Be a Blogger

Social Networking in the Classroom

Paul Allison

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 love when you haven’t kissed your mate in over 3 weeks? Is 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 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 studiolike 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.

**Finding a Personal Inquiry**

I ask my students to find a question or a set of questions that they develop in their own speculative writing, and eventually they do online research about their questions, connecting with others who have published on the Internet, and critically interpreting the welter of information available to them there.

Students grow their blogs over a semester of working with other students and teachers who share their social network, Youth Voices. Together we ratchet up the expectations each week. They begin by posting a barely revised piece of freewriting to their blogs; then they write two times about the same issue over a couple of days, then they add a Creative Commons image and do more writing.

Because they publish their work each week, they see the effort, accomplishment, risk-taking, and level of quality in each others' posts. A student's ability to assess his or her own work grows by the constant exposure to models by students they know and students they don't know. Many times during the semester, I hear students say, "I want to do that too. Can we quote from scientific studies like that? Can we include an image? Or make a video?"

**Finding a Niche**

Finding a personal inquiry is important, but equally important is the second part of their work in my class. I help students to build an audience, find a niche, develop a network of online friends, and become regular responders on blogs by peers who have similar interests or passions. They do this in Youth Voices. Students and teachers from all over the United States—from Florida to Alaska, from New Jersey to Utah, and from New York to Texas—have joined this site over the past few years, and this network looks like it will continue to grow.

**Developing Habits of Mind for a Studio Classroom**

Once they become members of a social network like Youth Voices, my students learn how to tag their work with keywords that identify their interests. They allow other students who share their passions to connect, read and respond to particular posts. Then students put each other on their own list of friends to make it easy to follow each others' work in the future.

This social networking technology allows us to ask the essential question: How do you get your work noticed online? Students quickly learn that they need to make both the content and the presentation of their blog posts compelling to a group of peers. They also learn to become good community members by reading and responding to each others' blogs, and eventually by developing ongoing inquiries with each other.

By the time in the semester when I start to feel like a waiter in a busy restaurant, students are working to piece together a blog post that has been revised and proofread a few times over a week or two, that includes at least one Creative Commons image, that takes a stand on an issue, and that includes quotations (snippets) from critically selected online resources such as:

- Wikipedia and other online encyclopedias
- Blogs and podcasts—which can range from online personal diaries to political and professional journalism
- Newspaper articles (from everywhere)
- Creative Commons images (from flickr, for example) and video (from services that haven't been blocked yet)
- Peer-reviewed journals that are now online
- Traditional Web sites that are usually out of date
- Sources from the "hidden Web"—materials that are available through library databases to which we, like most schools, have access
From the first day of a blogging class, I work to create a studio classroom where students can work on passion-based, critical, online research and compelling communication within a school-based social network. It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes time to build the trust necessary for students to accept the responsibilities of a studio classroom.

Toward the beginning of the semester, I use minilessons to introduce the multiple skills and ways of thinking that eventually become blogging habits of mind and work. I know these lessons have been successful when students can look at this guide for self-assessment, and not feel overwhelmed because they recognize that they know how to do each of the items listed on the Be a Blogger! matrix (see Figure 5.1). I give this matrix out to my high school students on Mondays, and ask them to choose a place to start. When they complete the work within a particular box, they put an x in that box. Their goal is to have crossed out everything in this matrix every week.

This matrix is an attempt to make clear the multidimensional, multimodal options available to students blogging in a social network. Students are asked to develop a blog post that includes text, images, links, and podcasts. In a one-week period, students are asked to work on these modes of expression with four different habits of work: participating (collecting), producing (drafting), perfecting (revising and editing), and publishing.

Any Given Monday

On any given Monday, a student using this matrix might start by Participating with Text by going to Youth Voices or the Personal Learning Space to read posts by other students in their class or community, or on their friends list. In other words, a student might begin his or her week by reading and adding a comment in two blog posts by their peers. To assist students in this process, the teachers in the Youth Voices network give our students “sentence starters” that they can copy and use to guide their comments. Although these can lead to a cookie-cutter response at times, teachers using them have found it useful to start with these very structured guides and encourage students to free themselves from them as soon as they seem ready.

Dear [Writer’s Name]:
I [past tense verb showing emotion] your message, “[Exact Title],” because . . . [add 2 or 3 sentences] One sentence you wrote that stands out for me is: “[Quote from message.]” I think this is [adjective] because . . . [add 1 or 2 sentences] Another sentence that I [past tense verb] was: “[Quote from message.]” This stood out for me because . . .
### Figure 5.1. Self-Assessment Matrix: Be a Blogger!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating (Responding)</th>
<th>Producing (Drafting)</th>
<th>Perfecting (Revising &amp; Editing)</th>
<th>Publishing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Read and listen to posts by other students in your class or Community, or on Your Friends list. Add a comment in two of their blogs. Keep focused on the content of that post, not how it is written.</td>
<td>Pose a good question for yourself. Make this the title for a document in Google Docs. <em>Freewrite</em> for 10 or 15 minutes.</td>
<td>Copy your text to Microsoft Word and check grammar (green) and spelling (red). Revise your freewriting: Delete unnecessary words. Add more details. Rearrange sentences and paragraphs. Replace slang or confusing words.</td>
<td>After you have finished correcting everything in Word, copy back to your Google Docs, then copy the Google Docs file to your blog. Be sure you have: 1. Good Title 2. 5+ tags 3. Set Access to Public, unless told otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be sure to quote two times from his or her post. Remember to <em>introduce</em>, <em>insert</em>, and <em>interpret</em>.</td>
<td>Write a <em>Focused Sentence</em>, a perfectly written, opinionated sentence that re-states your entire freewrite. <em>Freewrite</em> again this time starting with the <em>Focused Sentence</em>.</td>
<td>Look to see that you are <em>adding to the conversation</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Image</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Search for Creative Commons images using these sites: <em>flickr.com/creative commons/by-nc-nd-2.0</em> <em>stock.xchng—sxc.hu</em> <em>morguefile.com</em> <em>Wikimedia Commons</em> <em>flickrCC.bluemountains.net</em></td>
<td>Insert a <em>Creative Commons</em> image or one of your own. Remember to <em>introduce</em>, <em>insert</em>, and <em>interpret</em>. <em>Freewrite</em> for a third time, this time with the image in mind. How does it represent what you are trying to get across in your post?</td>
<td>At the bottom of your post, write: <em>Image Source</em>: 1. &quot;Title.&quot; 2. Name or ID of Photographer, 3. link to this photo online</td>
<td>Align your photograph left or right—and give it some horizontal and vertical space—so that the text wraps around. Images should be no larger than 250 pixels wide.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Links</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Read blogs, news, and web sites. Subscribe, then find blog posts and news items in your Google Reader subscriptions list. Read and copy snippets or quotations. Also use del.icio.us to collect web sites to use in your blog. Bookmark and tag web pages. Quote from these.</td>
<td>Add two Snippets or quotations from other blogs or news items that you have read—or podcasts you have listened to—about this topic. <em>Freewrite</em> a final time with these quotations in mind. Remember to <em>introduce</em>, <em>insert</em>, and <em>interpret</em>. How does each quote add to your message in your post?</td>
<td>Make hyperlinks to the Snippets or quotations that you have included in your post. If you use the clipboard in Flock the links will be automatically inserted for you.</td>
<td>Use highlighted Keywords from the bottom of one of your posts, from your list of Tags, or from Your Profile to find someone with similar interests or blog posts. Add this person to Your Friends list, and Add a comment to his or her related blog post.</td>
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<td><strong>Podcasts</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Use Google Reader to listen to selected podcasts that you have subscribed to. Search Every Zing to find more audio and video about topics of recent interest. In Google Docs write comments about these podcasts with links to the the original source. Use Podcast Sentence Starters.</td>
<td>Use Audacity to record. Be sure to introduce yourself with your first name and say the name of your school. Explain what you are about to read. It's okay to say more than what is in your post, but not less.</td>
<td>Upload your MP3 to a Podcast folder in your <em>My Files</em>. In the description box for your MP3, copy the first sentence from your blog, then type &quot;read more,&quot; and make this into a link to your blog post. See How to set up your podcast files.</td>
<td>Embed your MP3 file from your online file storage using the <em>Add</em> button at the bottom of your post. A small player should appear in your post</td>
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the bottom of the post,” including a “link to the photo online.” This allows the teachers who are monitoring Youth Voices to verify that all images on these sites have Creative Commons permissions attached. When students publish images that are copyrighted, I feel like I’ve been given yet another opportunity to teach them about the tricky issues of intellectual property rights in the digital age, before I ask them to replace it with a Creative Commons image.

**Tapping into the Underground Spring**

Although a student could start in many different places on the “Be a Blogger!” grid, most begin at the top of the second column with freewriting about a self-selected question. This is also how I introduce this grid to students: “Let’s start in the second column by writing nonstop, anything that comes into your head about anything that is important to you right now.” It takes some time each year, with each class to get students to believe that I mean this, that I really do want them to write about something that they care about, not just what their teachers want them to write. Peter Elbow’s (1973) description of freewriting in *Writing Without Teachers* is still a good place to begin.

The idea is simply to write for 10 minutes (later on, perhaps 15 or 20). Don’t stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can’t think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write “I can’t think what to say, I can’t think what to say” as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop. (p. 3)

After freewriting, the next step in the Producing column on the matrix is to write a Focused Sentence, a perfectly written, opinionated sentence that re-states your entire freewrite. Then students are asked to freewrite again this time starting with the Focused Sentence.

Students soon get used to shifting their composing gears this way: beginning with open, expansive writing; then writing a careful, precise, power-packed sentence; then going back to expressive, quick writing. This follows Peter Elbow’s (1981) “Open-ended Writing Process,” which he describes in *Writing With Power* (p. 58):

- Write for 15 or 20 minutes without stopping . . . make sure to let the writing go wherever it wants to go.
- Pause and find the center or focus or main point in what you wrote. Write it down in a sentence.
- Use that focusing sentence for a new burst of nonstop writing . . .

Elbow might say that once students have finished the prompts for the Text row in the Producing column, they “have used two kinds of consciousness: immersion, where you have your head down and are scurrying along a trail of words in the underbrush; and perspective, where you stand back and look down on things from a height and get a sense of shape and outline” (p. 52). It’s important to give the time, and ask students to create substantial personal, committed, passionate pieces of writing each week. I have them collect their freewriting, focused sentences, and more freewriting in the online collaborative word processing platform called Google Documents that they share with me. Over time, each student and I identify the “generative themes” (Freire, 1993) that begin to bubble up in his or her writing.

This type of really free, habitual freewriting is an important first step—an ongoing, underground spring—that allows blogging to become “a practice in catalyzing passion and creativity,” not just another school assignment. Once a student begins to write about their insights and discoveries around their area of inquiry, I encourage the writer “by finding niche learning communities that each kid might want to be a part of and build on that” (Brown, 2005, p. 11). Helping students to create and find these niches is what blogging in a school-based social network such as Youth Voices or the Personal Learning Space is all about.

One additional way that students are asked to *re-present* their generative themes (Freire, 1993, p. 109) is by coming up with five tags or key words. I ask students to think of five words to describe their writing so far. “If someone were to search for this piece of writing online, what key words would lead them to your writing?” This is akin to asking students to write a “focused sentence.” Asking them to tag their writing with five key words is to ask them to reread and think about what they are writing.

Later, when students add these words to the bottom of their blog posts, they see how key words give them the power to find others who have also published about this theme, which then allows them to respond to these bloggers, and possibly to “friend” them so that following their future posts becomes easier to do. The concept behind friends is that a person in the network connects their blogging site to others, establishing a web of relationships among others in the bigger network.

**Midweek Image Looping**

Let’s jump now to midweek, and zoom back to see the entire class. Whether a student started the Be a Blogger! matrix by commenting on other students’ blogs, by finding an image, or by freewriting, in the middle of the week, he or she should have done all of the steps that lead up to Producing (Drafting) with an Image. This activity is similar to ones that I remember from early in
Continuing in the Secondary Grades

my own schooling when my fourth grade teacher would ask us to look at an image and write about it, sometimes to describe it, but more often I remember being encouraged to use the image as a jumping off point. "Write the story that this image brings to mind."

An important difference here is that earlier in the week students were asked to find an image using a key word or tag or some word connected to a theme that they were already writing about. I ask each student to find an image (sometimes one that was taken by the student) to illustrate his or her thinking, then to think further and to write more, with the image in mind.

The image becomes part of the questioning, composing, wondering, inquiry process that helps the student to "loop, as if in an elliptical orbiting voyage" (Elbow, 1981, p. 60), back and forth between what the student already knows and is familiar with to a more speculative, unfamiliar territory.

I want students to go deeper than illustrating their writing with an image. I try to reach back to Freire's (1993) method of developing generative themes with images. Moving beyond my fourth grade teacher and acting like a critical pedagogue, I ask students to use the images that they have found to problematize their writing so far. "Go back to your freewriting now and see what else that image makes you think about your question."

Moving students from merely writing a description of the image to this more thoughtful, inquiry-based writing is one of the challenges of working with images. Instead of just illustrating their texts with images, the students learn to use their images as part of their thinking process. Through example and exhortation, most students begin to recognize the power of using images and text in conjunction, and even sometimes in juxtaposition, with each other. "Don't describe the image. Freewrite about what it makes you think now about what you are writing for this week's blog post. Where can this image take you?"

Rivers of Research Material

Another option on the Be a Blogger! matrix would be for a student to begin his or her week by reading something in their aggregator of syndicated writing and posts, Google Reader. If by Thursday, any particular student hasn't yet put an x through the third box (Links) down in the first column (Participating), I encourage them to go to their Google Reader and find blogs, news articles, and Web sites to read. Of course, before students can choose this option, I have to teach them how to subscribe to these sources.

I have found that students' blog posts are often more compelling when they introduce, insert, and interpret quotations from other sources, especially blogs and news sources that they have found themselves by using Google Blog Search and Google News.

In addition to writing more compelling posts, I want students to understand the differences among blogs, news sources, articles, peer-reviewed journals, videos, and podcasts. Over time, I have found that when students are using these resources in a personally meaningful inquiry they begin to distinguish between the resources that get updated in Google Reader from Web sites, Wikipedia, and other online encyclopedias and information sources.

Since it's easier to use these tools than it is to explain how they work, we have students try them out. Once students have opened an account in Google Reader (http://reader.google.com), we ask them to choose a keyword, something that they might want to research. One example is "Relationships." For the purpose of this demonstration, students use this keyword to find blogs, news sources, podcasts, and articles.

I take students through several steps to set up rivers of information in their Google Readers that will constantly update. Google Reader gives us a place where we can foster in students the habits they need to select from these rivers, then read (and understand) these sources before using quotations from them in their blog posts. Students learn how to use:

- Google Blog Search (http://blogsearch.google.com) to search the blogosphere to find other bloggers who are writing about their key words.
- Google News (http://news.google.com), looking for their keywords (for example, relationships) in over 4,500 news sources;
- Find Articles (http://findarticles.com) to discover more extended, scholarly articles.
- Everyzing (http://search.everyzing.com) to collect podcast episodes about their inquiries.
- Tweet Scan (http://tweetscan.com) or Summize (http://summize .com) to search for and gather any post on Twitter (http://twitter .com) that uses their keyword.

Students set their Google Readers up so that there is a folder for each of the keywords that they choose to represent their inquiries. Each day, they can come to class, click on that folder, and all the rivers of articles, blogs, news items, podcasts, and Twitter posts that have been collected there based on the settings and interests of the student. This makes the research more integral in their writing and blogging processes. When they sit down at their computers, they pop up their Google Reader and see if there is anything new on topics such as video games, Yankees baseball, mother-daughter relationships, music, or current news.

It is has been a shift for both the students and me to be thinking about information in this way. Instead of saying go find information on a particular
topic, I am learning how to ask students to stay with a question for some time and to have a mosaic of Internet resources sent to their Google Reader. What is giving the research purpose is an approach to blogging that asks students to have their own inquiries, their own questions about the world and themselves.

**CAN SELF-SPONSORED, PASSION-LED, INQUIRY-BASED BLOGGING BE A CURRICULUM?**

As a quick look at the matrix, “Be a Blogger!” might suggest, blogging in my classroom is a multitasked, intricate process of reading, writing, talking, creating media, and doing research. In this era of state tests and mandated, sometimes even scripted curriculum, however, how do I describe this process to an interested but busy colleague, administrator, or parent?

I do not start with the matrix, which can be overwhelming. “One way to understand this curriculum,” I say to them, “is to think of it as three different ongoing projects each of which require a student’s attention every week.”

- Profile: I ask students to add something new to their profiles each week. Profiles are areas on a student’s blog that indicate their interests and information about their lives.
- Blog Post: Each week, students are asked to post on their blogs. Each week more thoughtfulness, more quotations, better connections, more effective use of media are required in each of these posts.
- Comments: Students are asked to respond to other students, both within their classes and school and from outside of their schools.

After taking a few questions, I’ll continue: “Another way to understand this curriculum is through the media that students are asked to use in their profiles, on their blog posts, and in their comments. I give assignments each week that help students to develop their skills with text, images, audio, and other multimedia.

The Essential Questions for this curriculum are like concentric circles that start with an individual student’s passions, and lead out through an online social network into taking social action. Blogging is the tool I use to pose these questions to students:

- What are you passionate about and how do these interests fit with other students’ big questions?
- What voices or sources of information do you think are important to include in your search for answers?

**REFERENCES**


