

Blogging for Professional Learning
By Graham Wegner
ICT Coordinator - Lockleys North Primary School
<http://gwegner.edublogs.org>
<http://grahamwegner.wikispaces.com>



I've been teaching for nearly twenty years and one of the most common laments that I've heard over that time in staffrooms and at conferences is, "We never have enough opportunity to talk with other teachers about our work. There are never enough chances for professional dialogue."

But it's time to cast that old chestnut aside because in this amazing online Web 2.0 world, the tools are now available for all educators to participate in and contribute to professional conversations when it suits the individual. Using a humble blog (short for weblog), I have slowly constructed my own Learning Network that allows me access to Professional Learning opportunities across a broad spectrum of education sectors worldwide. All across the world, educators are participating in a global conversation regarding the future of education, whilst making connections with others on topics of mutual interest. Because a blog is an asynchronous tool, as an educator, I can read and contribute to any number of professional conversations in my own time and at my own convenience. The purpose of this article is document my own personal learning journey and provides some self developed guidelines for other educators wishing to pursue this exciting mode of communication, reflection and documentation.

So how does a blog enable this new form of self-directed Professional Learning? A blog is potentially a very person-centred environment where one person (the blogger) posts on issues of their own choosing and readers viewing this content have the opportunity to leave comments. Blogs allow for the embedding of weblinks, insertion of images and the enclosure of audio or video content (like podcasts, screencasts or videocasts) so they don't just cater for people who engage through writing. A great way to get started is through the reading of education related blogs. A year ago, when I stumbled into education focussed blogging,

one of the first blogs I "discovered" was Teach 42 <www.teach42.com>, written by a US teacher named Steve Dembo. This was an amazing experience - I was completely taken by his personal writing style and the way he explored ideas and concepts. Another feature I noticed was the blogroll, a linked list of other edubloggers that the author had identified as personal favourites. Using these links sent me off onto further exploration of more education based blogs - in this way, I then started reading David Warlick <www.davidwarlick.com/2cents/>, an education technology speaker and author and Will Richardson <www.weblogg-ed.com>, a then high school journalism teacher and self-professed weblog evangelist.

My next issue was keeping track of these exciting and informative sources. Using the Web 2.0 technology of RSS (Rich Site Summary or Real Simple Syndication) I started to use a web based service called Bloglines to populate and track the many blogs of interest I was beginning to read. I could have used a desktop program for this purpose (like FeedReader or Abilon) but using Bloglines means I could access my "feeds" on any computer with internet access. The other handy feature I started to use was the Public Bloglines subscriptions of another user where I could find new sources and add them to my own account. Having all of my favourite blogs in one place was a lot more time efficient compared with visiting each site individually and, as Bloglines only shows updated blogs and unread posts, making it a lot easier to track my reading. As I started to read more and more widely I started to notice cross references between blogs, bloggers citing and then reinterpreting others' work and a conversation-like exchange in many of the comments sections. There was a community feel here - bloggers seemed to "know" each other and were able to "point" to various sources of educational expertise. I wanted to be a part of it. The challenge now for me was

how to become fully involved in this new Professional Learning as an active participant and not just as a passive reader.

By now, I had started my own blog using the free Blogger platform. I called it "Teaching Generation Z" with the title influenced by the first education blog I had read and one of the names given to the generation born in this century. My first posts mimicked what I had seen on blogs that I liked and I had identified some topics that I wanted to reflect upon. But would anyone actually read my work? To facilitate this, I started to comment on blogs where I felt I had some new insight to add or some of my expertise to share. Eventually I switched my blog to a new blogging service called Edublogs, a WordPress powered platform created by James Farmer <www.incsb.org> specifically for educators. This was a great move since the WordPress software gave my blog new features not available on Blogger at the time, including Categories that enabled me to "tag" entries for easy retrieval later. So I continued to post at regular intervals, unsure if anyone was reading but using my blog as a place to reflect on my work. What did I post about? My blog was the place to record information about my work, my own ideas about education, notes from training sessions and conferences, projects and initiatives, and responding to

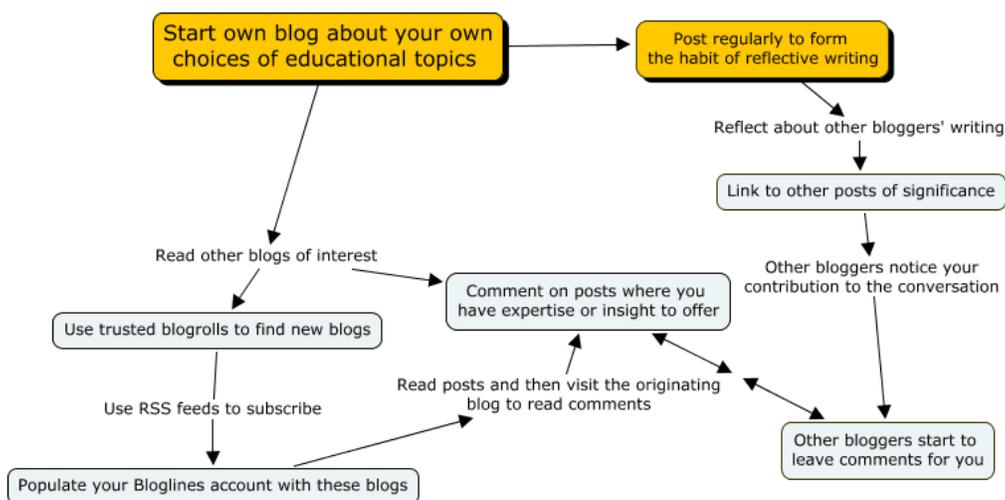
posts from other blogs.

Eventually, other edubloggers started to notice my work - this recognition came in the form of comments. The first comment on my blog came after about three months, from a Melbourne High School English teacher, Jo McLeay

<www.theopenclassroom.blogspot.com> and that was my first indication that another educator was reading. This was very heartening and gave me valuable feedback so I got braver and started to critique and evaluate other bloggers' posts and to comment more widely. Gradually the comments started to appear at more regular intervals and I started to become more and more involved in the Global Conversation. Through these comments I discovered new education focussed blogs, and I regularly received invaluable interaction from blogging educators for whose blogging I had built up a great respect.

Gradually over the space of a year, my Learning Network continued to expand and I learnt from a wide array of educators - classroom teachers, leaders and experts in various educational fields and the visionaries and radical thinkers pushing the boundaries of conventional approaches. Via blogging, I continued to discover many useful cutting edge tools and resources that have been

Establishing Your Own Blogging Network



...and so the cycle continues to build....

invaluable in my classroom and in my role as a Coordinator. I learnt about the learning theory of connectivism, the concept of mLearning (mobile learning), the Creative Commons licensing alternative to copyright and participated in lively debate regarding the future of e-portfolios and Learning Objects. I had become part of the Global Conversation.

Blogging has such great potential as a learning tool for educators. There are many benefits for our students as well, but I strongly believe that as educators, we serve them best if we have a strong working knowledge of these emerging technologies. By that, I don't mean technical expertise because blogs have a relatively low learning curve but a solid grasp of the benefits to be gained. A blog is a really great way of establishing your own online presence, a central point for organising all of your online resources. It is really easy to incorporate links to online bookmarking services like del.icio.us, and to upload documents and other files for quick reference. As I stated earlier in this article, blogging presents an excellent opportunity for professional dialogue on your own choice of topics. It gives a "big picture" perspective that is easy to lose sight of in our daily work and enables you to learn about new technologies, theories and practices as they emerge. Through your own blog, you can find solutions to your own education-based problems while contributing to possible solutions for others. Lifelong learning is enabled and my blog is a multimedia record that I and other educators can refer to. If I get a request from someone about Interactive Whiteboards, I can refer them to my blog where by using the Interactive Whiteboards category link, they can access my twenty or so posts on that topic. Currently, as I conduct my action research project on Teacher E-Portfolios, I can trace the evolution of my thinking over time via the posts under the category of E-Portfolios.

So, I strongly believe there is much to be gained by teachers maintaining their own blog. I believe there is a lot of potential in this incredible tool. The access to professional dialogue on a "just-in-time" basis is unsurpassed and educators involved are finding that they are making better use of their time as blogging enables the sharing of resources and ideas. Teachers involved in blogging are gaining experience in the openness of Web 2.0 tools with their students gaining the benefit of informed, net-savvy teachers who can then model appropriate use for their students' own learning. And as more teachers get on board with their blogs and broaden their professional perspective, the possibility opens up of "grassroots" influence on future directions here in South Australia.

So, in summary, blogging is here to stay as part of the shifting learning landscape. Educators who develop their own blog can become powerful role models for our students in demonstrating best use of this and other emerging technologies. Let's face it - our students are going to use these technologies whether we engage or not. But by utilising blogging as a vehicle for global Professional Learning, I believe teachers can benefit in their knowledge of the requirements for 21st Century learning. I know I have.

