

Build a bigger audience

John Sutton looks at how to improve children's writing by making sure that someone other than the teacher reads and comments on their work...

As a full time teacher I used to go on more than a few literacy courses designed to improve my skills in getting the children to write creatively. On every course that I can remember the tutor would spend a great deal of time stressing the importance of "audience and purpose". I would then attempt to translate this idea into the stories the children wrote in their books. Therein lies the problem: the children were a lot smarter than me. They realised that the audience for their efforts was one, i.e. me, and that was if I was on top of the marking! Small wonder that many of the children in my care didn't always try their hardest in writing. And I don't think it was just me;

more time and money seems to have been spent on trying to improve children's writing than any other area of the curriculum (possibly excepting reading) and we are awash with schemes, techniques and ideas for doing just this.

Professor John Hattie of Auckland University did some research on the interventions in a classroom that made the biggest difference to children, and he found that the single biggest factor was positive feedback. The trouble is, as a busy classroom teacher sharing your feedback with 30 individuals can mean that many get very few positive strokes during a lesson (and for feedback to be useful it has to be much more than just a "Well done", it needs a "Move me on" element). This is one of the main reasons why blogging has





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been so successful in primary schools in particular. The exposure of children's writing to an audience provides them with many more opportunities to garner positive and critical feedback and to engage on a global scale.

Recently I was lucky to share a platform at a conference with a group of children talking about the impact of blogging on their lives (let alone learning!) and the common thread throughout their talks was the importance of receiving comments from around the world. Not only was it "cool", but it helped them with their learning, too. Speaking to them afterwards, I was trying to understand why receiving a comment from a teacher or child in Australia was more significant than receiving a positive comment from their teacher. Tellingly, one said that although they liked receiving comments from their teacher, they knew him too well and they knew what he would say in advance about their writing, whereas a comment from afar often gave them a new perspective, idea or direction. I am sure there is a research study to be done on this.

Building a critical audience

The barrier to get children blogging is extraordinarily low, and the technology is extremely



simple to use so there is very little reason why you shouldn't give blogging a try. But there is a lot more to it than simply logging in, publishing a story and having done. Successful blog projects always work on building audiences for their school blogs. What's really important though, is not just to think in terms of audience numbers. Lots of red dots on a visitor map is indeed motivation enough for some children to try much harder in their writing, but for many, it's the receiving of critical praise from that audience that makes the difference and spurs them on to writing at a much higher standard. Luckily, there are some simple techniques and tools that you can use to help you achieve this.

Do as you would be done by

The simplest way to start building a critical audience for your blog is to visit lots of other schools' blogs and leave comments on their work. This is almost as important a task as publishing your own work. The informal networking that commenting critically on other children's blogs affords is a crucial element of blogging. Always remember that a blog post is a two way street; the reaction of your audience in many ways is as important as the original blog post itself. Every time you leave a positive comment on someone's blog there is an extremely good chance they will reciprocate. So, try and build a visit to a class blog into your weekly routine and

Get connected

USEFUL LINKS FOR GETTING YOUR CLASS BLOG OFF THE GROUND...

> bradfordschools.net/bmobile

Click on "Sprogs with blogs" to hear the children of Heathfield Primary talking about blogging.

> quadblogging.net

A free service for schools to find partners for blog projects across the globe.

> blogthenews.net

A website dedicated to publishing the best of educational blogging.

> twitterfeed.com

A tool that automatically sends tweets and notifications to your Facebook page every time you publish something on your blog.

> twitter.com/blackfieldprim

Bloggers from Hampshire.

> twitter.com/theheadsoffice

Julia Skinner on Twitter.

model leaving positive comments. Every comment that you write should include a "Have you thought about this?" or "Could you think of a better choice of word?" type of statement. Using the 'Two stars and a wish' model can work well for children, i.e. two things I like about this post and one thing I'd like you to improve. In addition, make sure you build up a list of links to school blogs in the sidebar of your blog so that the children in your class can visit other class blogs independently.

Quadblogging

Started by David Mitchell, deputy headteacher at Heathfield Primary in Bolton, quadblogging takes the idea of visiting class blogs a step further by organising schools into groups of four and then focusing on each school in the quad in turn to peer review the work that the school has published on their blog. Sign up for free at Quadblogging.net and you might well be partnered with



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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schools from Australia, the United States or somewhere else entirely.

Blogthenews

Blogthenews takes a slightly different approach to building an audience, but is again rooted in peer feedback. It relies upon each member school taking a critical look at their own work and making editorial decisions as to which is the best piece for sharing with a wider audience. Once the editorial group (could be a class, a club or a group working in rotation) has made a decision as to which piece of writing they wish to share via the Blogthenews.net website, they need to edit that piece to make it suitable for a wider audience. For example, they might need to write an opening paragraph contextualising the work and

then go on to edit the body of the text for grammar and style. Once they've edited the chosen piece they simply "tag" the writing "blogthenews" and the Blogthenews website will find the work and autoblog it on the Blogthenews.net (provided, of course, that you have signed up – again, it's free). Overtime, it's intended that the site becomes a showcase for the best of children's blogging around the world.

#Comments4kids

It's almost impossible to write an article about the internet these days without mentioning Twitter. The simple fact is that Twitter is an invaluable tool for spreading the word about your school's blog and its blogging activities. By using an autotweet

tool such as Twitterfeed.com, you don't even have to do any work. Once you have registered your class blog and Twitter ID with [Twitterfeed](http://Twitterfeed.com), every time someone publishes something on your blog a tweet is sent out containing a link to the blog post. A good example of a school doing just this is [Blackfield Primary School in Hampshire \(@blackfieldprim on Twitter\)](http://Blackfield Primary School in Hampshire (@blackfieldprim on Twitter)). You can also use the Twitter account to ask for comments on specific posts, engage in online collaborative projects and so on. This can be made much more powerful and given a much wider reach by adding #classblogs and #comments4kids to your tweets. These are known as "hashtags" in Twitter parlance and because they are widely used by teachers to label their tweets about their class blogs and requests for comments, they can be used as search terms meaning that the addition of these hashtags to your own tweets will give them a much broader audience.

Hopefully by now it's clear that to engage children and to move them on in their learning then comments on blog posts can be hugely important, but they need to go beyond the simple flattery. Children need to comment critically as well as positively. It takes patience and a lot of modelling to achieve this, but the benefits to your young writers can be immense.

Critical friends

An extremely powerful way of getting children to understand they have a responsibility to their audience is to find a member of that audience to act as a "critical friend" to your bloggers. This picks up on the work of Professor Sugata Mitra and his "granny cloud" idea, whereby a group of UK based grandmothers log on each week and mentor schoolchildren in India via Skype. You can achieve something similar by getting someone to comment critically on a regular basis on your blogs. This has been done to great effect by Julia Skinner (@theheadsoffice on Twitter) - a retired teacher whose enthusiasm for her role as a critical friend to young bloggers is starting to be picked up by others.