Interactive, Web-based Publishing in the Omaha Public Schools

Interactive, web-based publication software (also know as weblog or blog software) offers significant instructional potential as a communication, publication and motivational tool. Appropriately designed and monitored weblogs provide students and staff a medium for journaling, information processing, communication and resource access. An educationally based weblog can help students learn about responsible and purposeful blogging, provide a sense of community, encourage learning beyond the school day and offer opportunities for a meaningful publishing.

A significant number of students are already both posting AND hosting their own weblogs and, as a result, have created online communities for their own purposes. It makes sense, then, for teachers to take advantage of this skill and/or to provide opportunities to develop it by incorporating weblogs within an educational framework. As educators, we must make it a priority to harness this proficiency and begin to apply it to the curriculum goals and outcomes. In some instances, students do not have access to this technology in their homes. However, in order to function at an optimum level in today's society, familiarity with communication technologies is and will be important. Supporting and implementing weblogs in a classroom setting will provide all students access to these technologies.

Educational Uses
There are a variety of ways in which weblogs can be used in an educational setting. Some examples are:

> **Classroom Discussion –** Topics that are relevant to classroom curriculum can be posted for online discussion. Weblogs are an effective way of organizing discussion by grouping ideas, class members, or any other relevant criterion.
> **Problem Solving –** Classroom discussions that focus on mathematical or scientific problem solving (mathematical proofs, scientific methodology, real-world application of content material, etc.) where problems are better solved using a variety of methods and perspectives.
> **Debating –** Perhaps best used in the social sciences, the discussion is prompted by an issue in which students take a particular stance and are asked to define terms, defend ideas, etc. with follow up (or initiation) in class.
> **Literature Circles –** Classroom discussion that focuses on the discussion of literature – book reviews can be posted by students opening up discussion pertaining to essential questions regarding theme, genre, style, literary criticism, etc. In this case, the student is responsible for the initial post and other students can comment on his/her literary review.

Creative Writing/Nonfiction Essays – Students post writing assignments online for the purposes of review by those both in and out of class. Teachers can take advantage of the online element by having student work evaluated by professional writers and/or other educators.

Potential Problems

As with any technology, there are potential issues involved with weblogs. Recognition of these issues and guidelines for appropriate use will help limit misuse.

Relevant Use of Weblogs – It is important for teachers who intend to use weblogs to uphold educational directives and goals so not to allow the educational weblog to get "out of hand" or off-topic. The goals of the weblog and/or rules should be clearly posted and apparent to participants, and high standards need to be set for online publication.

Online/Internet Safety Issues – Students and teachers may be attracted to the idea that written work published online is just that- -published- - and subject to comments, reviews, criticism by those who are outside of the class. Obviously, building a healthy online community is a key component to a weblog, but, from an educational perspective, teachers and students need to be cognizant about publishing personal and/or private information online.

Profanity/Threats/Harassment – These issues, aside from being dealt with according to district and school code of conduct regulations, can be handled through the use of student accounts, permissions (how much access a student has), and language filters. Online posting are traceable, and any student who logs in and engages in harassment and/or other types of threats would have their post flagged and a written record of it held by the teacher and certainly the administration.

Accessibility/Continuity – While Internet access is become more prevalent in student homes, it's not guarantee that all students have equal access to the internet (and thus, a weblog). It is important to note that if weblogs are used for assignments and discussion purposes (or any purpose that is evaluated for a grade), that students be provided reasonable opportunity to access the site during class time and/or with school computers. If this consideration is not met, then a percentage of students will not be able to participate in the blogging component of the class, and this obviously is an unacceptable instructional practice.

Guidelines

In order to promote a safe, reasonable and focused environment, the guidelines below shall be followed by all teachers who are using weblogs in the classroom:

1. The purpose and instructional goals shall be clearly identified and posted on the weblog.
2. Teachers have an obligation to regularly review and supervise the weblog. Ideally, the application will be set to prohibit viewing of

student posts until after the teacher has reviewed for appropriateness.

3. Appropriate in-class time shall be provided for students to access the weblog.
4. Full student names and personal information shall not be published.
5. All posts shall be scanned by a language filter.
6. Posts/comments shall only be allowed from registered logins.
7. All posts from non-district logins or guest accounts shall be moderated and approved before appearing.
8. Inappropriate student comments and behavior (harassment, profanity, threats, etc.) shall be dealt with as proscribed in the student handbook and the "Behavior Guidelines for Students Using School Computers and Networks".
9. Pictures in which students are readily identifiable may not be used without written parental permission.
10. Teachers must take a blogging in-service before creating a district classroom blog.
11. Weblogs or social networking that facilitate communication within the district shall be hosted on a district server. The district's learning management system and website software program both provide this capability.
12. If the purpose of the interactive web publishing is to establish cross-cultural communications around curriculum topics, teachers should select one of the social networking sites that have been evaluated by the Technology Curriculum committee and determined to have appropriate safeguards in place.

The following sites may be used:
http://www.globalschoolnet.org
http://www.glogster.com
http://www.technospudprojects.com
http://www.monsterexchange.org
http://www.epals.com
http://edutagger.com

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