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“MySpace, Your Space, Our Space:
Is the Blogging Atmosphere Right for Schools?”

The Internet has become the new social “hang-out” spot for millions of teenagers. Connecting with friends by chatting online, posting pictures, linking to funny videos, interesting sites or articles, or simply just sharing about their day, are many ways in which teens communicate with their peers. It should come as no surprise then that Weblogs, or “blogs”, as they are more commonly called, have become wildly popular with this tech savvy generation. Blogs are often described as online journals in which people can post their thoughts and feelings about anything that they please. Most blogs also include areas in which users can provide links and pictures, creating an atmosphere in which teens can easily socialize with others. Two extremely well-known sites that provide a place for users to blog are MySpace.com and Facebook.com. MySpace is the 4th most popular English speaking site on the web with an estimated 106 million users (Wikipedia, MySpace). FaceBook boasts over 7.5 million users, with the majority being college aged students (Wikipedia, FaceBook). With numbers like these, it is clear to see that young people are enthusiastic about blogging as a way to create a social network, and many educators have noticed.

The potential to harness student excitement about blogging and social networking and tie that into the learning experience is indeed very appealing. Some educators think that using blogs in the classroom can greatly increase a student’s academic experience, but others are quick to raise valid concerns about their appropriateness and safety in a school setting. As many school districts are already banning blogs, the question has quickly become a controversial and heated topic. It is necessary to take a closer look at the benefits and dangers of blogging in educational settings, also known as “edublogging”.

Many people might think that because of their “journalistic” nature, blogs are best suited to the English field. While blogs are certainly great ways in which students can create individual pieces of writing, and work on spelling and grammar, the blog provides opportunities for use in every realm of academia. The blogs ability to connect students to others in their learning community is arguably its greatest strength. College educator, Susan Baim, believes that, “Blogs help students know each other at a ‘deeper’ level” (Baim, 5). She thinks that blogging helps build a learning community outside of the classroom and provides a network to other students who can aid each other in the learning process. Continuing conversations with peers outside of the physical classroom is important in creating lifelong learners, and blogs can provide an atmosphere that makes bringing the “outside world” into learning much easier. Baim reinforces this idea by stating that,

“Students may see something and say, ‘Oh, I’ve got to write about that today on LiveJournal.’ Without this forum, they may forget about it by the time they get to the classroom. It gives students the chance to add value to the classroom discussion without having to be in the classroom”(5).

Students can also link to relevant articles for their peers to view and further discuss. As Tim Wilson, a Minnesota school technology-integration specialist, observed, “Blogs are like a

conversation. Regular Web pages are static... When kids can talk with one another and share ideas, that's powerful" (Borja, 1).

Feeling able to share ideas and voice individual opinions on a topic is another major draw of edublogs. Some students do not feel that their voice is always heard in the classroom. Students may be more quiet or reticent to speak for many different reasons in a classroom setting, but an online classroom setting gives students a chance to share their voice (Borja, 2). Students often come to realize that their voice is being heard even beyond their classroom which often encourages them. "When students see people from outside taking an interest in what they're doing I think they tend to want to blog. That motivation becomes intrinsic rather than part of the class" (Kelly).

Aside from creating communication among students, edublogs can also be used for communicating *to* students as well. Class announcements, schedule changes and reminders can be posted on a blog for both students and parents to view. This provides a place where important class information can be accessed 24 hours a day by anyone with a computer. Links to instructional resources that can aid in student homework or projects can also be provided via edublogs. Tips and assignment-related resources can also be added in order to help students with their work. Students might even post comments about their experiences with certain linked sites that helped them with an assignment they were struggling on (Ray, 175).

In a practical example of how blogs can be integrated into teaching, students can post comments on readings or speakers, or even continue a topic discussed in class that they have had more time to think about. Teachers can post prompts, questions, or articles for students to further discuss online individually and/or as part of an online community. Students can collaborate on projects via blogs, and they may even work together with students from other schools on combined projects. Interacting with other students that would not normally be plausible suddenly becomes possible. Sharing discussions with students from different areas can open up a whole new world of ideas. This extension of a student's social network is also beneficial as the student is now able to connect with learners that could come from totally different backgrounds (rural/urban/suburban) or even from different countries (Ray, 176). The possibilities are exciting to many educators.

Some educators might wonder how the blog differs from threaded discussions that can be created through the less-controversial virtual learning environments, such as Blackboard or WebCT. College professor, Alex Halavais, suggests that students becoming "trapped" in threads and do not see the larger issues of a discussion. "I wanted to be inclusive and for students to engage in the entire class, but the threads got in the way for me" (Kelly, 4). He also noted that it would be better for student discussion to be displayed to more people than only those in his course. He says that displaying student work to a wider audience does have an effect on the quality of work produced. One of the main reasons that Halavais initially switched from virtual learning environments to blogging was because he believed that students work improved when they knew that their professor was not the only one reading what they wrote. Eventually, he says, his view has expanded and he now realizes the importance of students seeing their work in the context of a greater social network. "[Students] think about the larger social context of this, and they try to make their work apply to more than just the classroom" (Kelly, 6). Susan Baim concurs that threaded discussions do not have the same impact as blogging. "...Blogs provide students with a public forum in which they can connect with people with similar interests from around the world" (Baim, 5).

Of course, edublogs do not have to be “all work, no play”. Much of the appeal of blogs to young users is the ability to connect on personal levels and expand and support their social network. This can be done through academic postings when children can connect with others ideas and opinions, but there are educators (usually at the University level) who encourage personal, non-class related exchanges. Baim promotes the sharing of personal information among students on her class blog. She makes sure to remind them that the forum is public, so they should only post what they feel comfortable sharing. Halavais mentions that he did not expect how well he would get to know his students through blogging. “They rarely stay on topic, which for me is a good thing. They connect this to everyday life. That’s changed my interaction with students to a certain degree” (Kelly, 7). This connection between a subject and a student’s personal experiences can really create a deeper understanding and meaning for a student that might not have come from a typical classroom setting.

This type of personal information sharing is one of the main reasons that edublogging opponents say that this tool should not be incorporated into schools. Many educators, parents and legislators are concerned about the cybersafety of students who use blogs. Information such as a student’s name, address, or telephone number is obviously dangerous to give out on a public forum because it places the student at risk for online predators. However, other important personal information could be shared without much thought that could compromise a student’s safety. In making connections between a class lesson and his/her real life, a student might offer information about their location or personal habits that might give an online predator too much information. A USA today article mentions some of the risks students pose to themselves when over-sharing private information, and the article makes note of several cases of sexual assault that have resulted from interactions on sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Pat Johnson is the principal of a high school that bans all blog sites, not just edublogs used for the classroom, because of safety concerns. Referring to teens and blogs, Johnson says, “Our students as well as many other students across the country are setting themselves up to become victims” (Kornblum). Many schools agree with Johnson, and are concerned that students do not know how to edit themselves online. Nancy Willard, an author and speaker on safe Internet use, states, “Kids are going to argue that these blogs are part of their private lives. And that’s the point: They aren’t private at all” (Current Events, 3). As millions of young users place unsafe information on blog pages across the internet, predators are taking advantage of student’s naivety.

Online predators are not the only cybersafety concerns for students. Cyberbullying has become a large problem as more and more students turn to blogs and social networking sites. Just as online communities can build a sense of connection, some educators are worried that “blogs can isolate instead of connect people” (Borja). Cyberbullying can certainly have an isolating effect and can be emotionally and socially devastating for a child. Willard says there are 8 different forms of cyberbullying: flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion and cyberstalking (Willard, 1-2). All of these forms of bullying could take place on a blog, though some seem more likely to be used than others. If a student posts an insulting or mean comment about another student, he/she has denigrated his/her classmate. Outing, or sharing someone’s private information with a group, would be extremely embarrassing to a student, especially when the victim must face his/her classmates both in school and in the online community. Excluding a student from an online conversation would have the opposite effect of building an online learning community, which is one of the main goals of an edublog. Many times when a student is cyberbullied, he/she will be reluctant to be on the

computer. If a blog is a part of a classroom assignment, the student would be hurting his/her grade by avoiding the environment.

These cyberbullying wrongs are certainly possible on the edublog landscape, though they seem less likely to be used in this forum and more “suited” for a student’s personal blog that is unrelated to school. Two main reasons can be attributed for this; a school blog is not anonymous, and the teacher, or some school authority figure, is responsible for monitoring blogs. Cyberbullying often happens because these bullies feel like they are “invisible” on the web and they will experience no repercussions for their actions. An article from MindOH! Foundation says that cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying in that the bully cannot physically observe the reaction and hurt he/she causes to the victim. “They don’t ‘see’ the harm they have caused or the consequences of their actions, which minimizes any feelings of remorse or empathy. This creates a situation where kids do and say things on the Internet that they would be much less likely to do in person” (MindOH!). On an edublog, this anonymity would be taken away because the teacher and students know what each user is contributing to the class discussion. An edublog would also be monitored by an authority figure in the school who could set his/her own Acceptable Use Policies (AUP) for the class blog. If he/she notices students behaving out of line or posting hurtful or unacceptable comments on the edublog, he/she would have the authority to take the comments down (Aftab).

While these are helpful in avoiding cyberbullying in an edublog atmosphere, students’ individual blogs still cause concern for their often brutal cyberbullying content. Blogs can be a platform in which students joke on, insult, tease or even threaten fellow students. It is, in part, these kinds of behaviors that have led to all forms of blogs being banned from many schools. Most students claim that this impinges on their right to free speech, but Willard says that this is not necessarily an excuse to write whatever they want on their blog.

“One particularly concerning online social norm is: ‘On the Internet, I have the free speech right to write or post anything I want, regardless of the harm it might cause another.’ Internet civil liberties organizations strongly support this norm. But just as it is not acceptable to shout ‘fire’ in a movie theater, there are limits on free speech rights” (Willard, 4).

If these limits are not set by the student’s personal and family values, then the law can set limits. Civil and criminal law standards are in place to protect individuals from civil crime, such as defamation or the intentional infliction of emotional stress, all the way to criminal behavior such as threats or harassment. (Willard, 4-5). Schools can become caught in the middle of cyberbullying lawsuits involving students within their schools, even when the cyberbullying happens outside of school hours and off school property. If the school creates an AUP that prohibits the use of technology to abuse a fellow student, they will have greater power in intervening in cyberbullying situations that occur on students’ individual blogs.

Cybersafety is not the only reason that many people worry about blogging in schools. The great digital divide is a very valid concern for many students. The educational website, Edutopia, describes the digital divide as, “...the gap between those individuals and communities that have, and do not have, access to the information technologies that are transforming our lives” (Dickard). According to one source, “Nearly 70 percent of White (Non-Hispanic) and Asian-American children have both computers and Internet access at home, while fewer than 40 percent of American-Indian, Hispanic, and African-American children have both computers and Internet access at home” (Ray, 2). This means that, unless edublogging is kept in the school setting, there is a danger of isolating students who do not have access to this kind of technology

in their homes. This would be detrimental to not only a student's individual grade, but also to their social and emotional well-being.

Above all of these concerns lies the question, are blogs really able to help students in their academic achievement? Though blogs can be integrated into classroom lessons, some educators are skeptical about the academic impact of blogs on student learning. "Education Week" writer, Rhea R. Borja says that not much has been done to study the success of blogs as a classroom tool. Many educators do seem to agree that, while setting up an edublog for class is simple, it takes time, patience, and practice to create an effective classroom blog. Once incorporated into lessons, however, many educators are pleased with the interaction they see taking place in this online learning environment. Senior vice president of Yahoo!, Jeff Weiner, touched on the aspect of blogging that many educators think is the key to authentic student learning. He states, "What's revolutionary about this tool is that it puts give-and-take into web publishing. Before blogging, the web was pretty much a one-way street...we consumed what others produced. We did not create it or benefit directly from the web's ability to share it quickly" (Colgan, 58). Student's ability to "give-and-take" in their own learning experience, instead of unthinkingly consuming information delivered to them, is a large step towards creating life long learners who can think and question information for themselves.

Currently, there have been a few bumps in the road for blogging proponents. The largest threat to blogging in the educational sphere is the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA). This bill would require both schools and libraries to block access to commercial Web sites that allow users to create their own profiles or Web pages. Also affected would be sites that included discussion boards, chat rooms or e-mail service (McCullagh). The purpose of DOPA is to protect children from online predators, but many are afraid that the act is too vague and could be used to block many valid sites. Blogging sites such as MySpace and Facebook would be affected by this bill, and educators are weighing in on what they feel should be done. Andy Carvin, a self-described "Internet activist, author and Edtech expert", opines on his Learning.now blog that, "The big problem here is that they're trying to ban an entire class of online tools- the very tools that are just beginning to make the Internet an exciting, educationally relevant place" (Carvin). Librarian Meredith Wolfwater agrees, saying that she is afraid many students will stop using the library without access to sites such as blogs. She suggests that students need to be taught in school how to safely use the Internet, but that creating legislation is taking things too far. "Parents and educators need to take responsibility for teaching kids what is and is not appropriate to do on the Internet" (Carvin). She also writes that she feels that a school or library provides a more open space to access these sites from, making it less likely that a student will get in trouble than if they were using the Internet alone in their room.

Others are not so concerned by the DOPA legislation. They cite the fact that DOPA only affects those libraries that accept E-Rate funding. A blogger on Carvin's Learning.now blog, commented that if a school did not agree with blocking social networking sites, then they did not have to do so. He also suggests that, "while there are certainly many commercial social networking services and chat rooms, they hardly make up the majority of educational websites, the exclusion of which would therefore not be to the detriment of children" (Carvin). While his points were acknowledged, many argued that this kind of attitude would further the digital divide. E-rate is a program in which schools can receive federal funding for telecommunications and Internet access (Wikipedia, E-rate). Many urban and rural schools are greatly affected by E-Rate, as they are eligible to receive greater funding based on their poverty levels. By not accepting E-Rate funding, these schools might not even be able to afford the technology tools

used for blogging and social networking. If these schools accept E-Rate, they would still be behind other schools in these social networking practices.

As of now, DOPA has yet to pass both the House and Senate votes. In July, DOPA was brought before the House and passed by a 410 to 15 vote, but the Senate did not vote on the act (Kirkpatrick). Because the bill was introduced by the 109th Congress and that Congressional session has ended, DOPA must be voted on again by both the House and the Senate (Wikipedia, DOPA). Many sites are focusing on keeping abreast of this bill, including DOPA Watch, a site maintained by Carvin (<http://www.andycarvin.com/dopa.html>).

The blogging domain provides opportunities for students to interact with classmates and become more active learners in their education, but this comes at a price. Educators, parents and legislators must come to decide the true worth of blogs in the educational sphere and weigh that with the realistic risks that the Internet poses to students. Perhaps schools should create their own private blogging domains that would allow students the ability to create a blog with access to other student bloggers in that school's domain. A domain monitor could be set in place to make sure that users were adhering to the school's blogging AUP. Connections between other school's private blogging domains could be set up by administrators for the purpose of collaborative projects. This system could keep out potential predators, have a known overseer, could be used for both educational and social purposes, and could still provide the interactive community that makes blogs such powerful tools. Maybe one day this idea will become a reality, but until then, blogging will remain a tool that will not reach its full potential in educational settings.

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