

Why boys love to blog

At **David Mitchell's** school, male pupils can't get enough of writing. So what's been the key to closing the gender gap in literacy?

What is it? What's the problem with boys and writing? Ask any primary headteacher about the areas of learning they would most like to develop at their school and I can guarantee boys' writing will be in the top three. It's such a pervasive problem that when I tell you boys at Heathfield Community Primary School are writeaholics, you may well be surprised. Which begs the question, what's been going on at Heathfield? What's made writing so cool? In one word: blogging.

But before you flick over the page saying, "Blogging has been around for years. Catch up with the rest of us, Mitchell!" hear me out. We all know that boys need instant rewards that change regularly, and an element of competition, to fully engage. Well, blogging provides a platform for boys to take risks, get instant rewards and compete! And you're right, blogging has been around for years, but the Web 2.0 tools available to use within a blog are developing each week. As such, blogging offers schools and pupils a way to reach a real audience that is global, search engine friendly and, most of all, safe.

Our Y6 class blog has been live since September, during which time it has received 100,000 hits from 99 countries and 2500 well-structured comments, and the pupils have made nearly 1000 posts in total. If you put the following factors together – engaging with a real audience, rising Google rankings and instant feedback from all over the world – you begin to appreciate what all the fuss is about. It's not just the boys either; the girls are revelling in the competition too.

How to build an audience

Now, this success didn't happen overnight. Blogging is notoriously slow to start. Building an audience for your pupils is not easy and takes time. At Heathfield, we set about this process with purpose and a plan. We showed the pupils a WAGOLL (What A Good One Looks Like) and spent time in lessons visiting blogs that had been recommended by our blog provider (creativeblogs.net). Children were encouraged to read blog posts by pupils of a similar age and leave positive feedback. As a result, they came to





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understand what a good blog looked like, what made a good post and what constituted a constructive comment.

The Y6 blog was launched on 17th December 2009 and, initially, only a minority of pupils posted comments. However, sometimes you need a little bit of luck and on January 4th 2011 my ship came in. It snowed, heavily, and the school was closed from Tuesday to Friday. If I recall correctly, most schools in the North of England were closed and the media was criticising teachers for their apparent lack of commitment. I was getting increasingly frustrated by the coverage and so decided to use my ever-growing Twitter network to discuss how I might use the class blog to communicate with pupils and hold a virtual lesson.

On the Tuesday evening, I found a Web 2.0 resource called Coveritlive and quickly realised its potential. I texted the pupils' parents that evening, promising them there would be a lesson the following morning. Looking back, I had no idea how Coveritlive worked and had no idea what I would be doing with the pupils!

I have to admit that playing around with Coveritlive was a real pleasure. The resource allows you to share videos, audio, links, pictures and conduct live polls within a blog, and I used it to set up a range of activities. Pupils had to describe a short video of a 'winter wonderland', measure the depth of snow in their back garden and report their findings by taking part in a poll. As the data came in, we were able to discuss the poll results as they changed before our eyes. Judging by the requests for more of the same, the lesson was a huge success. I was amazed by the power I had at my fingertips.

Measurable improvements

I can't stress the significance of these early events enough. *The Times Educational Supplement* ran a story about the school being open 'virtually'. One of the pupils was featured

at home working on the blog, as was I. This added to the cool factor of blogging. When we gathered back in school the next week some of the biggest personalities in the class were engaged. This was a key moment; having these pupils switched on to blogging caused many of the others to follow.

Within three months, our first Y6 Blog had thousands of hits and many pupils had individual success stories. Those pupils left Heathfield with the best writing results we had ever achieved. Level 5 results in writing shot from 9% in 2009 to 63% in 2010. Those same pupils making an average of 6.6 points progress per child in 12 months.

Global education

Our current Y6 class now has a large group of boys that are enthused and engaged with their learning. Their journey with blogging began in June 2010 when Heathfield joined a project called Blog the World Cup: 32 blogs on one website – one for every competing nation – with each blog managed by a class or school. We blogged all about Germany (germany.blogtheworldcup.net), commenting on the country's population, their football team, the players, match reports and match statistics. The response was fantastic and we even had two wonderful comments from the German ambassador to the UK. All in all, the four week project involved 120 countries, received 25,000 hits and helped pupils become familiar with Web 2.0 tools such as Coveritlive, Voicethread, PrimaryPad, Animoto, Photopeach and Audioboo. Best of all it made pupils want to write.

Our latest predictions indicate that we should receive around 500,000 hits by the end of the year. In this world of celebrity, Heathfield pupils are becoming little celebrities themselves. They have presented a seminar at the BETT Show and have three more conferences lined up over the next four months. Binyameen and Raja were actually stopped by teachers at BETT. Yes,

they have fans! As a teacher, this brings a whole new meaning to the phrase 'consider your audience'. Heathfield pupils really do consider their audience and they do this each day and night. Our teachers deliver sensational lessons in which the pupils analyse writing, plan writing, write, and evaluate what they have written. Then they blog!

Blogging is now a big part of the culture at Heathfield and our boys are thriving. The key to it all is that blogging allows pupils access to a safe, real, global and relevant audience that never sleeps.



Switch on

TAKE A CREATIVE APPROACH TO ICT IN YOUR SCHOOL...

Schools looking for a more engaging way to teach the curriculum through technology should investigate Rising Stars' *Switched on ICT*. The scheme has been written by some of the most exciting ICT experts working in primary education (Miles Berry, Dave Smith and Tom Barrett to name a few) and provides detailed, easy to follow guidance on how to plan, carry out and assess creative projects.

Many of the ideas can be carried out using free software – or software schools already own – and the entire resource is underpinned by a clear assessment structure. Topics include producing a wiki, creating geo-trails and opinion polling. Contact Rising Stars, risingstars-uk.com, 0800 091 1602.