

Blogging RSS



The “What’s
It?” and
“How To” of
Powerful New
Web Tools
for Educators

by **Will Richardson**,
Supervisor of Instructional Technology,
Hunterdon Central Regional High School

THE INTERNET has long been valued by teachers and librarians as a powerful research and communications tool, and in the last 10 years, it has brought about a sea change in the way students find, manage, and use information. But the promise of the Web as more than just a readable, searchable resource has been slow to be realized ... until now. Two new Internet technologies, Weblogs and RSS (Real Simple Syndication), are redefining the way students and teachers use the Internet, turning them from mere readers into writers to the Web as well, and making it easier to filter and track the ever-growing number of resources coming online each day. In fast-growing numbers, educators across the country and throughout the world are finding just how powerful this new interactive Internet can be.

Weblogs, or “blogs,” as they are called, can best be defined as Web sites that are easily created and updated by those with even a minimum of technology know-how. What used to be a messy process for Internet publishing is now almost as easy as sending e-mail; no code, no file transfer, and in many cases, no hosting setup. Just login to your site from any Internet connection, enter the content in a typical Internet form, press a button, and your Weblog is updated. And it’s not just text. Blogs can display pictures and video, include audio and Flash, and even store other files like PowerPoint presentations or Excel spreadsheets for linking.

The Boom in Blogs ...

Weblogs have been around for years, but only recently that have they caught on with a full spectrum of Internet publishers. An October 2003 survey by the Perseus Development Group [<http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/>] estimated that over 4 million Weblogs had been created by the middle of 2003, and thousands more are being created weekly.

But there are more serious uses for Weblogs, and they are already having an effect in many disparate areas. Howard Dean’s Weblog [<http://www.blogforamerica.com>] vaulted him into the thick of the Democratic presidential race. Companies are using blogs to communicate directly with customers and to provide collaborative space for developers. Journalists at *The New York Times*, *ABC News*, and other media outlets are using blogs to connect more closely to readers, providing insights and information that might otherwise not make it into print. In fact, in journalistic circles, a debate is raging over whether or not Weblogs might be changing the profession as we know it.

... Now Extends to Education

Educators have been slower to adopt Weblogs for a variety of reasons, among them access, privacy, and security issues. But as more and more people get on the blog bandwagon, more and more teachers and schools are starting to experiment with the technology as a way to communicate with students and parents, archive and publish student work, learn with far-flung collaborators, and “manage” the knowledge that members of the school community create. In fact, many are seeing Weblogs as a cheaper alternative to course management systems.

Tim Lauer is one of those people. The principal of an elementary school in Portland, Oregon, Lauer is infusing Weblogs throughout his school. The Meriwether Lewis Elementary Web site [<http://lewiselementary.org/>] features the latest in news and events as collected from a series of separate Weblogs that are hooked together using RSS. Not only does this allow for the school's Web site to be a timely source of information, it allows a number of staff members to contribute in what is a more distributed content creation model: The music teacher keeps a log for music news, and PTA members contribute to their own site. Lauer keeps his own Weblog for his personal messages to staff and the community.

"The key is that the ease of use inherent in Weblog software makes keeping a classroom or school Web site very easy," Lauer says. "What a teacher or principal decides to note about their classroom or school is key. They can concentrate on the content and not worry about becoming a Web designer."

And one of the best parts, according to Lauer, is the cost. "We use Moveable Type, and it's free for educational use," he said. "It can do just about anything those very expensive course management tools can do. So in times of dwindling school budgets, the use of tools such as Moveable Type sends a message to our taxpayers that we are resourceful and wise with our school dollars."

A Tool for Collaboration

The collaborative aspect of Weblogs is what has brought many teachers into the fold. Commenting capabilities in many of the blogging software packages allow for easy peer review for students and teachers and make bringing in experts or mentors from outside the classroom easy. One such example is my own experience in a literature class I taught last year.

We had selected Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* for our Modern American Literature curriculum, and I decided to use a Weblog to carry on our conversations about the book outside of class. Since we were probably the first school in the country to study the novel, I wondered if the author might be willing to join my students in our online discussion. To our great surprise, she did, and my students got the benefit of a 2,300-word response to our "big" questions about the characters and the plot in the book [<http://weblogs.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/beesbook>]. In addition, we set up a Weblog for parents of my students interested in reading the book for themselves, and about a dozen parents held their own discussions in parallel to my students [<http://weblogs.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/beesparents>].

Pam Pritchard, from Lebanon, Ohio, is another educator who is at the forefront of Weblog use in schools. She has used what are called audioblogs to help her students work on their reading and pronunciation skills. Pritchard records her students and posts the audio files on a Weblog. Then her students play the files back at school



Hunterdon Central journalism teacher Jon DeLisle uses Weblogs to link to resources and examples of good reporting. His students, like senior Connor Buckley, each have their own Weblogs, where they post their assignments, give each other feedback, and keep track of the news.

or at home when they want to hear how they sound. She has also used Weblogs with great success as a teacher mentoring tool. She and her entry year teacher archive their thoughts, reflect on their practice, and discuss their specific goals and needs for upcoming classes [<http://www.edithere.com/eyt/>].

"Through the use of our Weblog we've been able to build a relationship, engage in reflective practice, have interactive opportunities that develop and broaden our knowledge base, and document evidence of growth and refinement in the practice—which is required by our state," Pritchard says. "The Weblog has been an incredibly efficient tool for allowing all this to happen effectively."

The range of uses for Weblogs among other educators is wide. Hundreds of librarians have realized their power in

communicating information about resources and in starting conversations about books and literacy. Students use Weblogs as digital portfolios or just digital filing cabinets, where they store their work. Teachers use blogs as classroom portals, where they archive handouts, post homework assignments, and field questions virtually. Clubs and activities, sports teams, and parent groups use Weblogs to post scores, meeting minutes, and links to relevant issues and topics. In other words, a Weblog is a dynamic, flexible tool that's easy to use whether you're creating with it or simply viewing the result.

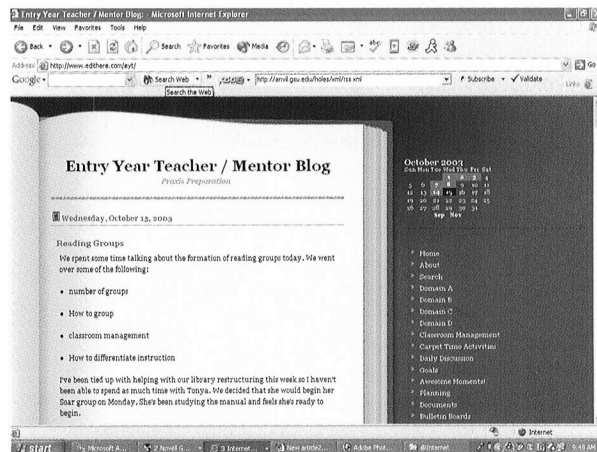
There are serious considerations that educators must weigh dealing with state and federal privacy laws (such as CIPA and COPPA), the administration of the sites, and the level of access students are given to post. Each school and each district may have its own comfort level that needs to be respected when thinking about putting student work on the Internet. Some blogging software programs attend to those concerns more than others.

Rich Site Summary/Real Simple Syndication

But Weblogs in and of themselves are only a part of the story. There is another "tool" that is built in to most blogging software that many think will change the way we receive and process all of the information we get from the Internet. This is what's known as RSS.

Depending on who you talk to, RSS stands for Rich Site Summary or Real Simple Syndication. Either way, RSS

Editor's note: Do you want to know more about Weblogs in K-12? Have you got some questions? You can ask author Will Richardson in person! He'll be delivering the opening keynote, "The Next New Thing: Create, Communicate, & Collaborate with Blogs," at the Internet@Schools East conference in early March in Washington, DC. It's sponsored by MMIS, of course! You can see the whole program on pages 36 and 37 of this issue, or check it out at <http://www.infotoday.com/Internet@Schools>. —DH



Two examples of Weblogs.

is a real important technology that information specialists and educators would be well advised to harness sooner rather than later. In simple terms, Weblogs (and an ever-growing number of other sites) generate a behind-the-scenes code in a language similar to HTML called XML. This code, usually referred to as a “feed” (as in “news feed”), makes it possible for readers to “subscribe” to the content that is created on a particular Weblog so they no longer have to visit the blog itself to get it. As is true with traditional syndication, the content comes to you instead of you going to it.

For instance, say you’ve found 20 or 30 (or, like me, 120!) Weblog sites on the Internet that interest you. Finding the time to click through to those sites on a regular basis is probably pretty difficult. But what if you had to go to only one place to read all of the new content on all of those sites? Wouldn’t be so difficult, would it? Well, that’s exactly what RSS allows you to do by using what’s called an “aggregator” or news-feed collector. The aggregator checks the sites you subscribe to, usually every hour, and it collects all the new content into a folder that is just waiting for you to come and read it. Big deal, you say? Very big, indeed, for a variety of reasons.

Take this general scenario, for instance: You currently get the headlines from *The New York Times* via an e-mail message that arrives each morning. But more and more, your e-mail box is being clogged up by spammers selling everything from pornography to mortgages. There are new virus warnings every day. Not so with RSS. The feed your aggregator checks is virus free, and you know that everything in your aggregator is something you want to read because you subscribed to it. No ads, no spam, just new content from the sources you read. You can scan the headlines, read the entire post, click through to the actual Web site, and file the information away for later retrieval.

Subscribe to My Homework Page!

For educators, the potential significance of RSS is huge. Think about how teachers and districts could use this syndication process to communicate with students, parents, newspapers, etc. In the classroom, teachers who have students create their own Weblogs can easily keep tabs on what those students are posting by subscribing to their

students’ feeds and simply checking their aggregators regularly. If school Web sites were built on a foundation of Weblogs, as with Lewis Elementary, parents could “subscribe” to different feeds that are relevant to their children ... say, the feeds from the College Search page, the Board of Education page, and Mr. Richardson’s homework page.

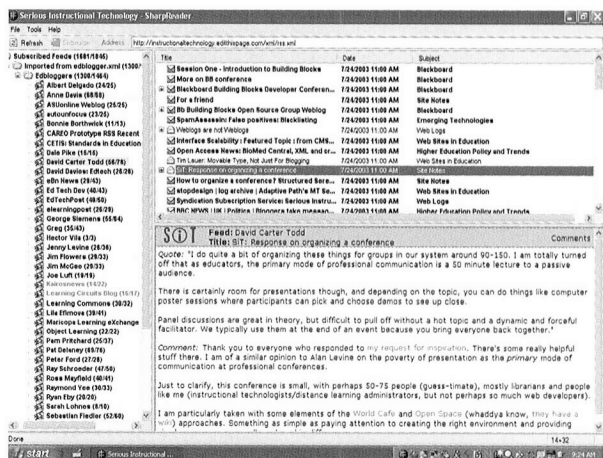
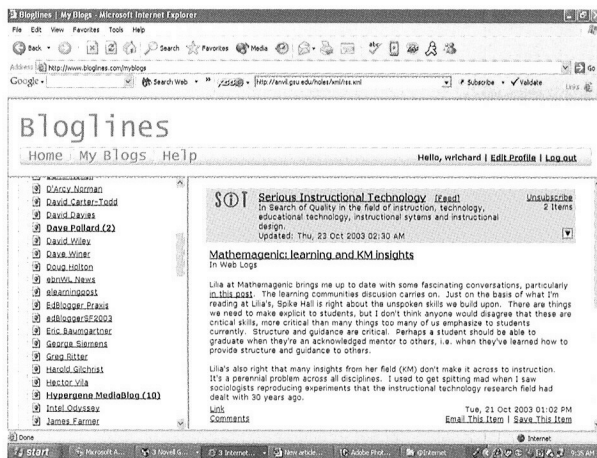
Similarly, if internal committees used Weblogs to post minutes and links, administrators could do a quick read in their aggregators to keep abreast of what the groups are up to with the added benefit that the work is easily archived for retrieval at a later date. Or, if you teach, say, a media class and want to stay abreast of the latest developments with the Federal Trade Commission, you can even subscribe to a Google or Yahoo! search for that term so that any news on that topic is delivered right to you.

More and more Web sites are creating RSS feeds for their content. Many major newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, and others, now offer RSS feeds of major sections in their papers. Magazines are following suit. And sites such as Feedster and Amazon.com allow for the creation of RSS feeds for searches. So, for instance, if you are a librarian and you want to be notified when new young adult books are released, just add the Amazon.com-young adult books feed to your aggregator and sit back and wait for the notices to start arriving. Or, if you are a classroom teacher who wants to stay current on the newest tools in educational technology, just create that search at Feedster, subscribe to the results, and any time anyone in Weblog land writes about that topic you’ll automatically know about it.

Getting into It

So if you’re convinced as I am that Weblogs and RSS have an important role to play in education, how do you get started? Here are some suggestions.

First, start your own Weblog, and start aggregating RSS feeds. There’s no better way to understand the process and potential than to practice it yourself. As you learn more about the technology, start thinking about ways you might use it in your classroom. Since there exists a whole range of Weblogging platforms and RSS readers to choose from, you’ll want to consider security and privacy issues, collaboration potential, and general complexity.



Two examples of news readers.

The easiest way to start a Weblog is with one of the free services online. You can be up and running in just minutes with Blogger [http://www.blogger.com], the best known of the free services, but more and more sites like moTime [http://www.motime.com] and tBlog [http://www.tblog.com] are expanding the options and tool sets available. Remember, if you want your Weblog to be interactive, make sure you choose a tool that has a built-in commenting feature so you can invite others to discuss your posts.

Weblog and RSS Resources

Most Popular RSS Aggregators

- AmphetaDesk**—http://www.disobey.com/amphetaDesk/
- Bloglines**—http://www.bloglines.com
- NetNewsWire**—http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/
- NewsMonster**—http://www.newsmonster.org/
- NewzCrawler**—http://www.newzcrawler.com/
- SharpReader**—http://www.sharpreader.net/

RSS Resources

- An Introduction to RSS for Educational Designers**—
http://www.downes.ca/files/RSS_Educ.htm
- Fagan Finder**—http://www.faganfinder.com/search/rss.shtml
- LockerGnome's RSS Resource**—http://rss.lockergnome.com/

Most Popular Weblog Platforms

- Blogger**—http://www.blogger.com
- Manila**—http://manila.userland.com
- Moveable Type**—http://www.moveabletype.org
- Radio**—http://radio.userland.com
- TypePad**—http://www.typepad.com

Weblog Resources

- Blogroots**—http://www.blogroots.com/resources.blog
- Weblogs Compendium**—http://www.lights.com/weblogs/index.html

Educator Weblog Sites

- Anne Davis**—http://anvil.gsu.edu/EduBlogInsights/
- Educational Bloggers Network (eBN)**—
http://www.ebn.weblogger.com/
- Educational Weblogs**—http://educational.blogs.com/
- Pam Pritchard**—http://www.edublognews.com/
- Pat Delaney**—http://www.ebn.weblogger.com/delaney/
- Tim Lauer**—http://tim.lauer.name/
- Weblogg-ed (Will Richardson)**—http://www.weblogg-ed.com

If you want a bit more power, and you have some server space and tech support onsite, you might want to consider Moveable Type [http://www.moveabletype.org] or its sister offering, Type Pad [http://www.typepad.com/], both of which are free to schools. The advantage is that you have more ability to troubleshoot if your hardware goes down. (If your free site goes down, so do you.) Moveable Type has a number of plug-ins and extra features that make it the choice of many educators wanting to provide Weblogs to many teachers and students.

If you want the power to build hundreds of sites for students and teachers with full-featured commenting and content management, you might consider Manila [http://manila.userland.com] from Userland. (Disclaimer: Manila is what I use in my district.) The annual license to run Manila on your server is \$299, and depending on how much server space you have, you can create and maintain thousands of multimedia Weblogs for your school community. In addition, there are new open source Weblog solutions coming online on a regular basis.

From an RSS standpoint, there are a lot of aggregators available for free download, including NetNewsWire [http://ranchero.com/netnewswire/] (for Mac OS X only) and SharpReader [http://www.sharpreader.net/]. Remember that if you use more than one computer during the day, you will need to install the software more than once. That's the main reason I recommend that teachers new to the technology try Bloglines [http://www.bloglines.com], which is a Web-based, free aggregator that you can access from any Internet connection.

However you start, start small and experiment. And become a blogger and a user of aggregators so that you can get firsthand experience in the power of the tools. Also, take the time to read and study good Weblogs, for these blogs can do much to inform your teaching. And finally, share your struggles and successes with the growing number of edbloggers coming online every day.

Will Richardson is supervisor of instructional technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. Reach him at wrichard@herhs.k12.nj.us.