial NATE/Becta conference on 'Using ICT with hard to teach subjects', I chose the ever-lingering malaise 'reluctance to write' and the faddish new medicine of blogging to see if I could affect a cure. I can't say I emerge as the new Bones but it I didn't kill the patient either; indeed there are some signs of further life.

Method

I have used blogs before but only in my role as web co-ordinator. We have both PE Department and Gifted and Talented teacher blogs. I set these up and gave some, very small training (that's all it takes, really) and I also used a blog for some student voice work on a project to see if we could get student responses using online applications – we post, they add a comment.

This was different though. The class, EN3, is taking their AQA English GCSE in a year. Of the 18 students, none was targeted above a C this year and the majority expect D to G. The one-year course means that everything's a big rush to the finishing line (coursework deadline, with 'Different Cultures' poems thrown at them for good measure). This gives us two potential shots at the holy grail of a pass at C or above in English, as they can retake in the Summer during Year 11. But it does little to inculcate a love of the subject.

I believed they were disenchanted but just to be sure I checked by means of a questionnaire. Sure enough, on scores of one to ten regarding writing tasks, copying, short answers and stories came out top (in a relative sense) and essays, long answers and auto-biography scored low. Only 14 completed the questionnaire; some refused it as it involving writing! Four gave 'nul points' on their 'enjoyment of writing' score.

Comments included:

I don't like writing I never will

I don't mind writing but I don't like it *and*

I don't like writing... Because of my spelling mistakes and learning difficulties.

This last from Stacey, more on her later.

Given this ringing endorsement of my English teaching I set myself to find a suitable safe space for my students to blog in. Like many of my fellow teachers in need of inspiration I went online looking for help and a shoulder to cry on. The good thing is I found it, them.

One of the prime concerns at our NATE/Becta meetings was the issue of safety, not only that of the children but also teachers leaving themselves open to charges of irresponsibility by allowing students to connect to potentially unsafe environments. I say this to put your minds at rest in case this stops you working online. It shouldn't.

There are free blogs you can join and immediately start writing on but they require an email account and my students have been banned from using email in school for five years. This was due to 'misuse' during ICT lessons. It is of course mind-boggling that on the one hand the government is promoting ICT as the gateway to next generation learning and the world of work, while my poor lumpen proletariat can't surf or email. These ironies run through our present use of ICT in schools.

The free blogs like 'Wordpress' <http://wordpress.com/> and 'Blogger' <https://www.blogger.com/start> are a marvellous resources but hard to control and monitor for 18 people. They are set up as individual writing spaces for journal-like activities. They are great and so easy to join you should try one today (doctor's advice). But they were not right for my class, not yet anyway. I'm a teacher and I need *control!* Also Blogger has a 'next post' link and if you sit there and click it, say, 18 times, you might come upon someone with, perhaps, an interest in high-heeled boots – and not just to go with their flares. This means they are not safe, at least not 'school-safe' as some heads and heads of department might define it.

At my wits end (well okay just heady-scratchy-end) I turned to Classroom2.0 <http://www.classroom20.com/> This is a forum for teachers interested in using new web technologies. I signed up and asked for advice on blogs – I got six pages of help. I also found out about Free Hosted LMSs. These are Learning Management Systems, online classrooms that developers are making and hosting. In this case it's free, perhaps altruistically but more probably to make money through sales or advertising. You might be aware of MLs – we call them VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) in schools. The good thing about these LMSs is that they try to keep pace with the latest changes, whereas our current VLE, for example, lacks a blogging function.

As luck would have it, there was a thread on Classroom2.0 assessing and advising on these systems. I was able to join three and look around them asking specifically:

- could I create classes and passwords?
- would my students be anonymous?
- could I make the blogs private?
- could I delete anything inappropriate?

The answer to all is a resounding 'yes'.

I decided on edu20.org. <http://www.edu20.org/> which is the baby of web entrepreneur, Graham Glass. He has obviously made a packet through software development and now lives on a boat writing applications and looking very healthy, wealthy and sun-tanned (I know, I know). Graham turned out to be very helpful: he responds directly to emails and makes changes to the site based on teacher comments.

Description

I joined and made a class (in the end I made six classes for students across year groups). You are given administration rights, so you have almost full control and your class is given a code. If you want it private you can password-protect it. The site's functions include among other things: wikis, chat rooms (useful but filtered sometimes by my school's network), polls, and blogs.

Blogging works like this: once logged in and in your classroom you click on the tab called blogs and are given two options, post a message or view all posts. Posts have a limit of 500 words. You can post a message and then read yours and others in your class. The system also allows you to comment on other posts. This is a great method of peer assessment. In the limited number of comments students made they were supportive if not incisive. But that is a skill we need to explore and this technology supports it brilliantly.

When I finally gathered my non-writing pupils in an ICT room, I got them to go to the site and sign up. The good thing about edu20.org is you don't need an email address and you don't have to give your real or full name or age. You can input all your details but you can also operate almost anonymously.

There were issues with the login passwords in that the students set them and then forgot them (and their usernames) but the teacher can reset them. This is time consuming and unnecessary but seems to go with the territory. One good way around this is to get students to use their mobiles to photograph their details (their suggestion).

And all of a sudden I was in the promised land of online writing and new illiteracies. What brave new task did I get them to do? A review. Now, looking back, I can see the error of my ways. I spent so long looking at blogs and users and systems I ignored the why. If we are going to use technology, we are going to need to find the right application for it. More on that in a while though.

My hook for the fish was YouTube. We have a fairly supportive SMT who are willing to allow teachers to trial material and ways of working. I was able to have edu20.org unfiltered and then have a special login created to allow access to YouTube. I knew the patients would like this. I gave them carte blanche to find a clip or trailer of their choice and write about it on the blog. I won't go into the issues around YouTube here but I realise they are myriad and murky. Suffice to say that I don't suggest using it when Ofsted arrive – but also remember the Government are already using YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/DowningSt>.

If you look at a YouTube page you will see a box on the right with 'embed' above it and some code below it. You copy the code, go to your blog on edu20.org and insert the code onto your page (you have to click a button called 'source' and then just paste the code). This is the only technical element the students had to do. The trailer then plays on your page. You therefore have two elements: your post and a moving image trailer. Some of the students wanted to write about films and games that were certificated 18 and, in the optimistic belief that they were mature beyond their years, I allowed PG rated

trailers of older films. The other way around this is to use images of the DVD or game covers in the reviews instead of trailers. This is easy to do as well: you just need the images on the PC you are using and you navigate to them.

So did it work? Well, yes and no. I only used the ICT rooms twice. Some students wrote one line reviews; some didn't even join the site. They saw YouTube was unblocked and had a wonderful English lesson surfing music, game and film videos. Starving people tend to gorge themselves. Most blogged, which meant they wrote, but there was no 'penicillin moment' and I'm not Marie Curie.

Key findings

At least two students became immersed in this activity. One was Stacey who for two months this year refused to write in any lesson other than Science ('I can pass that subject and my other grades are c**p'). She wrote three reviews on horror films and games. Not only that, she went on to write Manga based Fan-Fiction and has opened a new world of literature to me. It turns out she reads this fiction obsessively. Her particular area of interest is a storyline called Naruto. She showed me on FanFiction (<http://www.fanfiction.net/>), over 149,000 stories written and shared by people. One time it was suggested that VHS would be the death of cinema, only for attendances to rise; likewise computer games and videos may see the rise of certain credible types of writing. Stacey's writing wasn't technically accurate, structured or incisive but I actually had *writing*, something I could work with. Crucially, I now had her engaged on two stories – both of which I could use for coursework. When interviewed, Stacey said it was the ability to watch and write and continually refer back that engaged her. I think it was also in a medium she feels comfortable in: not pen and paper but online.

It was very similar for Callum who usually takes an age to write, doesn't enjoy it and is very quiet. For the first lesson he sat watching game videos online. He kept telling me he was doing research. The thing is he was. He also wrote two reviews I used for his GCSE English coursework. Callum's original comment on writing was 'I don't enjoy it'. Well he does now – or at least certain genres of writing. As I've been ploughing through the Anthology he asks if can be excused to blog. He can't of course – we don't live in education system that operates at the level of individuals, at least not yet.

Other students wrote, but these two were particularly hard cases to crack. I think this worked with them, proved at least that the technology works and can engage some of the students. This is one task and I'm sure other teachers will be able to devise numerous opportunities for writing based on these applications. The first thing you need from students to assess and improve writing is simply that: a text of theirs to work from. I now have these. The quickest method of highlighting spelling and grammar is to take the text into Word and deal with the red and green underlined issues. We did this with the final GCSE drafts but not on the edu20 site.

I was able to undertake this task with other English classes and over the course of a few lessons was able to build up a whole series of reviews. I then set up a Wordpress blog and posted the best of the reviews there. This blog is now on our school website (<http://etcreviews.wordpress.com/>), meaning the work has a real audience: our school. It celebrates and validates their comments in a very public way. We can now build on this sense of audience and collaboration.

Follow-up: more blogs

I wasn't satisfied, however. I had a real context, good; we'd created an online writing community, good; I had coursework, hooray. But the task could have been done with pen and paper. This was just taking existing practice and using a computer instead of a pen. Surely we haven't spent millions for this?

I went back to basics. Blogs are a form of journal; the word comes from Web Logging or blogging. What I needed was a real use for a journal in a way that paper finds hard to replicate. What I discovered were six Year 10 boys (all in a Media class and two also in my English class) who don't like writing and are hard to engage, but love football.

I set up a Wordpress blog <http://etceuro2008.wordpress.com/> with me as the administrator (nothing is published without me, I get emailed to authorise all posts and comments) and I made one student, Craig, an author – which means he can log on and write. The six boys blogged on Euro 2008 over the course of the three- week tournament. They love football and talked incessantly about the matches even though England were not involved. They made 29 posts on the matches and used the BBC football site to research the games. The comments are neither original nor great prose and they are littered with technical errors, but I have six boys wanting to write on a regular basis for an audience. The writing was done in a Media class during practical lessons; we simply set aside 15 minutes during the lesson where they could go online and blog. Craig used to read the posts at home and the rest during ICT-based lessons. This was true collaborative work – only Craig could type, the others huddled around commenting. I can't use this work for assessment but we will be taking some of it for a magazine article for Media GCSE work.

That seems less important than finally providing a valid space for these boys to write in. They don't even see it as a written task. Craig later said he didn't think about the writing; it was simply 'interesting doing this' and it was made easy doing it online. They also took ownership or control of it. About three posts in I blogged when Craig was absent with two of the boys and two other boys made comments. The rest of them resented this and said it was their space! I was delighted. The Euro blog lasted until the end of the tournament when I deleted Craig as a user – but glad to say the patient was alive and kicking.

Conclusion

I now have a clear idea for at least one role for blogs as journals in classrooms. I think short-term, easy-to-manage, targeted blogging is the place to start. Set up extension or alternative activities for key individuals or groups. Next year the Year 10 boys have asked to blog on the premier league and Eastbourne Borough, a team they play for at Junior level and go to watch. Other possibilities include a blog for Year 7 on their first month in school.

Next steps

Beyond this I am going to keep the review site going as a whole school literacy initiative and open it to book reviews, while also looking out for different opportunities for students to blog. I will then be able put down my stethoscope, take off my white coat ... and let the patients cure themselves.