CREATING A SCIENCE CLASSROOM BLOG

(AND FOSTERING DISCUSSION, DEBATE AND CRITICAL THINKING)

Harvard University-HHMI Outreach Program
Life Sciences-HHMI Outreach Program
Dept. of Molecular & Cellular Biology
Harvard University
16 Divinity Avenue-Room 1090

What is a Blog?

According to Wikipedia.com, a blog (short for web log) is a "website where entries are written in chronological order and displayed in reverse chronological order." [1]

Technorati's *State of the Live Web* report indicates that there are approximately 70 million blogs on the world wide web with 120,000 new blogs added daily and 17 posts added per second. [2]

The primary purpose of a blog is to facilitate interaction between the host(s) of that blog and the reader(s). Blogs may include articles, images, links to other websites and/or general comments.

Posts are usually instantaneous and readers are free to respond by leaving comments of their own. Comments may also be posted in response to other readers. All posts are date/time stamped and archived.

Comments by readers may or may not be moderated by the host(s) for appropriateness.

Because of the great number and diversity of blogs, blogs can be loosely placed into the following categories: educational; entertainment; personal; business; and media/news. [3]

How is a Blog Different From a WebSite?

There are several key differences between blogs and websites. These differences give blogs a distinct advantage in an educational setting. For example:

(1) Although knowledge of HTML is not necessary for creating either, blogs tend to have a greater variety of ready-made templates;

(2) The nature of a blog is such that it is constantly changing, with new information updated on a regular basis—the same does not necessarily hold true for websites. Because of this, traffic to a blog remains relatively constant;

(3) It is much easier to change the look, layout and feel of a blog as well as post, publish and respond to comments;

(4) By their very definition, blogs are designed to encourage discussion and debate and promote a sense of community and;

(5) Rather than relying on a website provided by your school, blogs can be easily accessed and updated from anywhere. It is generally easier and faster to update a blog than it is to do the same for a website. [3]

Why Create a Classroom Blog?

The benefits of creating a classroom science blog include the following:

[1] Blogs are interactive tools, fostering debate, discussion and critical thinking;

[2] Blogs can foster technological literacy.

[3] One can post documents and files (PowerPoint), podcasts, pictures, homework assignments, video and audio clips, articles, links to other websites, journal entries and discussion questions.

[4] Students can respond to blog entries and instructors can post entries, wherever internet access is available. (Hint: Give students plenty of time to post comments);

[5] Blogs are easier to update and maintain than a webpage.

[6] Students can focus on writing skills, independent of their handwriting skills. Blogs and log entries can be modified for any skill level.

[7] Blogs are a great way to highlight and share student work and evaluate students' critical thinking skills.

Concerns and Considerations

The following list attempts to address some of the concerns one might have, over the use of blogs in the classroom:

[1] Can I preview my student's comments before they go "live" on the blog?

Yes. In order to avoid any plagiarism, libel, liability or inappropriate language issues, etc., make sure that you select the option whereby comments need to be approved by you, prior to the comments going "live" online.

[2] Don't blogs encourage casual or lazy writing?

That depends on you and the emphasis you place on students' writing skills. Will you emphasis content over grammar or will both get equal consideration?

[3] Will my students be able to remain anonymous? I'm worried about my students' online exposure.

When students post comments, they should use first and last initial or first name only. Email addresses or personally identifiable information should never be included in the comment field.

[4] Will I have unlimited storage space on my blog? Can I post anything?

Not usually. Storage space is limited and some of your files will be larger than others. You may have to delete old posts or files to free up more space.

[5] Should I have an *Acceptable Use Policy*? How can I set clear expectations and protect myself?

Absolutely. If your school does not have one, you should prepare one yourself. Sample *Acceptable Use Policies* are available online.

[6] Can I use my blog for personal communication with my students?

This should most definitely be avoided. Keep the blog on a strictly professional level. Do not post or respond to personal messages.

Creating Your Blog: Step by Step (in less than 20 minutes)

Step 1: Registering with *Blogger.com**

(1) Go to *www.blogger.com* (make sure that your browser accepts cookies).

(2) Click on the arrow (at right) that says, "Create Your Blog Now."

(3) Use an existing Gmail address or create one specifically for your blog.

(4) Enter and retype your password.

(5) Your display name should be something like "Ms. Smith." This is the name that will be visible to your students, so you probably don't want to include your first name.

(6) Type in the 'Verfication Word' you see highlighted, click on the box indicating you have read the 'Terms of Service' and click the arrow labeled 'Continue.'

Step 2: Setting Up Your Blog

(7) Enter the title of your Blog (example: Ms. Smith's Biology Class)

(8) Enter your blog address. You can keep things simple by entering your blog title again (example: http://**mssmithsbiologyclass**.blogspot.com). Click continue.

(9) Choose a Template (design) that you find interesting then click 'Continue.' You can always change your template at another time. You are now free to create a post. Click the arrow at right.

(10) Before you create a post, however, you might want to click the 'Settings' tab (up top) and modify your settings. Under settings, you should focus on the 'Formatting' and 'Comments' tabs. It is essential that these settings be adjusted correctly.

(11) Under the 'Settings' tab, click 'Formatting.' The information here is fairly straightforward. You can adjust the date, time, language, etc.

(12) Click the 'Comments' tab. These settings deal with user comments. Make sure you choose the following: (a) Show Comments (Yes); (b) Anyone can comment; (c) Adjust the Timestamp Format; (d) Enable Comment Moderation (**Yes**—this is **very important**). **You want to be able to preview comments before they go 'live;'** and, (e) Add an email address if you want to be notified when comments are posted by users. Save your settings. You can adjust the other settings ('Basic,' 'Publishing,' etc.) as you see fit.

Step 3: Posting (Hint: Publish all student comments after the due date as to help avoid any plagiarism issues)

(13) Posting text is easy. Click on the 'Posting' tab. Enter the Title for your post. Enter the information you want to communicate, in the large text box (text, pictures, links). Notice the 'Post Options' and 'Shortcuts' links below. When you are finished, click 'Publish.'

(14) You've done it. Good job. As you gain more experience blogging, you can always improve the look and feel of your blog by adding pictures, videos, podcasts, etc.

*Blogs created and hosted using Blogspot or Wordpress do not currently include sponsored advertising. Feel free to use other services like www.wordpress.com to create your blog. You might find some services more flexible and easier to use than others.

Harvard Univ./HHMI

Life Sciences-HHMI Outreach
Dep. of Molecular & Cell Bio.
Harvard University
16 Divinity Ave.-Room -1040
Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone:
617.496.3457

E-Mail:
http://outreach.mcb.
harvard.edu/contact.htm

We're on the Web!

See us at:

*http://outreach.mcb.
harvard.edu*
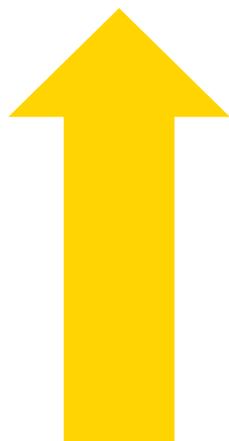
Resources:

Below is a list of popular sites that allow you to create your very own classroom blog:

[1] www.blogger.com (free)

[2] www.wordpress.com (free)

[3] www.typepad.com

[4] www.livejournal.com (free)

[5] www.blogster.com (free)

[6] www.vox.com (free)

Before you begin creating your blog, it might be helpful to look at some other blogs. You can find helpful examples below:

[1] www.technorati.com

[2] www.scienceblog.com/cms

[3] http://scienceblogs.com

[4] http://science.planetlanhan.com/blog

[5] http://stemcell.taragana.net

[6] http://blogs.nature.com

Works Cited:

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog

[2] http://technorati.com/weblog/200 7/04/328.html

[3] http://universalfacts.blogspot.com/2006/08/definition-and-purpose-of-blog-what-is.html

About the Harvard-HHMI Outreach Program...

The Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology at *Harvard University*, in conjunction with the *Howard Hughes Medical Institute,* offers a variety of programs for high school biology teachers and their students. Some programs expand the knowledge of teachers by providing a conduit to the latest scientific research and educational technology.

Other programs expose high school students to experimental biology in a laboratory setting. The broad objective of Life Sciences-HHMI High School Outreach Program is to excite students and teachers about doing science and to encourage their further exploration of the life sciences.

About the Author...

Keith Hartan currently teaches Biology and Forensic Science at Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, MA. He has been teaching science for four years. (www.mrhartanscienceclass.wordpress.com)