

Can Blogging Be An Effective Tool In Our Classrooms?

It took me awhile to figure out how I would write this paper and the breadth and depth it would cover, but as I started to write and reflect upon this experience I found that it would be best to take a few main ideas and expand upon them in more detail. For me, the blogging journal was like any other classic experiment, it ended up creating way more questions than there were answers to.

Having said that, I listed below some of those questions that have been nagging me these past few weeks and that I feel should be addressed. Because teachers can be verbose, resulting in their writing taking their readers on a journey they wished they had never started, I plan to be succinct and to the point, so that the reader can look upon this as an enjoyable experience. Fasten your seat belts, because here we go...

The nagging questions are (envelope please),

- Can blogging be used as a tool in the classroom? How effective would it be?
- Could we as teachers use blogging in order to replace our lack of collaboration time with our colleagues at our school sites?
- Have studies been done to show its effectiveness as a teaching/teacher's tool? If yes, who conducted those studies?
- Have teacher's posted any useful website URLs or curriculum ideas that can be used effectively in the classroom?
- Does it serve a purpose in promoting better teaching through IISME? Is it relevant to IISME's overall mission? Will/has IISME create/d a feedback form or evaluation sheet to assess its usefulness?
- Is this experiment more suited for the non-science teachers? I sense they seem to want/need to see themselves writing/speaking/receiving feedback more often than myself (this one is totally subjective based only upon my last eight weeks and the obvious fact that I am a science teacher).

Could it be used as an effective tool?

I listened to a lot of teachers during the midsummer meeting discussing whether blogging could be used effectively in the classroom and if so, what would be the best approach? Although it was said in different ways, we all seemed to ask how can we use this in our classrooms without making it a logistical nightmare for us. How will we know who is and who isn't doing the task on a consistent basis?

As we talked more and more, many of us came to the conclusion that we would start out small and pick a few kids that would blog for a larger group possibly once a week until the kids got comfortable with it and the bugs were worked out. Then, the

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teacher could monitor it more effectively and expand the program if it was going well. Otherwise, rethink the project and possibly use it in some other capacity.

Whatever happens, I do think there will be a certain group of kids that blogging appeals to, somewhat like the teachers in our test group, it can serve as a hook to get them more focused on doing an assignment and help keep their interest. I don't see it as something one would do everyday for no other reason than not having the computers available, or the time to devote to something that is not a California state standard. Here's a question that I just thought of, do the private school teachers use and explore the use of blogging more than public school teachers, because they have a different set of standards or no standards at all, which gives them more inherent classroom freedom?

Could we use it as a tool for teacher's to collaborate?

Yes, I think blogging could be a very powerful tool to help teachers collaborate with one another on an informal basis. Often at school we receive blanket emails where a teacher will raise an issue that affects only a small group of teachers and has little relevance to the majority of the others. In these cases, I think posting these questions, thoughts, issues or rants as a blog where likeminded (most of the time similar subject) teachers could go would be much more productive, and serve the population that is interested in discussing that topic best.

Moreover, at my district and many others, teachers rarely have time to talk to one another about curriculum development, long range planning, discuss what materials need to be ordered for upcoming projects, and generally reflect upon their lesson taught in an open forum with one another regarding what worked and what didn't. I could see blogging being a way of facilitating this type of open, ongoing communication among teachers. I think it would be a very effective and productive tool if it was used in this manner.

Have educational researchers completed studies showing a positive relationship between blogging and its efficacy in classroom learning?

I did not find an immediate answer to this question, so I really believe it needs to be further researched by an IISME staff member or by a teacher. Maybe it can be hunted down next year, when as I learned from talking to Debra, that IISME plans to have a peer coach oversee the blogging journals. I would recommend starting the search at some of the larger public and private universities' schools of education; oftentimes they have the deep pockets to spend time creating, running and reporting the research. The websites that I did find on the internet gave all kinds of anecdotal evidence for using blogs in the classroom, but I did not find any pure research data showing the benefits of blogging on classroom performance. Sure, kids and teachers like to blog which is fine; however is there any research that supports this endeavor?

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Have teacher's posted any useful websites or curriculum in their blogs?

Yes. During the course of the blogging experiment many teachers have posted useful URLs to help other teachers with their questions. Most of the time the URLs were for something specific like "how do I do such and such in PowerPoint?" or "why do I keep getting the error message when I am in JavaScript," and not germane to teaching in the classroom or curriculum issues, but more focused on the specific project that teacher was doing with their company at the moment. In this capacity, the blogging experiment was hugely successful. It reinforces the reason for the birth of the internet; it is this online community of open sharing of information that makes this such a great tool and I think it should be used to its fullest extent so that teachers can help each other answer questions and solve problems.

Does this serve a purpose in promoting better teaching through IISME? Is this relevant to IISME's overall mission?

I believe this experiment has brought us together as teachers in a way that would not have been achieved otherwise. As the weeks rolled by, I noticed that many of the participants, including myself, were more open to discussing personal issues and sharing our triumphs and our failures that occurred this past year inside and outside the classroom. Whether or not we are better teachers because of this opportunity I don't know. I do know that I am more aware of different teaching styles from reading all the different blogs and I am reminded that teaching is a science and an art and that there is no one best method to teach a child to learn; it is an ongoing journey where one sharpens their skills and hones their craft through trial and error, collaboration, learning from mistakes and failures, and continually taking risks.

I do think tackling something new like this blogging experiment is exactly what IISME should try from time to time. As we all know in order for IISME to grow they have to be bold and try new things, all change and acquisition of new knowledge causes stress and that stressful experience can be looked upon as liberating or confining. It all depends on how the IISME crew wants to deal with it and what type of choices they make with the new information and experience they gather after this summer. I hope they decide to keep the blogging format or some variation of it for those teachers who want this type of high tech and high touch experience.

Is this experiment more suited for non-science teachers?

I mulled this one over for a long time and it is completely subjective, but I am curious how many of the teachers in this first go round of blogging were strictly science or math teachers. My sense is that blogging may suit the type of individual that likes to respond to current topics and issues throughout the hour or even every ten minutes and many times that suits the personality profile of an English/social science/history teacher more than the math or science teacher. I personally don't need or want someone responding to my blog every 20 minutes, because I feel like I have to answer back and that takes me away from the work I am supposed to be doing. However, I am aware that

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there are teachers who love doing this and they feel the need to communicate on any and all topics that are posted. So blogging fits them well and it can be a constructive outlet for them.

For myself, I plan to try a blogging journal with my incoming freshman. I have one class this fall that I will be teaching and even though it has been five years since I have taught the course, I think I can introduce this new topic without much trouble. Truth is, the students will probably be more on top of it and savvy at it, than I. So we will learn from each other and work out the kinks along the way.

Specifically, I thought I would have the students keep a weekly blog journal on current science topics. I would probably pick a current science event or let the class vote on the week's topic and then we would write about it in our journals. Next, I could offer them feedback on their ideas and their grammar. From a hardware point of view, I can do this because we have laptops on carts and the students can check them out for the block so it makes it easy logistically. However, the \$64,000 question is, is this too much micromanaging of students work? That is, am I setting myself up for more work than I can handle? I guess I will have to see how it turns out. Hey, just like a true experiment, I don't know the outcome until I run it.

Carpe diem!