

tell the world

Are you making the most of your class blog? John Sutton shows how this simple online tool can become central to your literacy lessons...



Every morning, one of the first tasks for Y2 children at Chorlton Park Primary School is to check their class blog. Who has visited their site? Which part of the world do they come from? Did they leave a comment? Have they got a blog we can visit in turn?

Over the last 18 months, nearly 23,000 visitors have read something on Year 2's blog. This has had two profound effects on the class. Firstly, and most importantly, they know that whenever they write something on their blog, someone other than their teacher is going to read it. They have an audience. Secondly, through the simple expedient of having a map that uses red dots to plot the location of each visitor, the children's knowledge of world geography is far beyond that of most seven year olds. They look at the dots, identify the countries marked, and examine any blank spaces on the map to see if they can encourage people from that part of the world to visit. Their audience is global, and they are not fazed by this.

Digital literacy is something people have spent their entire academic lives trying to clarify. And indeed, some refuse to recognise that it is different from "analogue" literacy; are the skills needed to interpret a web page really any different to those needed to navigate through a non-fiction book? I would argue there are specific conventions and skills used on the web that need teaching, but these in themselves wouldn't necessarily represent a separate "digital literacy". However, there are factors around the safeguarding of children that need specific recognition. For example, children may respond very differently to an anonymous stranger they meet in the street as compared to someone anonymous they meet online. Children need to be taught the skills to recognise such situations and to respond

appropriately. So, for my purpose here I will define digital literacy as the skills people need in order to create, communicate, interpret, evaluate, classify, manipulate and share digital content, whether online or simply on a device (PC, laptop, mobile phone etc.).

I hope we can take it that these are fundamental skills which the children we teach are going to need for a successful future in the world of higher education, work, and even social life.

Safety nets

As the issues surrounding e-safety move ever higher up the educational agenda, it's imperative teachers realise these skills are an essential part of a child's experience. They not only allow pupils to make the most of the internet as a learning resource, but also to deal with the negative side of the web whenever they come across it.

It is no longer tenable to take the view that we can rely on filters to protect us from unsavoury content. We will be doing our children a great disservice if we neglect to equip them with the skills they need to navigate the online world safely; just as if we neglected to teach them how to cross the road.

Over the last five years, the development of a class blog has been central to my teaching, and I

find blogs have been an invaluable tool in addressing the aspects of digital literacy that I've highlighted. Here's why:

1 A creative tool for sharing

The class blogs I have collaborated on are intended to act as a digital showcase for the work we undertake in class. This might simply be a poem that a child has written, or a story. Equally, it could be a PowerPoint uploaded to Slideshare and embedded in the blog.

For a Victorian topic, the class all contributed to a digital timeline which included images, links and even video. In a local studies topic, we plotted the location of fast food restaurants in the surrounding area on to a map, classified them according to the type of food they sold and reviewed them. In both cases, the resulting resources were published on the

class blog. In other words, we have been using blogs as a creative tool both directly - by publishing our writing - and indirectly; by sharing the work we have produced using other tools, such as video or sound editing packages.

There are thousands of free tools available that will allow you to publish and share resources online. For a few simple examples that I've used extensively, try the tips in the 'resource box' panel below.

"with patience and perseverance children can be taught valuable peer review techniques to help budding writers edit and improve their work"



Resource box

SIMPLE ONLINE TOOLS TO TRY ALONGSIDE YOUR CLASS BLOG...

<http://photopeach.com>
Make a quiz from images using Photopeach

<http://umapper.com>
Plot your school trip on a map using Umapper

<http://www.dipity.com>
Make a timeline with Dipity

<http://slideshare.net>
Upload and share your PowerPoints with Slideshare

<http://www.voki.com>
Use a Voki to recite a poem or count in a foreign language

<http://delicious.com>
Use Delicious to collect and tag bookmarks for your class



2 Communicating and evaluating

One great feature that distinguishes a blog from most websites is the option for visitors to leave a comment expressing their thoughts, rather than simply acting as a passive consumer. In other words, those who choose to comment on a blog add to the overall value of the work.

For example, I once wrote a piece on my blog about Acceptable Use Policies in school which, although I felt was well written and considered, was made infinitely more valuable by the contributions of one or two commenters who took the time to add their wisdom.

Teaching children to contribute in this positive way is quite a skill. Many will not move beyond simple qualitative judgements such as "I like your poem". However, with patience and perseverance children can be taught valuable peer review techniques to help budding writers edit and improve their work.

Remembering the example of Y2 at Chorlton Park is always worthwhile. They have spent quite a bit of time visiting blogs produced by schools from around the world, cultivating an audience. It is this audience that motivates children to evaluate, edit and improve their work as they know their story or poem will be read by people from all over the globe.

Draw a Crowd

HOW TO BUILD AN AUDIENCE...

Don't expect hundreds of visitors in your first week. Building an audience takes a little time and effort, but these simple tips will help to speed up the process...

1. TRACK YOUR VISITORS

Add a Clustmap to your blog and track the red dots with your class

2. POST REGULARLY

You need to give reasons for visitors to keep coming back. A dormant blog rapidly disappears off search engine results

3. PUBLICISE YOUR BLOG LOCALLY

Use the school newsletter and any other local means to highlight your school blog project. Word will soon spread to relatives and friends far and wide

4. FIND PARTNERS

Make it a feature of your week to visit a couple of new school blogs with your class and leave a comment or two inviting them back to your blog. Put links to schools whose blogs you regularly visit in the sidebar of your blog.

5. USE YOUR NETWORK

Some teachers have begun very successfully to use Twitter to promote their class blog to their network. I requested comments on a local studies project recently and got ten top quality comments from teachers all over the world.

3 Classifying content

As the volume of information stored on the web increases at a dizzying rate, so does the need to classify this information in order to make it accessible. Tagging is a skill that is often ignored by class bloggers, but shouldn't be overlooked.

Tags are simply labels generated by the writer in order to classify data. For example, all blog posts containing poems might be tagged "literacy", "poetry", "haiku", "narrative poem", "sonnet" etc. There is no rigid structure, and new tags can be added as and when they are required.

In one project the children had to research websites about the Blitz in Manchester. The collected websites were bookmarked using Delicious (delicious.com) and the children tagged the sites according to their subject. The resulting tags were displayed on their class blog as a "tag cloud".

On a simple level, I get children to tag every piece of writing they do on a blog with their first name. This means that by simply clicking on their name tag they can find all the posts they have contributed to their class blog over the year.

4 A metaphor for the online world

Using the class blog children can enter into conversations with people from all over the world, share the resources they have created or found, link to others, and tag their own contributions in any way that suits them. This is all done in an environment that is led (gently I hope) by the teacher who moderates and encourages along the way. It's not a simulation of the internet, as so many e-safety resources are, but rather a safe, practical and real world experience that's incredibly motivating.

The children from Y2 know that someone from Papua New Guinea has visited their blog, but nobody from Mongolia has, and they want to know why.

Tips on commenting

Dis is da best blog in da world, eva!!!!!!

Decide from the outset what is acceptable and what's not. Here are six reasons why I delete comments when moderating class blogs:

The comment...

- is, or could be, construed as offensive or rude
- contains random collections of letters or excessive punctuation
- is negative about a post or person
- contains excessive amounts of txt spk
- doesn't relate to the post concerned
- contains a link to a site that the children have no need to visit

In the early days of any class blog project you'll get examples of all of these. Don't be afraid to moderate comments with your whole class on the whiteboard (providing you've checked them in advance for inappropriate language). That way your class will understand how your rules work in practice.

