

## Blogs and the National Curriculum

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#### Overview

Mark Ellis has been exploring the use of Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis and media sharing in the classroom. This case study describes how to use one such application – a blog – as a means of promoting high quality original writing for GCSE coursework. A blog is a diary or journal, which is ‘posted’ or published online, to which readers can add comments and responses if they wish. Mark adapts this medium with an upper set Year 10 class, who were working on descriptions of work experience. The results are mature, entertaining pieces of writing, through which the students show a heightened awareness of audience.

Newent Community School is a mixed 11-18 comprehensive school with 1,400 students on roll. It has arts and science specialist status.

#### Introduction and context

Blogs are wicked!  
Blogs are cool.  
Blogs bring audience  
Into school.

I’m not going to be skipping to that at my age, but Web 2.0 tools can lighten the steps towards a sense of audience for your students’ writing in ways that will surprise.

While you were digesting the 2008 National Curriculum revisions, were you cheering with the rest of us at having ‘more room for creativity’, ‘exploring culture and identity’ and ‘building critical engagement’? Yes, I thought so. But...you wouldn’t be human if your heart didn’t sink just a little at the implications of finding *real audiences...by making links with the local or global community*.

Now the visionary people who drafted the revisions surely sense the potential of Web 2.0 for ‘providing real audiences and contexts for writing and speaking beyond the classroom’ and are fully aware that our students are doing this already, for themselves, by themselves. Just ask your students if they’ve ‘talked’ to somebody in another country this week. The answer is ‘well duh!’ – that is what they are doing on various messaging applications and social networks in the evening.

The National Curriculum example of ‘Real World’ English that ‘could be through contact with writers, actors and journalists and others whose “business” is words’ is silly. Take the back of a convenient envelope and do a few calculations: *one Paxman plus one Duffy divided by 3200 schools equals chaos*. These people are already being e-peppered by e-drivel that wouldn’t have got through in the days where feedback required reflection, time for purpose to cool, and of course the expense of a stamp.

So... where is the real audience going to come from?

If you require an audience, look around you!

When I were a lad... there was still one shop left in Birmingham where the assistants were not allowed to handle money. Instead, they popped the paperwork and your cash into a vacuum tube, it whooshed up to *Accounts* and returned after a few minutes with the receipt and the change. A similar sterile transaction can sometimes occur when students hand in their hard-crafted work. It is sucked up to the *Place of Feedback* and returned after an indeterminate time directly to the author. Nobody else touches it!

'Blogging', replaces this with a public posting and public feedback on the Internet. Students know that their work will be read by many people and they give and receive feedback in a public forum. Sounds challenging? Well, yes. But you don't just let your students slap stuff on the Internet for Petrov from Cairo to comment on.

## Method and description

Our annual Year 10 Work Experience week can inspire useful GCSE coursework. Students have unique material for reflection and comment, which overcomes one of the barriers to writing. But there is often a problem with the sense of audience. *Just exactly who will be reading? Why will they be reading? How will they respond if I start like this? Or like this?* Just some of the thought processes students may fail to engage.

The blog experiment has five phases:

1. Find a blog provider
2. Set up a blog with the right security and permissions
3. Enrol the students
4. Set the task and the conventions
5. Stand back and let them get on with it – monitor from a safe distance

### 1 Find a blog provider

By the time you read this, there will be an even wider choice. You have to look. If you would like to use one that is already tried and tested, you will find a free blog available to you at <http://edublogs.org> which you join using your school email. There is no need to sign up for a blog that costs money!

#### Issue 1

Schools have no uniform approach to Web 2.0 and you may find that either your network manager or your local authority will filter edublogs' traffic or may not provide you with a school email system. There is no way around this, except enlightenment. Good luck.

However, you may find that your LA has some kind of learning platform and that wikis and blogs are part of that. You have to ask.

Once you have made a blog – and you need to manufacture a good name for it, one that you can continue to use next year and with a different group of students for a different purpose – your next step is to let the senior management team know what you are doing.

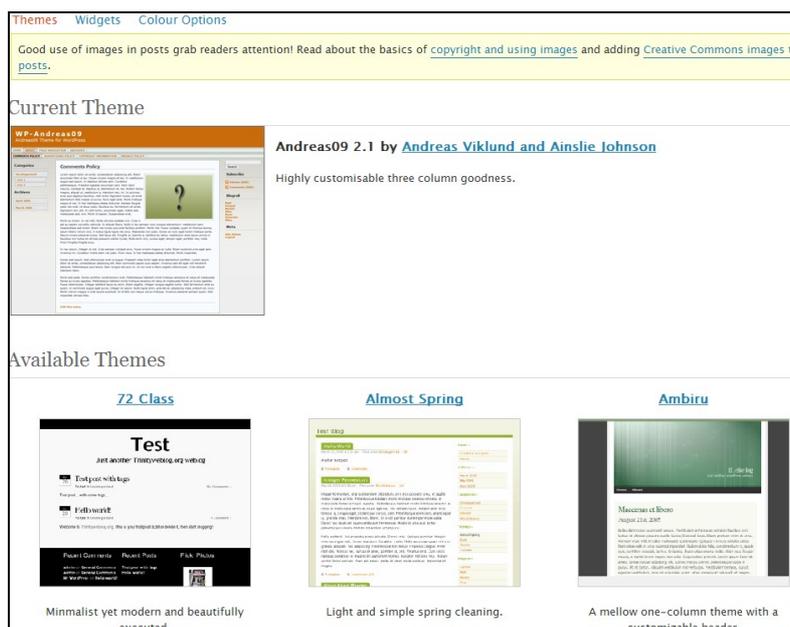
#### Issue 2

See Issue 1 above. If you decide to use a blog, the chances are that you will be taking a bit of a pioneering step at this stage. Make absolutely sure that your senior management team

approves of what you are doing and enrol them on the blog so that they have full access. (This provides a different ‘audience’ as well! Students like that sense of being taken seriously.)

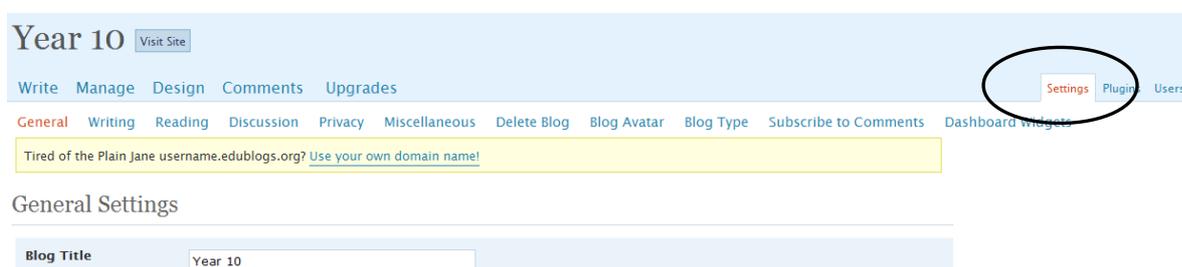
## 2 Set up a blog with the right security and permissions

The fun bit is choosing a ‘theme’ which governs the way the blog will look. This is a matter of personal choice but there are some subtle differences between how the chosen themes use the right and left side bars and what you can put on them. It is easy to change a theme, even when the blog is open and running with entries in place, so nothing is lost if you make frequent changes to the theme.



*This is the simple window for changing themes on Edublogs. There are dozens of themes.*

Once you have themes, you need to think about how a blog is normally used and how different school use is. Most bloggers want the whole world to read and comment on their blogs. This is just *not* acceptable, at least in the current climate, with a school blog. So you need to adjust the security settings under Manage – Settings.



Set ‘Users must be registered and logged-in to comment’. This gives you control. *Anybody* on the Internet can theoretically see the blog but they won’t be able to comment unless they are members of Edublogs. Now you make one crucial setting. Under Settings – Discussion, set ‘Allow people to post comments on the article’ but also set ‘Comment author must have a previously approved comment’. If you do this, then you will always get to decide whether the first comment anybody makes will be accepted. This means that you can approve all the students: I asked them to ‘comment’ on a dummy

post I made, just to get them all on the system – but if any outsider did comment, you could simply not approve and that would be that. You should also set the blog to email you whenever there are posts or comments – just to keep an eye on things. If you ever *do* run into problems with an inappropriate post, the sooner you are on to it the better.

### Issue 3

Inappropriate use. There is much terror about the use of the Internet by young people. It doesn't matter what you think rationally about this; the perception is the problem. It is as well to anticipate that you may just get an inappropriate post. However, since your students have to logon to post, you will know who wrote anything that gets posted. You should stress to the students how important it is to guard the confidentiality of their login and passwords so that others cannot get *them* into trouble. Does your school have a policy on inappropriate use? You should know what it is. This is, however, a good opportunity to talk about levels of security in passwords and about identity theft – topics with *huge* real-world application.

## 3 Enrol the students

Students have to join Edublogs themselves. They should *not* request a blog, but just sign for membership. Make sure that they create a username that you can recognise – I made all my students email me their username for my records – and that others in the class will recognise too, but it would be foolish for anybody to use their full real name. Your students should use their school email addresses to register. Keep Hotmail out of it! You then have to go to the Users tab and add them all to the blog. This is where using school predictable email addresses comes in very handy. When you enrol your students, set their role to *Author*. This allows them to post.

However, blogs are really for individuals to use and the world to comment. We are trying to use them slightly differently. If you ever want to be able to find the posts a student has made, then you have to do a bit of trickery: make each student a 'category'. Posts are 'tagged' with categories – a free-form indexing system. By making students into categories, any posts students make can be put into the category of their own usernames, and can therefore be found at will by others.

## 4 Set the task and the conventions

This is your teaching role. As well as the task itself, you will have to decide before you start what the conventions of written English will be and what the comment conventions are. Normal Internet use does *not* respect the GCSE English criteria. You may decide to allow students to express themselves as they like because you are dealing with a group for whom grammar and punctuation are undiscovered countries. I took the decision to insist on 'normal' written English standards for school work, but I also pitched the task as being for magazine/colour supplement publication and we read a few relevant articles in preparation, looking at the techniques used by authors to engage interest and structure the narrative. This at least gave us a benchmark.

Some of the students posted their accounts during the Work Experience week. An evolving account of events could be an alternative use of the blog. When I do it again, I think I will insist on a preliminary post and a reflective post after the event as a minimum. I think that will be interesting.

The comment conventions you set have to depend on your school's Assessment for Learning (AfL) readiness. We are all at different stages with this. Those schools that have been involved in the Key

Stage 3 Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) pilots will have a ready vocabulary for students to use. One of the difficulties, I found, was how to encourage students to point out technical errors in the writing of others without producing the smart that a public rebuke might cause. This is a tricky one. With other classes using wikis, I have put students in groups with the specific task of commenting on and revising the technicalities of work within the group – that seems to take the sting out of it. However, the advice to students that *what goes around, comes around* is easily understood. I have not encountered any bitterness or bad feeling so far.

## 5 Stand back and let them get on with it - monitor from a safe distance

The results speak for themselves. I think that the sense of audience is markedly improved. This is best demonstrated in the opening sentences and the well-considered strategies that the students used. Here is a selection of openings:

Yes I must admit I was there stood outside the doors of the Assembly rooms hopping from foot to foot. But I finally plucked up the courage and faced my fears of dealing with new people in a new environment.

Well the end of work experience for me will be over in less than a couple of hours. But to be frank this hasn't been work experience for me. It's been life experience. I'm coming back from this placement a different person I know it sounds corny, but it's true.

Fortunately, I did not have to navigate tube routes or attempt reading a map to get to my placement on that first Monday morning. I spent work experience week in my second home, Brecon. (*Making a reference to somebody else's post.*)

The first day... What was I expecting? Cut up fingers, absolutely tedious paperwork and 'watching' glass jewellery being made.

Well to be honest I was absolutely wrong, my work experience was excellent. It was interesting, fun, a new experience and definitely changed me in some ways.

And a comment or two:

I like the build up to the little boy booming (good use of booming much better than shouting) heroin at the end of paragraph one.

Yes. This needs a bit more work but what you've done here is good. The build up to the ending is quite effective, and really funny; the random things children come out with is certainly something you can use for humour's sake.

### Issue 4

You really have to get out of the way and let them do it. You can't tell me that you weren't itching to 'correct' the errors in the examples I have just given. But this is an opportunity to save the red ink, and open up a different approach to the question of who *should* be taking responsibility for the accuracy of work. Remember, that what you can't see from extracts is the number of changes students have made to their posts in the light of comments *from other students!*

If anybody would like to read the blog, it is at <http://newenglish.edublogs.org> for the foreseeable future.

## **Conclusion**

I appreciate that the public forum will be for some students a lot more 'trying' than the vacuum tube method of dealing with work, but the advantages seem to be overwhelming. This class is certainly writing with a sense of audience. The fact that the audience is other people that they know, as well as their parents and some of the staff from our school, does not make the audience any the less 'real'. Students respond with a sense of obligation to the reader both as 'posters' and as 'commenters' and I am sure that, whatever defects this method may have, the drafters of the new National Curriculum would approve of that.