



## Weblogs in Education

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### Introduction

This paper provides an overview of weblogs. The first section presents some definitions and key features of weblogs and the ease of creating and maintaining weblogs. The second section presents the potential of using blogs for educational purpose, as well as some issues and concerns.

### *The definition of blogs*

Jorn Barger coined the term “weblog” in 1997 (Blood, 2000). A weblog is essentially a web page ‘logging’ hyperlinks to websites which a web-surfer finds interesting. The term weblog was later truncated to “blog” (Merholz, 2002). The terms Weblogs, or *blogs*, are currently used to refer to online journals (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). The *Blog Herald* reported that over 60 million blogs existed worldwide in May 2005.

### *Key features of blogs*

A defining feature of a blog is the order in which posts are arranged on the site. A blog is primarily a website that is frequently updated with new posts. The posts are arranged in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entry at the top of the blog (Paquet, 2003; Ward, 2004). In addition to this feature, Paquet (2003) described four other characteristics of a blog: personal editorship; hyperlinked post structure<sup>1</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> The posts are typically short and feature hypertext links to other Internet sites. This distinguishes blogs from a simple online personal diary that recounts personal experiences and thoughts.

archival features and free, public access to the content.

Personal authoring of blog posts often utilises text, hyperlinks, pictures and graphics. With the availability of high bandwidth and storage space, blogs may also be populated with posts containing video clips and audio clips. Some blog owners may improve the interactivity of their blogs by utilising the *comment* feature. The *comment* feature allows readers to respond to a post by leaving their comments and opinions on the post. If the ‘*trackback*’<sup>2</sup> function is available, it allows a reader to comment on the post in his/her own blog, while notifying the blog owner and providing access to the reader’s comments.

Blogs have very strong archival features. Within blogs, posts are automatically archived and the archived content is searchable and retrievable through the input of keywords using the search function. In the blogosphere, Rich Site Summary (RSS, also known as *Really Simple Syndication*) feed is another feature available in many blog engines. With a RSS aggregator (e.g. *Bloglines* from <http://www.bloglines.com>), readers of a blog can subscribe to the feeds to keep track of new posts in the blog. With RSS, one can obtain updates in multiple blogs without actually visiting the blogs through a web browser. Figure 1 below is a screenshot showing some common features of a blog.

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<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, *TrackBack* was designed to provide a method of notification between websites: it is a means by which person A says to person B, "This is something you may be interested in." To do that, person A sends a *TrackBack* ping to person B. (adapted from <http://www.movabletype.org/trackback/beginners/>)

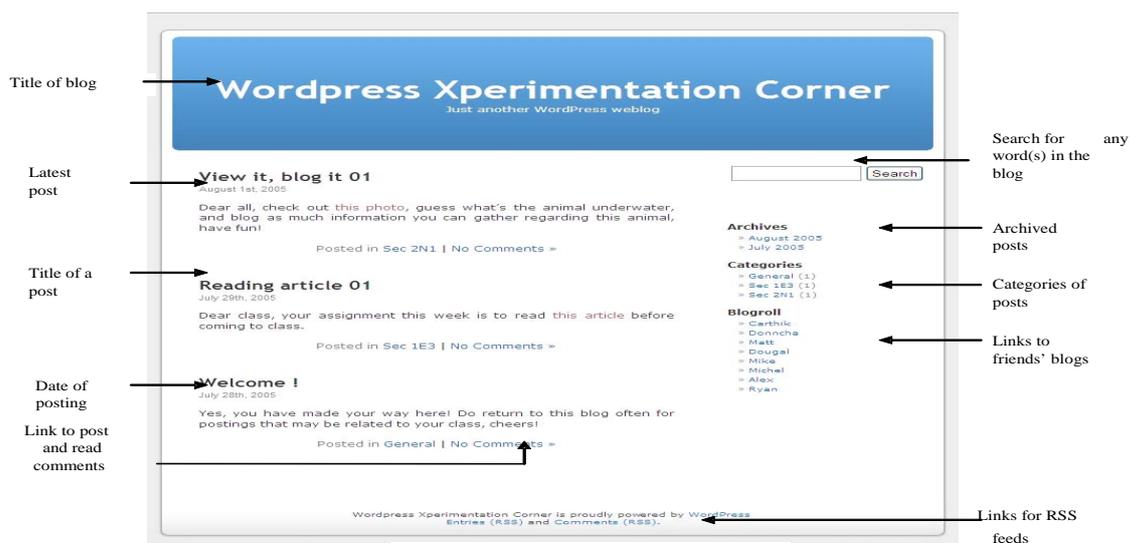


Figure 1. Basic features of a blog

### ***The ease of creating and maintaining a blog***

A blog can be created with 3 or fewer steps in less than 10 minutes. The practice is similar to composing an email. Updating a blog with new posts requires only a few mouse clicks. Owning a blog is made possible with the availability of free or inexpensive weblogging services, such as Pitas, Livejournal and Pyra Labs' Blogger.com. These easy-to-use services have resulted in the fast and astounding growth in the number of blogs (Paquet, 2003).

After a blogger has updated his/her blog, the blogging platform automatically archives posts and replaces them with the latest content on the front page. This is done without the need for any user intervention.

### **The Potential of Blogs for Teaching & Learning**

This section presents the theoretical underpinnings for using blogs for teaching and learning. Some promising results of the use of blogs are highlighted to illustrate the educational benefits that could be brought about by blogging.

#### ***Rationale for using blogs in education***

Much of the pedagogic use of blogging is grounded in Vygotsky's theory (Ferdig, 2004). Through social interactions mediated by language (but not restricted to language), edublogs<sup>3</sup> offer students the opportunity to surface their ideas in a social plane. The ability to comment on these ideas enables individuals to participate in social construction of knowledge and meaning making. Scaffolding of the meaning making process carried out through

<sup>3</sup> An edublog is a blog used for educational purposes. (adapted from the Wikipedia)



commenting can further enhance learning (*find out more about scaffolding in the “Issues and Concerns” section*). Blogging then supports the internalisation of knowledge by allowing students to look back at their archived posts and reflect on what they have written and the comments provided by their peers or teacher.

### ***Benefits of using of blogs for teaching and learning***

Figure 2 below illustrates the potential of blogs:

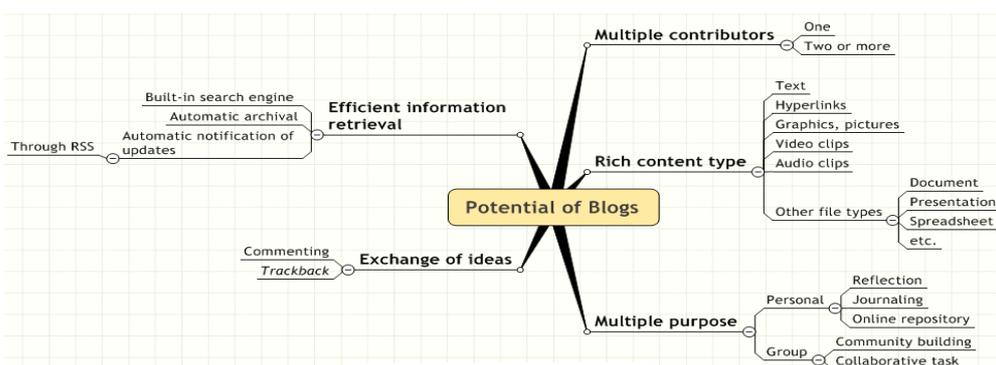


Figure 2. Potential of blogs

The literature suggests that blogging can be used to positively enhance the teaching and learning of language and music. Kennedy (2003) reported on the integration of blogs into English classes in secondary schools and stated that ‘web publication gives students a real audience to write to and, when optimised, a collaborative environment where they can give and receive feedback, mirroring the way professional writers use a workshop environment to hone their craft’ (as cited in Barlett-Bragg, 2003).

Ward (2004) encouraged his English writing class students to blog and his post-course survey confirmed that his students enjoyed the experience though they had no prior web design

experience. His students’ English language showed improvements and they were more careful in their writing as a larger audience (inclusive of peers) could view and read their work.

In the teaching of Chinese language, Tan, Teo, Aw & Lim (2004) experimented with blogs for the building of student reading portfolios.

Students were asked to post and exchange ideas and reflections on their readings through their personal blogs; these reflections collectively formed a reading portfolio over time. Findings from the post-project survey indicated that students felt their writing improved as blogs allowed them to view how others wrote. The students felt encouraged when they saw the positive comments that were given to their posts. In addition, they discovered that their proficiencies in *Hanyu Pinyin*<sup>4</sup> had improved as a result of inputting Chinese characters using it.

<sup>4</sup> *Hanyu Pinyin* (汉语拼音) is a system of romanisation (phonemic notation and transcription to Roman script) for Standard Mandarin. *Hanyu Pinyin* is also one of the



Chong & Soo (2005) examined the pedagogical efficacies of blogs in undergraduate music education. They found out that blogging allowed learning to extend beyond the classroom and students were encouraged to engage in critical reflection. As evident in the students' posts, blogging also facilitated the exchange of ideas between peers and the process of students analysing their peers' posts.

### Helpful Pointers to Facilitate Planning For the Use of Edublogs

The following list of ideas is adapted from Davis's post on how edublogs can be used (Davis, 2004).

#### 1. You might like to create a reflective, journal type blog to...

- reflect on your teaching experiences that may include:
  - description of what worked for you in the classroom or what didn't work.
  - something you learned from another teacher.
  - teaching insights you gained from what happened in your classes.
  - exploration of important teaching and learning issues.
- share ideas and resources for teaching activities.

#### 2. You might like to start a class blog to...

- provide online readings for your students to read and respond to.
- gather and organise Internet resources for a specific course, providing links to

method used to input Chinese language characters into the computer. (adapted from the *Wikipedia*)

appropriate sites and annotating the links to highlight their relevance.

- post instructions for assignments such as prompts for writing.
- showcase students' work such as art, poetry, and creative stories.
- post photos and comment on class activities.
- communicate with parents.
- link your class with another class somewhere else in the world.

#### 3. You can have your students create their own weblogs to...

- create an ongoing portfolio of samples of their writing.
- write comments, opinions, or questions on daily news items or issues of interest.
- discuss activities they did in class and tell what they think about these activities
- showcase their best writing pieces.

#### 4. You can also ask your class to create a shared weblog to...

- carry out project work in small groups
- showcase products of project-based learning.
- document their progress, findings and answers as they embark on a project, such as *WebQuest*<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1. Ways to use weblogs in education**

Section 1 of Table 1 describes what a teacher could blog about in his/her professional capacity. This could form part of his/her professional

<sup>5</sup> A *WebQuest* is an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web. (adapted from <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/>)



development as the same issue may pose a different meaning at different stages, as a teacher grows with experience. Other teachers reading the blogs can provide insights or tips by providing comments, hopefully creating an informal community.

Sections 2 to 4 describe ways to engage students as bloggers, either to blog individually or to maintain a task specific group blog. The above list is neither subject specific nor exhaustive, hence more ideas can be generated to suit teachers' teaching and learning context.

### **Some Issues and Concerns on the Use of Blogs for Teaching & Learning**

In this section, we will examine some issues and concerns pertinent to the use of edublogs in Singapore's context.

#### ***Inputting of Chinese and Tamil language***

For Chinese and Tamil Language teachers, a potential issue that might affect the implementation of edublogs is students' access to computers that are capable of inputting and displaying Chinese and Tamil characters. The availability of Microsoft Windows XP has resolved the need to purchase and install additional software to input Chinese and Tamil. The built-in Window Input Method Editor (IME) allows the input of many languages, including Chinese and Tamil. However, many of the computers at home may not have the IME activated. As such, teachers may need to advise students on the activation steps<sup>6</sup>.

#### ***Scaffolding of learning tasks***

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<sup>6</sup> A version of a step-by-step guide can be downloaded from [http://edublog.net/files/winime\\_howto.zip](http://edublog.net/files/winime_howto.zip)

Blogs serve as another information technology tool that enables learning. However, learning will only be effective if the students are given instructions on how to create a good post, what information to include in a good post, how to give feedback and respond to a feedback given to a post, and so on. These instructions are also known as educational scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976, cited in Wikipedia). Educational scaffolding may include instructions and guidelines for tasks, problem-solving approaches and work routines. Suggestions put forward by students on their blogging experience also indicated guidance on tasks could help in forming their thoughts (Luca & McLoughlin, 2005).

#### ***Plagiarism***

Copying others' work and turning it into one's own is not new, and the openness of the Internet has made retrieval of solutions and answers a breeze for students (Suarez & Martin, 2001). The problem of plagiarism could possibly plague blog entries. However, Oravec (2003) argued that the availability of blogs to the wider Internet audience could well work against the problem. Students will be able to view each other's work in the individual blogs, and each student can act as an extra pair of eyes to prevent one another from conveniently copying others' work. Peer pressure may help to reduce the likelihood of plagiarism, as one would not want to copy and be faulted by his peers.

#### ***Legal liabilities – copyright, defamation, racism***

Teachers may also have to educate students on the legal liabilities for publishing content online. One age-old concern is the infringement of copyrights. In their posts, students may attach pictures, audio files or any other files which may be copyrighted. They can begin their journey of



respecting others' intellectual properties by seeking permission from the copyright owners before they post any such materials in their blogs.

Blogging is a means of expressing one's feelings and emotions but students should also be taught to express themselves responsibly. They should not post information that is hearsay or will hurt others' feeling. This may result in the act of defamation, where someone's reputation is adversely affected.

In our multi-racial society, students should also cultivate their respect for other races when they blog. They should not post any racist remark that demonstrates discrimination or prejudice against the other ethnic groups.

Anyone who violates the copyright acts or is found guilty of defamation or racism is liable to have legal actions taken against them.

### **Conclusion**

Blogs in education is relatively new in the Singapore context. In the wider social context, blogging has already been readily embraced by the young in Singapore. This phenomena affords educators an opportunity to transfer the ownership (both of the blog and of learning) to students by leveraging the many features of blogs. Teachers should examine their existing processes, and consider how blogs can replace some of their existing practices. The benefits of edublogs can be fully realised only when it is integrated into the teaching and learning practices of the education community.



### Annex A: List of edublogs references/resources websites

1	weblog-ed – the read/write web in the classroom URL: <a href="http://www.weblogg-ed.com">http://www.weblogg-ed.com</a>
2.	EduBlog Insights - Comments, Reflections and Occasional Brainstorms URL: <a href="http://anne.teachesme.com/">http://anne.teachesme.com/</a>
3.	EduBlog.NET - converging edublogs from a singaporean perspective URL: <a href="http://edublog.net">http://edublog.net</a>

### Annex B: List of freely available blog creation/hosting sites

1	Blogger URL: <a href="http://www.blogger.com">http://www.blogger.com</a>
2.	LiveJournal URL: <a href="http://www.livejournal.com/">http://www.livejournal.com/</a>
3.	MSN Spaces URL: <a href="http://spaces.msn.com">http://spaces.msn.com</a>

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