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Wikis and Blogs: Your Keys to Student Collaboration & Engagement

BY CATHERINE IMPERATORE

The two most powerful Web 2.0 tools in a career and technical education (CTE) educator's arsenal are the blog and the wiki. Both are easy to use and inexpensive, and either resource can turn one student's assignment into an interactive experience for a class, an entire school or a cross-global community. Wikis and blogs can strengthen reading and writing skills and teach students about the new literacy of the Internet age such as evaluating sources and synthesizing information, according to Will Richardson, author of *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. And with the proper setup, these tools can still ensure students' online privacy and safety.

The enthusiasm for Web 2.0 has predated any substantial research on its effectiveness, but the data is finally catching up. A 2008 study on the use of Web 2.0 tools by students age 11-16 in and out of school by Becta (the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) found that these resources encourage participation by students who

may be reluctant to speak up in class. In addition, the study concluded that the 24/7 nature of the online world fosters a continuing conversation and leads some students to further investigate topics that interest them. The research also showed that students feel a greater sense of ownership and pay greater attention to detail when their work will be published online.

But if wikis and blogs are both easy yet powerful Web 2.0 tools to implement in the classroom, which should you choose? Their uses do overlap, but wikis are more focused on collaboration while blogs encourage engagement.

Collaboration

Wikis are Web sites that allow authorized users to easily add, edit and delete content. Wikis allow collaboration on a large scale—think Wikipedia—or small—think your classroom.

At its most basic, a wiki is a repository for class documents such as syllabi or a resource list. To take it up a notch, use a wiki to keep track of student projects. Each project has its own page where stu-

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dents can post progress reports and add images, audio and other files. Or make the project classwide: ask your students to collaborate on a study guide, a manual, an encyclopedia or a glossary. Culinary students can help each other improve recipes, IT students can collaborate on developing source code, and future teachers can work out hypothetical lesson plans.

For career exploration, students can create a career resources wiki describing different jobs and the education and training required, as well as local employment opportunities. Introducing wikis in the classroom is not without its challenges. "Wikis conflict with tradi-

tional assumptions about authorship and intellectual property,” according to contributors on <http://writingwiki.org>. This Web site encourages educators to introduce students to the conventions of collaborative work, creating a styleguide for the wiki and discussing how contributors will be recognized.

Engagement

If engagement is more of a priority for your classroom than collaboration, think blogs. A blog, short for Web log, is a Web page comprised of chronological entries in which one or more authors share information and reflections. A classroom may have one blog to which the entire class publishes entries, usually known as posts, or individual blogs for each student, or both. Readers can comment on each post, encouraging audience response and engagement. A good first foray into blogging is to post an assignment to a classroom blog and direct students to complete the assignment by responding in the comments section; for instance, health sciences educators can ask students to describe the correct procedure for dealing with a particular medical emergency. But this approach barely scratches the surface of classroom blogging.

To maximize student engagement, pose a thought-provoking question you would normally discuss face-to-face and direct students to post their responses to the class blog or on their individual blogs. Then ask students to respond to each other's entries. Difficult workplace scenarios are great conversation-starting topics for CTE classes. Richardson also proposes having students reflect on assignments or evaluate you, the educator! Blogs, like wikis, are useful tools for career exploration. Interns can write weekly about the challenges of their first workplace, or students can post interviews with career mentors.

David Warlick, an educator, author, consultant and public speaker on 21st century teaching and learning, suggests that educators invite practitioners in the field

to comment on students' work. Classroom blogging presents its own difficulties. Jeff Utecht, an elementary technology and learning coordinator and consultant, has written on his Thinking Stick wiki about the challenge of sustained blogging once the “cool factor” has worn off. When this happens, the quality of the conversation is likely to suffer. To combat this, Utecht recommends allowing students class time to read blogs. As he points out, “By first focusing on the reading and responding to others we help students to ‘listen’ in the blogosphere. Just like in real conversations listening before speaking is a good skill.”

Services That Protect Students

Educators implementing Web 2.0 tools in the classroom often run headlong into issues of student safety and privacy. One way to combat these issues is to use blog and wiki services designed with classrooms in mind. Wetpaint, a free wiki service equipped with education-friendly features, will eliminate advertisements from classroom wikis at your request. Wetpaint also offers varying levels of privacy to ensure that unauthorized users cannot view the wiki. But Wetpaint has an age restriction: students must be at least 13 years old to register. Wikis at Wikispaces also cater to the education community's needs, and with no age restriction. The service is giving away 350,000 of its ad-free and private wikis, a \$50 value, to K-12 classrooms (as of the writing of this article, they had donated 128,000 wikis). Teacher control of content is easy with either service.

The wiki is open to editing by authorized users only, and revisions are tracked by user. If inappropriate material is added to a wiki, the educator will know which user made that revision and can remove the offending content. Education-focused blogging services also offer options for protecting students' online activities. Gaggle, which provides student e-mail and blogs, probably offers the most solid line of defense. E-mails are automatically

monitored for inappropriate content, while blog security settings allow educators to bar outsider access, hide e-mail addresses, block offensive content, disable commenting and more. The free version of Gaggle includes advertising. If student e-mail is not needed, consider 21Classes. This ad-free service offers a class homepage as well as blogs for each student. Educators can moderate student entries and set privacy options to determine who can view and comment on the blogs. 21Classes is free for up to 50 students.

For You, For the District, For the Globe

Blogs and wikis are also useful resources for educators' professional development, and they can facilitate communication between administrators, educators and parents. For instance, a school district could use a blog to share district news, performance data and goals and seek feedback from teachers and parents. Blogs and wikis can also have a global reach: a wiki is the basis for the global Flat Classroom Project. In 2008, its third year, the Flat Classroom Project included more than 200 students in eight countries collaborating on projects based on Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat*. **T**

Wiki and Blog Services

Wetpaint

www.wetpaint.com/category/Education

Wikispaces

www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers

Gaggle

<http://gaggle.net>

21Classes

www.21classes.com

Catherine Imperatore

is ACTE's electronic media coordinator. She can be contacted at cimperatore@acteonline.org.



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