Teacher Tips for Blogging Projects

While classroom blogging projects are becoming increasingly common in schools, they are often short-lived and unsuccessful efforts. This collection of tips and tricks will help to ensure that your blogging efforts can be sustained over the long run:

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Tip	**Rationale**
Start with one classroom blog	One of the first questions that teachers ask when starting classroom blog projects is, "Should I have each student in my class create his or her own blog for expressing thoughts and ideas?"
	The answer is a resounding no! For blogs to survive and thrive, they need to have a constantly updated stream of content—at least 2 or 3 posts per week. Blogs that are not updated on a regular basis lose the attention of readers, who have plenty of other options in today's digital world.
	Because most K12 students will struggle to generate 2 or 3 meaningful posts per week—and because monitoring the content posted on 50+ blogs can be an overwhelming challenge for any teacher—it is best to start any classroom blogging project with one blog that every student in your class or on your academic team can post to.
	While you'll have to work with one username and password—which could lead to inappropriate or unpolished entries being posted by students that you don't completely trust—your chances of generating an audience for your students are far greater when your students are working together to generate content.
Encourage students to become regular readers of blogs	Believing that blogs are ONLY opportunities for students to practice writing skills is a fatal flaw for most classroom blogging projects. Instead of digital soapboxes, teachers and students must begin to see blogs as interactive forums for continuing conversations around topics of interest—and interactive forums require two-way participation.
	That means your students need to become avid readers of blogs, too. Consider organizing a collection of student blogs in a public feed reader that your students can visit during silent reading time or while surfing the web at home.
	Encouraging students to read blogs written by other students serves three primary purposes:
	1. *Students who read blogs see models of writing that can be use as comparisons for their own work.* 2. *Students who read blogs are exposed to ideas for interesting topics that they may want to explore and write about in new entries for your blogging project.* 3. *Students who read blogs connect with potential audiences for their own ideas.*
Teach students to comment on blogs	As your students begin reading blogs written by other writers, you should systematically teach the skills necessary for writing effective blog comments because comments give students opportunities to practice reacting to ideas in writing. What's more, comments left on entries written by other authors can serve as first drafts for future posts on your own classroom's blog. Finally, commenting emphasizes the community nature of blogging and draws reciprocal readers—people interested in looking closer at the ideas expressed by your students—to your classroom's blog.
Promote student blog entries to parents and colleagues	While writing for the Web ensures that your students will eventually have readers from every corner of the globe, the vast majority of your blog's readers—and almost all of your commenters—are going to be the parents of your students, the students in the

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	classrooms of your colleagues, and educators that you have made connections with in faraway locations. Parents, colleagues and students in classrooms just like yours have a stake in the learning that your students are doing online. That's what makes them willing to read what your kids are writing and to stop by to leave a comment every now and then.
	Don't let this discourage you! In fact, work hard to ***promote*** your students' writings with parents and colleagues. Send out links to pieces that you're particularly proud of or that are likely to stimulate exciting conversations. Ask parent volunteers to stop by once a week and leave feedback for the students who have posted new entries.
	Not only do students need to receive feedback in order to remain motivated by your classroom blogging efforts, but feedback from those who matter—moms, dads, teachers and best friends—is often far more meaningful than the occasional comment left by an outsider, regardless of where they are from!
Remind students to respond to commenters.	As your blog begins to draw attention and starts to receive comments from readers, remind your students to respond to each comment directly, either in the comment section of their original entry or in a new post on your blog. By responding directly to readers, your students are showing their audience that they are listening—a key to encouraging return visits!
	More importantly, however, responding to comments allows your students to take advantage of the primary benefit of writing for an audience: The ability to have thinking challenged over-and-over again. Writers who make their core beliefs transparent are often introduced to new perspectives, and responding to those new perspectives—pushing back, refining original positions, articulating misunderstandings—is a critical part of the cycle of true learning.
Emphasize the important role that quality writing plays in successful blogs	Because writing and publishing online is so easy—and because interactions between students in electronic forums are often defined by casual grammar and language use—many students approach blogging with a careless attitude, failing to invest significant time into crafting polished entries. While they crave audience, they misunderstand the message that mistakes send to readers.
	Not only should teachers interested in blogging projects encourage students to work through the steps of the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing) before publishing—just as they would on traditional tasks—they should also reinforce time-and-again that the credibility of writers is dependent solely on the quality of their written work.
	Students ***must*** know that the potential for having influence in online communities exists only when students present ideas in ways that will impress readers.
Consider naming and training student editors	Teachers who are starting classroom blogging projects often enthusiastically jump in with two feet, encouraging classes to churn out dozens of entries, promoting posts with parents and peers, and building new lessons with their blogs in mind.
	Then, they end up buried by entries that are poorly written or by students who need technical help to get new pieces posted online. Eventually, they begin to question whether the time that they are investing in monitoring student work for quality and in facilitating digital novices is really worth it. Enthusiasm is replaced by exhaustion.
	That's why student editors are so important for successful classroom blogging projects. Training a handful—three to five per year—super motivated students to proofread new entries and to support students struggling with technical skills can ensure that teachers don't suffer from "monitoring burnout."

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	Over time, you'll have veteran student editors who take great pride in the blog that your class is producing. Not only will they continue to write for you once they've left your class, they'll serve as competent gatekeepers, polishing entries that aren't quite ready to be published, monitoring comments that are being posted, and generating enthusiasm for the work that you are doing online.
Require that students use pseudonyms while writing	For many schools and districts, the risks involved in introducing students to tools for communicating, collaborating and publishing content online far outweigh the rewards. Frightened by stories of internet predators, restrictions are placed on the kinds of information that students can reveal and the kinds of opportunities that students can be engaged in online.

One step that you can take to keep your students safe—and to comfort district leaders who question your decision to begin a classroom blog—is to teach your students about the importance of remaining confidential online. Resist the urge to include the name of your school or yourself in your blog's title. Refuse to link directly to any sites that readers could connect back to your classroom, and require that students use pseudonyms to sign their writing.

As "cloak-and-dagger" as these efforts at internet safety may seem to you, your students are likely to enjoy them! Pseudonyms and confidentiality allow them to try on different identities and to be judged based on their thoughts instead of their age or their social groups. And the first time that their work is mistaken for that of anyone older than they really are, your students will be electrified! |
| ***Schedule regular readers for videoconference feedback sessions*** | If you carefully cultivate parents, peers and colleagues as regular readers who stop by to comment on the work that your students are publishing online, consider scheduling a videoconference to connect your students to a real member of their audience. By inviting a reader "into" your classroom, you automatically reinforce the idea that student voice really does matter.

Have your digital guest to describe what it is that they like the best about your student blog. Encourage them to share specific entries that they thought highly of and content strands that were motivating. Ask for areas of improvement. Nothing can be more powerful to student writers than hearing from their readers—and hearing from readers is one digital step away! |
| ***Include—and regularly explore—visitor maps and statistics on page views.*** | As motivating as local readers can be for student bloggers, discovering that visitors from all over the world stop by to read their work never fails to amaze tweens and teens. To prove to your students that they are reaching readers in faraway locations, be sure to include a visitor map in the sidebar of your blog.

While there are many services that will track the location of the visitors that land on your site, Cluster Maps (http://www.clustrmaps.com/) is one of the most popular because it highlights each visitor with a red dot on a digital image of the world. Before long, red dots will cover entire continents, reinforcing the idea that your students are being heard!

Cluster Maps also reports the number of page views that your website receives on a regular basis—and can break those page view statistics down by continent. Consider asking students to track this information carefully in their notebooks or on a classroom bulletin board. Watching your readership grow over time will be just as motivating to your students as seeing where their readers are coming from. |