Chapter 5

Be a Blogger

Social Networking in the Classroom

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Several years ago I decided to see how blogging might fit into my curriculum. Much on the Web has changed since then and we have many more interactive tools available to us now via the Internet, known collectively as Web 2.0, but blogging remains the center of my work with students. Blogging in a school-based social network creates a meaningful, dialogic, motivating environment where students get inspired to measure their own reading, writing, research, and response skills alongside their peers. This environment of self-assessment makes my teacher assessment an afterthought for most students.

My students have personal blogs where their writing posts automatically appear on the main page of the Youth Voices (http://youthvoices.net) site. The software we use allows them to be surrounded by many multimedia resources for their personal inquiries. Students become passionate self-guided learners who seek to improve their skills to keep up with and to impress their peers, some of whom they know quite well because they sit in classes next to them, others of whom they get to know only through Youth Voices.

Snapshots of a Blogger

To get a picture of how blogging was working in my classroom, I observed one student carefully for a week in late February 2007. Nichole was a junior at the time, and had been a blogger in my New Journalism/Technology classes at a high school in New York City since eighth grade. Nichole and I
had learned a lot about blogging by the time I documented her work in publishing her blog “From Love to Social Pressures”:

Is love when your mate shuns you out of their life? Is love when your mate walks past you everyday? Is love when your mate doesn’t even acknowledge your existence? Is it love when you haven’t kissed your mate in over 3 weeks? Is it love when your mate acts like they only want you for one thing? No, that’s not love. Love is when two people show affection for each other and recognize each other’s smarts. Not when your partner makes you feel less of yourself and makes you feel invisible.

Some people believe that for every person born into this funny place, there is a perfect match, or a soul mate. I’ve often toyed with the idea. Could it be possible that in God’s grand design, he was so terribly kind as this? To make somebody so well matched to each of us as to pop into our lives like a battery that fits just right, and never, ever runs out?

—“Soulmates,” Purple Planet Blog (http://purpleplanetblog.blogspot.com)

I used to believe in soul mates, but now I feel that I might not have a perfect match. That there might not be that one person in the world that I am destined to be with. Maybe because I don’t get good luck and maybe its on purpose. I believe it has something to do with the fact that I am still very young and I do have my whole life ahead of me. I want to go to college and I want to become a doctor someday. Being distracted isn’t the best thing for me to do. That’s why I always believe that what happens in high school is ONLY high school and I will get a second chance when I go to college to start my life over. I don’t want to make the same mistakes I’ve made before because it would only lead me down the wrong path again. That’s why I feel sometimes my life is pretty screwed up and I cant wait to get that second chance to start fresh.

Maybe I should be a little more grateful but today I feel as though something huge is missing, like I am nothing but a piddly number in the scheme of life. I do the same thing everyday I see the same people, drive the same route, eat the same food, and deal with the same b.s.

—“Ever Feel Unappreciated?” The Life of Mrs. Quad (http://jaxattax.blogspot.com)

I love myself and I live for myself. I care about what other people think of me but to a certain extent. The majority of my life I spend wondering what is missing? Why do I wake up each morning not wanting to get involved with anyone, not wanting to see the world? And that’s when I came to the conclusion that I am not a happy teenager. I only have one chance to live young and I am totally destroying that. I’m
taking responsibility and eliminating things in my life that shouldn’t be there. I can’t help it because I was brought up to be nice, and the result of being nice is holding back what I truly feel about things. I swear I wish I wasn’t that way, but now I have gotten used to it and bad habits are hard to break. I want to be happy, and I want to smile when I’m doing well, but the fact is that I’m not doing so well. I have so many issues evolving in my life and taking over that it’s getting harder and harder each day to take control. It also feels that I am alone in this world because I’m always crying before I go to sleep and thinking of ways to get out. I go around what I know I need to do because I feel it’s “too hard”. It sounds pitiful, but that’s just how I am.

(Posted on Youth Voices (http://youthvoices.net), by Nichole on March 1, 2007)

This was Nichole’s 36th blog post and podcast episode since the beginning of the academic year in September. By this time in the year, Nichole had many subscribers and followers or friends who looked forward to her weekly posts and podcasts. Her followers included a group of peers in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Sacramento, California, a solid group of readers in her own school, and new readers in Maine.

Here are day-by-day snapshots of Nichole blogging over one week in late February 2007:

On Monday, Nichole freewrites about a self-chosen question, “What is love?” then crystallizes her freewrite into a focused sentence in which she expresses her feeling that someone else can “make you feel less of yourself.” Next Nichole scans several blogs, using Google Blog Search (http://blogsearch .google.com), and reads a post titled, “Soulmates” that had been published a couple of months earlier in the “Purple Planet Blog” (http://purpleplanetblog .blogspot.com)/. Finally, Nichole extends her freewrite, at first by writing in response the Purple Planet blogger, then by writing to herself, developing her inner voice about how things might improve for her in the future.

On Tuesday, Nichole spends several minutes reading over her incomplete post on Google Docs, which is an online collaborative word processing platform, and then she changes the title from: “what is love?” to “From love, to social pressures [sic].” After this, Nichole searches with the word “alone” on Flickr for a Creative Commons image, and soon finds an image of a young girl curled up, almost in fetus position, in front of a window with a shade pulled down completely to block the bright sun that still filters through. Before the end of the period, Nichole saves this image to her desktop, then inserts it into her post, and writes more.

When Nichole arrives in class on Wednesday, she launches her Google Reader to find a blog post in her “love” folder by a woman in Texas, “The life of Mrs. Quad: Ever feel Unappreciated?” (http://jaxattax.blogspot.com), and
copies a few lines from that post into her own blooming blog post. As she writes, Nichole reckons back to her own thoughts about how someone else could “make you feel less of yourself and make you feel invisible,” and answers tentatively: “I love myself and I live for myself. I care about what other people think of me but to a certain extent.” Nichole adapts Mrs. Quad’s feeling that “something huge is missing,” into questions about “What is missing?”, then expresses “the conclusion that I am not a happy teenager,” and finally ends the period by writing about why her life leaves her crying at night.

On Thursday, Nichole spends time reading other posts on Youth Voices. She finds an echo to her inquiry in her classmate, Jay’s recent post, and comments on his blog: “Hey Jay, Me and you are both worrying about our futures. . . . Just give all that you can and don’t worry about what other people are going to say because all of that does not matter.” Nichole also responds to two other Youth Voices bloggers, one in Salt Lake City and one in Maine. Finally, Nichole spends some time adjusting the background and the color of her font, and she proofreads, correcting spelling, and adding in all of those apostrophes that she tends to leave out when she freewrites.

On Friday, Nichole copies her writing to her blog on Youth Voices, and records her post using Audacity, a desktop recording software program, then exports it as an MP3 audio file. Nichole uploads the MP3 to her podcast folder on Youth Voices and embeds it into her blog post so that it attaches to the syndication feed for her blog known as RSS (really simple syndication) that allows others to read and listen to her work. Still not finished, Nichole reflects on her work in a community blog, “How am I doing?” where other members of Youth Voices can read it and respond.

Here’s what Nichole had to say that last week in February 2007 when this post went up. This is her self-assessment:

Lately, what makes for a really good blog post is a lot of thought, emotion and a picture. Without any emotions it’s almost to a point where it can be dead. The picture adds another kind of taste to it because the reader can actually get a look at how you might feel through a picture. Adding a podcast is also a plus because listeners can hear the tone in your voice, and get a feel of how you feel through how you’re talking about the topic. This week I have written about two or three times for my post and I have a picture. And I have a podcast. My post has my opinion and I actually put some work into what I was talking about. I always do that. I just feel that I did it more this week than last. Next week I hope to get a lot more writing done and keep up the good work.

Although the school required me to report a grade for Nichole’s work every few weeks, I always de-emphasized the importance of my evaluation. I never
grade specific blogs, and instead I keep track of the number of blogs and comments a student produced, giving higher grades for more and better developed blogs and comments. It was the comments from other students to Nichole that mattered the most; these served as the real external assessment.

**WHAT DOES A BLOGGING CLASS LOOK LIKE?**

Let’s change the lens now and take a look at the class where Nichole has been working. By the time Nichole was working on “From Love to Social Pressures,” her class had reached an important turning point. I always look forward to this change in dynamics, after which I begin to feel more like a waiter in a busy restaurant than a teacher in a school computer lab. No longer am I working to motivate students to do work for me. Instead, I am working to help each student to accomplish his or her own goals as readers and writers in a school-based social network. No longer am I assessing them; after the shift the students assess themselves, and decide what to do next. This shift, this turning point from teacher-centered to student-centered self-assessment, has come each semester since I put blogging in a social network at the center of my curriculum.

If you were to look into a computer lab like the one where Nichole and her classmates were working, you might see me moving from student to student, troubleshooting computer glitches here and encouraging revision and proofreading over there. Often, you can see me asking students to read aloud what they have written, with me guiding them with this question: “Do you see where you left a word out? You read more than what’s on the screen.”

Next, you might see me responding to a student across the room who says, “I’m bored! There’s nothing to write about, and I’ve got to get something out or my friends [finger quotes] will be disappointed.” Sitting next to this young writer who is feeling the pressure of having a regular readership from across the country is a boy who needs to get back on task. His attention has strayed because yesterday, after listening to a podcast, he couldn’t figure out how to make a link to the original MP3 in the response he has begun to write. I show him the simple html code he can use to make a link in his blog post.

Out of the corner of my eye I see that another student who has been relying too much on Wikipedia recently is back on that site again. “It’s not that you can’t use Wikipedia,” I say, “I just want to see you using snippets from other sources too. What blog posts, newspaper or magazine articles, and what podcasts have been collecting in your Google Reader about Will Smith?”

Before this conversation ends, a student across the room blurts out, “When I respond to blogs, do I have to use the sentence starters?” “No,” I answer,
“but remember the three parts that you have to have. First, quote something that stands out to you from the blog. Second, say why this stands out or make a personal connection to the post from your own experience. At the end make a compliment and be nice.” “Do you have to talk so loud?” complains a girl in the corner, “Now I have to re-record my podcast.”

What’s a Blogging Curriculum?

I’m happy in this busy, sometimes noisy room where students are focused on reading and writing blogs on Youth Voices. With each new class, it takes some time to reach this point. It has something to do with project-based curriculum. Perhaps any teacher who has learned to sponsor projects in the classroom will recognize the turning point that I’m referring to here, where the teacher starts working for the students, instead of the reverse.

Students in my blogging classes develop the learning dispositions that Suzie Boss and Jane Krauss (2007) say “the best projects share.” My students exhibit “important learning dispositions, including persistence, risk-taking, confidence, resilience, self-reflection, and cooperation” (p. 65).

In addition, I think that the studioliike atmosphere that I seek comes from a curriculum that asks students to do two things first: find something to be passionate about, and connect with others who share this passion. Students are also asked to evaluate their own progress each day, and to choose from many options what to do with their time.