Let’s Pre-Blog!: Using Blogs as Prewriting Tools in Elementary Classrooms

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Prewriting
Prewriting is not a new concept, and has been an integral part of the language arts curriculum since the early 1970s (Britton, 1970; Murray, 1972). Murray states that prewriting should consume approximately 85% of a writer’s time. If this statistic is true, then it is important for educators to impress upon students the need to invest a sufficient amount of time on prewriting. Yet, do they? The prewriting stage is crucial in allowing the writer to be prepared to write; however, research has shown that the most neglected step in the writing process is the prewriting stage (Roberts, 2002; Tompkins, 2001). Hence, it is essential crucial for us to find ways to motivate and teach our students how to prewrite effectively and productively using the tools they value and will actually use.

Prewriting preparation includes deciding on a topic, identifying an audience, and selecting the purpose for writing (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000). Often, teachers do not give students the proper time or instruction to develop these elements. Honestly, it is often a hurried activity on the way to the final writing product (Roberts, 2002). Whether this neglect is due to time constraints or a simple lack of student interest, this phase of writing is frequently overlooked.

Blogs & Blogging
Recently, blogging has become a popular form of communication (Boling et al., 2008; Huffaker, 2005; Richardson, 2010; Rozema, 2005; Zawilinski, 2009). Basically, a “blog” is a website where an individual writes entries, which are displayed in reverse chronological order and are accessible to
anyone with an Internet connection. Blogs can have a variety of uses and objectives. They can provide commentary on a specific subject or serve as a personal, online journal. Many blogs combine text, images, and links. In addition, blogs provide readers with the capacity to leave comments and remarks, and can be made private or public. Richardson explains that what really distinguishes a blog from your run-of-the-mill Web site or typical Microsoft Word document is what you find there. The author describes that blogs are “comprised of reflections and conversations that in many cases are updated every day (if not three or four times a day). Blogs engage readers with ideas and questions and links. They ask readers to think and respond. They demand interaction” (Richardson, p. 17). In the classroom, blogs can take on various forms depending on your educational needs.

**Connecting Prewriting and Blogging: Pre-Blogging**

Currently, teachers are seeking new activities such as blogging to promote the prewriting process (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Lorenza, Green, & Brown, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Roberts, 2002). Specifically, the distinct features of pre-blogging include the ability to share and get online feedback from teachers and peers as well as having drafts and related comments listed in reverse chronological order. Students can use the blog as a place where they can work to further develop writing or other skills with the advantage of an audience. Teachers can offer instant instructional tips, and students can practice and benefit from peer review. They also make online mentoring possible. For example, a class of older students can help a class of younger students develop more confidence in their writing and pre-writing skills.

Moreover, Richardson asserts that “the true potential of blogs in schools comes when students and teachers use them as publishing tools” (p. 43). Rozema (2005) claims that “the most compelling recommendation for blogging is the real-world audience it provides. The question of audience is fundamental to writing, and for most of us, fundamental to our writing classrooms” (p. 33).

Now that we have examined the basics of prewriting and blogging, how do we connect them to effectively meet the needs of students in our classroom? Let’s remember that our students are 21st century learners who view a blog as transparent a technology as the pen or pencil (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).
Therefore, we should use this new literacy when teaching prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Rozema, 2005). To prepare learners for the new digital world, we must start to show them how to do so in an appropriate and effective manner. By combining the traditional practice of prewriting with the new literacy of blogging, we can start teaching students how to “pre-blog”.

The exciting aspects of pre-blogging are that it allows students to share their plans with more individuals than just the teacher and ask for feedback (Richardson, 2010). Additionally, it documents the prewriting process for writing instructors and other readers. Furthermore, the comment feature facilitates constructive feedback while the reverse chronological structure encourages critical reflection, giving students an opportunity to reconsider their previous entries at a later time (Rozema, 2005).

There are several further reasons to include blogging in your language arts teaching. Primarily, blogs are constructivist tools because they allow students to create writing products that will become “part of the wider body of knowledge that the Internet represents” (Richardson, 2010, p. 26). Also, blogs can expand the walls of your classroom. By sharing and collaborating with each other, your students will be able to communicate and collaborate after the school day has ended. As has been mentioned, blogs also provide an archive of learning. Richardson emphasizes that “the ability to keep histories of work in an organized, searchable, easily shareable space is an important development” (p. 27).

Depending on your specific learning objectives and goals, you can use pre-blogging in various ways. Keep in mind that the blog must be used for a real purpose. Rozema (2005) explains, “As English language arts teachers and teacher educators, we can help our students find real purposes to blog if we keep these print-based predecessors in mind. Our students might use journal blogs to respond to literature, share experiences from student teaching, or write poetry; notebook blogs to brainstorm ideas, record thoughts, and point to informative sites; and filter blogs to annotate and critique online resources.”

**Pre-Blogging Activities**
Here are several activity ideas for pre-blogging:

- **List Dump:** Have your students pre-blog by writing down every idea they have in a list form (Bailey, 2011). Then, instruct them to ask for responses from others as to what could be added to this list. Rozema (2005) explains that the comment feature facilitates constructive feedback from teachers, peers, and others; and the real world audience makes publishing a reality.

- **Free-Write:** Another pre-blogging strategy is to have the learners write using their blogs for several minutes on any topic (Bailey, 2011). Make sure they do not focus on formatting, grammar, spelling, or typing errors. As Elbow (in Rozema, 2005) puts it, "What looks inefficient—a rambling process with lots of writing and lots of throwing away—is really efficient since it's the best way you can work up to what you really want to say and how to say it" (p. 33). Subsequently, the students can modify this piece of writing as they use the blog’s reverse chronological structure to reflect on and self-assess their own writing. Rozema (2005) emphasizes that the best way to align blogging with process pedagogy is to use it early in the writing process, when getting ideas down and receiving content-oriented feedback from peers and the teacher is highly valuable.

- **Drawing:** Many elementary students must draw before they can write (Tompkins, 2009). If this is the case with your younger students, they can pre-blog by drawing their ideas on paper. Then, they can scan or take a digital photo of the finished picture to be uploaded to the blog. Another option would be to use an online drawing program such as KidPix Deluxe II, Crayola Art Studio, or Tux Paint (Maloy, Verock-O’Loughlin, Edwards, & Woolf, 2010). Using an online drawing program may be new to you, but once you learn how to use one and teach your students how to do so (with the help of the technology teacher), they will be able to gather or organize their ideas in a way that is meaningful and real to them. Moreover, the blogging forum will allow them to publish and share their works with the teacher, peers, and the general public (Rozema, 2005).

- **Video or Audio Postings:** To further meet the needs of 21st century students, a teacher could ask the students to use the Internet to search for online videos or audio podcasts relating to the topic and post them on the blog. Or, the students could create their own videos or podcasts as they prepare to write. By finding, viewing, and posting online media, these writers are preparing for writing using new literacies.
Pre-Blogging in the Classroom

Recently, fourth-grade teacher Mr. Larson started working on a unit plan for Beverly Cleary’s book, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. Based on previous traditional tries with prewriting (KWL charts, outlines), Mr. Larson feared that his class would be unmotivated to prewrite during this unit. Hence, Mr. Larson decided he needed to use a 21st century literacy skill to increase student motivation.

Last year, Mr. Larson started a class blog. He found that it started as a way for him to communicate with parents. Once the students started reading it, they wanted to blog. So, he decided to add it into his teaching. Now, he has started using it to get them brainstorming before they write. They use images, KidPix drawings, words, or even videos to prepare for writing. Then, he provides comments and they revise in their next blog entry. Mr. Larson has found that if you explain what you expect from using a blog, the students will give it to you.

As Mr. Larson began his first writing lesson based on *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, he announced, “Today, you will be going to the computer lab, logging into your blogs, and prewriting for your next essay. Instructions are posted on my blog.” He heard cheers. Yes, cheers.

One student even said, “I can’t wait to get started!”

As he smiled Mr. Larson thought, “Wow. This is really working.” Give it a try, and you will be smiling, too.

References


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**Literature Cited**
