Weblogs for Online Education
Richard S. Lavin, Paul A. Beaufait, and Joseph Tomei

We are being pummeled by a deluge of data and unless we create time and spaces in which to reflect, we will be left with only our reactions. I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from “audience” to “public” and from “consumer” to “creator.” – Blood (2002, p. 16)

Learning Objectives
After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the learning potential in blogs, and decide whether they will be useful for your educational purposes;
- Identify various dimensions and paradigms of blog usage, and devise strategies for using weblogs on their own, or as part of a suite of tools;
- Choose the blogging and associated tools you need in a principled way, and make good use of the features provided.

Introduction
In this chapter, we discuss some of the actual and possible uses of blogs in education. We advocate an adventurous approach, in which educators investigate tools for themselves and reflect on whether and how they might make use of them. We look at some of the ways in which blogs can fit into a loose assemblage of tools that educators and learners may wish to create for themselves. We look also at specific blog tools and functions to familiarise educators with some of the options available and, more importantly, the issues that are likely to accompany such choices. Sandwiched between this Introduction and a Summary in which we encapsulate our approach and suggest some of the directions current research
is leading, we consider blogging in five major sections, with the focus moving progressively inwards to the details of tool choice.

The first of these, Blogging for Education: What, Why, and How?, looks at the background to blog usage, answering questions such as: What exactly are blogs and how did they evolve? How do they fit into the broad field of eLearning and blended learning? This section may help you decide whether blogs are for you.

In the second, Blogging Paradigms, we focus in on some of the philosophical and theoretical parameters of blog usage, answering the questions: What are some of the parameters that govern the uses of blogs, and how can we conceptualize the whole spectrum of edublogging? This section is designed to help educators already using blogs, or already committed to using blogs, to reconceptualize their blog use and consider new possibilities.

In the third, Blogging Strategies, we move our focus in further to advocate practical strategies, relating these to theoretical aspects of blogs and helping readers to become aware of other possible options and dimensions. In this section, we recognize concerns regarding privacy and public access to students’ work on the Internet. We also look at the areas of plagiarism and assessment.

In the fourth, Features of Blogs and Blog Hosting, we move our focus to blogging engines, services, and features. A foundation of our approach is using blogs as hubs for interaction with other tools. In the fifth, Tools to Use with Blogs, we introduce some of those tools and illustrate their uses.

Those last two sections focus squarely on blogs themselves and their features. There are risks associated with such a focus. One of these risks is that we might unwittingly propagate a technopositivist ideology (Njenga & Fourie, 2010), according to which eLearning technologies become imbued with an air of progressiveness, accompanied by a sense of inevitability or intrinsic value in and of themselves. However, we take it as understood that there are valid reasons to eschew the use of blogs, or any and all eLearning technologies. We assume that readers of this chapter have sensed pedagogical or learning potential in blogs and wish to know more about them. When educators choose to use blogs, the tools (blogging engines, hosting services, and browser interfaces) with which they and learners will be interacting constantly become an important consideration. Tools embody the intentions of their makers, so a conscious focus on tools and their ideological implications can ensure that your teaching with these tools is consistent with your own beliefs and goals.

Inevitably, there is overlap between sections. For example, we present blog commenting as a means to encourage blog reading. However, it is also a means for ensuring interaction among students, as well as reflection on content. Since comments are typically fairly short, writing blog comments can also introduce learners to blogs before they are required to create their own blogs and write longer posts. Similarly, when discussing the desirability of embedding external elements within blogs in Section 4, Blogging Paradigms, we mention for illustration purposes specific tools that belong conceptually in Sections 6 or 7. This overlap is what makes blogs such a powerful tool for the classroom, but also makes it difficult to create a step-by-step guide to using them.
The three of us have come to blogging via different routes, experimenting with, selecting for, and promoting uses of various strategies and tools that we feel complement learners’ needs and our individual and collective teaching styles and preferences. We are confident that after reading this chapter you too will find blogging strategies, tools, and combinations thereof that will suit your educational objectives and settings, teaching styles, and technological preferences.

**Blogging for Education: What, Why, and How?**

In this section, after a brief introduction to blogs themselves, we look at the contexts in which blogs may typically or most effectively be used.

**Definitions**

The basic idea behind blogging software has been inherent in the design of the World Wide Web—based on stacks following the “last in, first out” principle (Rosenberg, 2009)—since its inception in 1990. As Stefanac (2006) puts it, “[a]rguably, Sir Tim Berners-Lee authored the first blog” in the early nineties (p. 36). Thus, the emergence of blogs as a distinct genre and their explosion in popularity—an estimate in the Sunday Times in February, 2009, put the total number of blogs in the world at close to 200 million—appears in hindsight to have been somewhat inevitable. Educators soon became aware of the educational potential of blogs and sought to exploit it.

For the purposes of this chapter, a blog, somewhat recursively, is any site created with blogging software whose organizational principle is reverse-chronological ordering. In other words, it works on the “last in, first out” principle, with today’s entry being visible first thing as you enter a site. With most blogging software, there are two main elements for the user to deal with. The first of these is a posting interface, in which the blogger will create the content of the blog post (most often but not always primarily text) and usually add a title, perhaps with other elements such as keywords. The second is the public face of the blog, which bears the URL that the blogger would tell prospective viewers. In addition to a blog URL, usually each individual post will have its own URI or permalink.

**eLearning and Blended Learning Contexts**

When technology was less advanced, eLearning generally consisted of adding occasional email to face-to-face or distance learning classes as a complement to postal delivery. Since the turn of the century, it takes place in a wide range of contexts and modes, and thus has different meanings to different people, and even to the same people at different times. Educators involved almost exclusively with delivery of distance learning material would be likely to approach blogging from a different perspective from those working in blended learning contexts. Likewise, primary or elementary educators will have different goals from those working in secondary and tertiary (post-secondary) education. Although much of what we say is applicable to most contexts, readers may wish to bear in mind that the authors all work in tertiary institutions in Japan, and that our institutions have no distance learning programs per se; our interest in blogs and other eLearning tools is centred on enhancing our face-to-face language classes.
The Historical Development of Blogs
Our work with blogs for educational purposes has been informed by the historical development of blogs. Initially, blogs were a form of personal expression that later developed into a political phenomenon. Catherine Seipp discussed this in an attempt to explain what blogs were to the readers of the American Journalism Review. While her comment is rooted in a particular time and historical event (the online reaction to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon of September 11, 2001, often referred to simply as 9/11), there are several points that are worth noting here:

In general, “blog” used to mean a personal online diary, typically concerned with boyfriend problems or techie news. But after September 11, a slew of new or refocused media junkie/political sites reshaped the entire Internet media landscape. Blog now refers to a Web journal that comments on the news—often by criticizing the media and usually in rudely clever tones—with links to stories that back up the commentary with evidence. (Seipp, 2002)

Seipp went on to quote Virginia Postrel, who wrote: “After the attacks [of 9/11], people wanted very much to know what other Americans—and people around the world—were thinking and feeling, and blogs provided a vehicle for hearing from people you felt some connection to.”

Note that Postrel's emphasis is firmly ensconced in the notion of expressing one's opinions and ideas. In that sense, it is understandable that education would not drive the process, but lag behind, in so far as the traditional raison d'être of being a student is not to express one's opinions, but to learn those of others. Like many others, Godwin-Jones (2003) chipped away at those assumptions when he wrote: “If one thinks of blogs as being essentially on-line journals, it may not be evident how they could be used in collaborative ways. But actually looking at a few blogs ... demonstrates how interactive they can be.”

The Godwin-Jones quote shows that, as blogs became more popular, the notion of providing for two-way communication came to the fore. As this notion developed and advanced, the idea of a blog as the centre of a community, based on the idea that asynchronous computer communication could be rich enough to support such a social creation, began to take hold. While our image of two-way communication is often from the point of view of those engaging in a dialogue, that dialogue can enrich those who observe it. Paulus, Payne, and Jahns (2009) pointed to “conversation as learning made visible” (p. 2) and showed that it is useful for teachers to monitor student understandings as they express them on their blogs. Through this process, teachers can discern needs in the students, by checking the degree to which what they have taught matches what students have taken from it, and are thus able to plan future learning activities.

For the purposes of this chapter, we talk about using blogs as personal journals and as repositories for student work, for limited interaction, and, networked with other blogs, for creating communities.
A Spirit of Adventure

There are as yet no well-regarded step-by-step guides to using blogging in education, and we think it unlikely that such a guide could ever be very useful in a wide range of contexts. We shall in the next major section, Blogging Paradigms, offer instead some conceptual lenses that can effectively frame the uses of blogs in educational settings. Before we do so, let us set the stage by introducing the spirit that infuses all our work, one that is shared by many edubloggers and summed up best in Salen (2007):

> I believe weblogs are ideal in blended weblog and face-to-face learning environments if both educators and students embrace the medium with curious and explorative enthusiasm. In addition, the educators have to enforce enough structure, rules, practice, and prior information to give the students an opportunity to familiarize [themselves] with the medium as quickly and effortlessly as possible. On the other hand, it is important that instructors abstain from giving too much structure and rules, as it is likely to make the students dependent on persistent teacher scaffolding, and thus make them less independent students. (p. 89)

The first part of this, “curious and exploratory enthusiasm”, embodies the recognition that each individual educator is his own best guide. Seeing what other educators are doing, looking for elements that strike a chord, and that you can envisage being useful with your classes and your style of teaching, prepares the way to trying something new. Observing the reactions of students, and reflecting on how you might modify the activities to make them more meaningful or enjoyable, and to meet your objectives more fully, opens the door to creative modifications, ready to be modified and supplemented again as you find other inspiring examples to emulate or learn from, or read other works by educators and researchers to gain a new perspective. This should all sound familiar, as it is what most educators often do for any new activities, as well as in routine ones.

Much effort by teachers is aimed at fostering autonomy in their students, and blogs appear to have a natural fit with this goal. Mynard (2007) found that blogging appeared to promote autonomy, encouraging students to decide on their own writing topics and to reflect on their learning. Development of autonomy is also implicit in Oravec’s (2003) finding that blogging can motivate students to work on a topic for an extended period of time. There are obvious parallels between the desire to foster autonomy in students and the stance that we are advocating educators adopt. Shoffner (2007), for example, emphasizes the importance of preservice teachers using tools such as weblogs within their content area to allow them to construct a working pedagogy for technology. Little (1995) writes of teacher autonomy as a prerequisite for learner autonomy. To us this represents a strong case for using blogs or other tools that promote reflective journaling. The use of blogs or other similar “small” technologies is also supported by the findings of Davis et al. (2009), that teacher training initiatives should be as organic and local as possible. An example of such a local initiative for continuous professional development is provided by Luehmann & Tinelli (2008). The use of blogs can be taught simply and reasonably quickly. Teacher-participants initially may use blogs as personal journaling tools, and successful use in this way does not depend on the success of any larger initiatives. Gradually thereafter they may
read, and begin to comment on and link to other teachers’ blogs, expanding their gleanings from, and connections and contributions to, a professional development network.

A more adventurous approach is likely to be easier to implement in the more ecological approaches outlined in Blogging Paradigms in the next section, where blogs can be used and combined in ways defined by the educator and emerging from the specific learning situation, than it is when a blogging tool is bundled with a VLE. Nevertheless, it is applicable in both scenarios.

**Blogging Paradigms**

Here we describe some theoretical lenses through which to view the spectrum of blog uses. They serve as an introduction to the more specific strategies that we outline in the following section, Blogging Strategies.

**Embedded, Networked, and Embedding Uses of Blogs**

A first approach to blogging, perhaps taking a purely face-to-face environment as your starting point and introducing blogs as the only eLearning component of a course, is to use a blog as a repository or online portfolio of student work. Such a conception of a blog fits well with traditional conceptions of portfolios as showcases of discrete pieces of completed work. Advantages of blogs as tools for such an online portfolio include ease of use and the default chronological organization, which may be adequate for many purposes with no additional organization. Blogs, in common with other Internet-based tools, provide teachers with web-based access to students’ work at any time, with time stamp functions also acting as a kind of submission tracker. In accord with more recent conceptions of portfolios, blogs work well for housing iterations of students’ work, serving as a record of progress. This is of obvious benefit when it comes to assessment, a topic we revisit in the section on Blogging Strategies. More significantly perhaps, the blog can also serve as a venue for teacher comments, serving as a trigger of progress as well as a record thereof. Readers may wish to view the section on ePortfolios in Tomei et al. (2008) for an overview of issues related to this topic.

This latter conception of portfolio as a record of progress meshes with the notion of process writing, an approach to writing that emphasizes the process of writing over the end product. Dating from Janet Emig’s (1971) work, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, which first noted the process of revision in students who had superior writing ability, process writing was at one time so ubiquitous as an approach to teaching composition that Joseph Petraglia (1999) could write: “Like many colleagues, perhaps, process is all I have ever known (p. 50).” Zamel (1982) said that from this perspective writing “is the process of exploring one’s thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are”.

An attractive feature of such a meta-cognitive approach is that, by emphasizing process, allowing students to “think aloud”, and incorporating multiple doable steps into assignments, you can lessen pressure for and decrease opportunities for plagiarism. We revisit this topic in Blogging Strategies. While a growing literature seeks to reevaluate process writing as a pedagogical approach (Kent, 1999, inter alia), we would like to emphasize how the technological advances demonstrated by blogs can infuse new life into this common pedagogical approach.
An alternative to using blogs as the only eLearning component of a course is to use blogs as a tool within an eLearning or blended learning environment, in a way that complements other tools and activities. Such an approach is consistent with Heinze & Procter’s (2005) view of blended learning as a “harmonious combination” of face-to-face and computer-mediated learning. Within true blended learning approaches, or in predominantly face-to-face courses with eLearning introduced as a minor component, we suggest that one's approach to blogging will differ depending on whether you or your institution are already committed to one of the comprehensive, or monolithic (Camprese, 2005; Lavin, 2002; Weller et al., 2005), systems variously known as a learning management system (LMS), course management system (CMS), or virtual learning environment (VLE).

If so, then we would argue against using the blog feature of your VLE, if it has one. Instead, we would suggest adopting the approach outlined by Oravec (2003), where a student's blog functions as what she terms a “middle space”. This term suggests to us both:

- a middle ground between the fully personal presence of a learner in a face-to-face classroom and the depersonalised presence afforded by many VLEs; and
- a place that is online like the VLE but, unlike the VLE, controlled by the individual learner.

For Oravec, the “malleable and fluid” nature of weblogs supports “idiosyncratic intellectual approaches” (p. 225). She also points to the potential of such spaces to “offset pressures to plagiarize materials or to withdraw in academic or personal discussions” (p. 225). Oravec’s conception of middle space is reminiscent of Gumbrecht’s (2004) perception of blogs as “protected space” for bloggers, one that cannot be violated even if it can be observed. Of particular interest to Oravec (2003) is that the nature of this space means that weblogs can motivate “students to write and do research over an extended period of time” (p. 225). Later, we will relate these conceptions of space to those of intra-, inter-, and extra-personality.

If there is no requirement for you to use a specific VLE, and if your classes are not so large that management and assessment become your chief preoccupations, we suggest that you eschew the admittedly powerful VLE tools in favor of a more eclectic approach, in which you choose the tools you need yourself, on a case-by-case basis. The central idea behind this kind of approach is that educators are in the best position to decide what they wish to accomplish and what tools to add to the toolbox in order to do so. In general, educators embracing this approach make use of “small technologies” (Lavin & Tomei, 2005), tools such as email, wikis, blogs, and discussion forums that have one central and readily identifiable function, and that allow the locus of creativity and innovation to shift from the developer of a VLE to the educator making the decisions as to how to combine the available tools.

Such decisions are a natural consequence of accepting the general “small pieces loosely joined” philosophy (Weinberger, 2003) now accepted by many educational technologists (e.g., Feldstein, 2005). This may entail “moving from an education system defined by its limits, to an education system defined by its lack of limits” (Warlick 2007, p. 32). While the toolbox you assemble may include tools such as email and wikis, we shall in this chapter

---

1 Arguably, assessment of blogs by educators constitutes a violation of this protected space. We will revisit this issue in Blogging Strategies, below.
focus only on blogging, and on tools which are embeddable within blogs or that can be considered as subsidiary to blogs. Note also that, in many cases, we feel that blogs and associated tools may well be all you need, as outlined in Blogs as the eLearning tool of choice below.

An approach of this type, in which educators avoid pre-packaged sets of tools (VLEs) in favour of their own toolkit, is often called an ecological one (Brown, 1999), because the basic aim is to establish a framework with space to grow and change. A learning ecology is one where the tools are “decentralized, fostered, connected...as compared to centralized, managed, and isolated” (Siemens, 2003). Thus, if one tool in your system is unsatisfactory, you can change it immediately, rather than relying on the abilities and goodwill of a VLE supplier or developer.

Ecological uses of blogs can further be subdivided into networked and embedding uses, though this distinction is a subtle one. In networked uses, a blog is considered one among several tools of more-or-less equal status, used together to cover a whole spectrum of activities. In embedding uses, although several tools are used and some or all of them may be usable independently of the blog, the blog is considered primary and is used as a kind of hub for the other tools, and indeed all learning activities. In the next sub-section, Blogs as the eLearning Tool of Choice, we outline some of the features of blogs that make them uniquely suitable as the main tool in a complete eLearning or blended learning strategy.

**Blogs as the eLearning Tool of Choice**

As we have mentioned, we believe that educators are best served when they take responsibility themselves for identifying their needs and assembling the toolsets they need to accomplish their own purposes. However, we believe that exclusive or near-exclusive use of blogs, perhaps with additional judicious use of email, is a viable option in many contexts.

**Integration of tools**

It is worth noting that blogs work well with other tools, such as feed or book widgets (which will be covered in a later section, Tools to Use with Blogs); the usual model is that a blog has other tools embedded within it. This is partially due to inherent qualities of most blogging platforms, but may be more the result of the early and continued growth in popularity of blogs, which served as motivation for developers to bend the software to an ever-expanding range of uses. Thanks to this trend, it is easier to embed many tools into a blog than to design a webpage into which to embed such tools. Thus, where a more extensive collection of tools is appropriate, a blog can serve as a central hub or portal to organize access to these tools, giving students a single access point to disparate Internet locations, comprising various online tools and repositories of information suited to their particular needs or the educator’s pedagogical goals.

**Suitability for conversation**

Many blog engines feature backlinks. These enable one blogger to enter into a dialogue with another blogger on the level of an individual post. Links are two-way, a major advance on the one-way links of the traditional Web, and it is this quality which makes blogs part of the Web 2.0 movement, and one which aims to bring the Web closer to the original intentions of its inventor, Berners-Lee (2000). Nearly all blogging platforms have
mechanisms for making links easy to create, usually by means of bookmarklets, which automatically embed the URL to be linked to, freeing the blogger from the drudgery of copying and pasting URLs or encoding them into reader-friendly displays.

Another Web 2.0 feature shared by blogs is instant updatability and editability. In other words, updates and edits in traditional website development entail a relatively arduous process of editing code on a desktop computer and then uploading and replacing code on the whole site, whereas bloggers, just like wiki contributors, can edit and post new content from any Internet-connected computer or even a mobile phone. In addition, the default organizational model of reverse-chronological ordering means that new content is always visible; perhaps more importantly, this means that a blogger never needs to worry about where to put new information.

**Suitability for collective endeavours**

Blogs, in addition to serving as records of progress or repositories for individual writers, are commonly used to enable collective work of various kinds, often, as noted here, on company intranets:

> [W]idespread adoption and success of Weblogs at spreading ideas quickly, as well as connecting loosely joined communities, was noticed by many as valuable inside the firewall. Some organizations encouraged senior executives to start blogs and individuals with specialized expertise to start posting preliminary thoughts and ideas in order to foster discussing and information sharing both inside and outside firewalls. Companies including Sun, Microsoft, IBM, Disney, GM, Ford, Weatherbug, Salon, and the Guardian use Weblogs. One individual usually publishes a Weblog, but teams and groups can create Weblogs for information sharing. (Fichter, 2005)

Company or team blogs may be set up differently depending on purpose. Team leaders may be the blog owners, who may make routine posts such as updates on team progress, resolutions from face-to-face meetings, or reminders on priorities. This serves as a record of decisions or process for the team, and may or may not include provisions for commentary, discussion, or interpretation by or with other team members. In other cases, team blogs may give all team members authorship rights; blogs of this sort may focus only on updates from the various team members, or may feature discussions on issues that are of concern to one or more members of the team. While more traditional tools such as SharePoint are still in favour with many companies, for others blogs have become the tool of choice for many to inform users of the status of current updates and receive feedback from their users.

Luca & McLoughlin (2005) discuss their use of a blog running on Google’s Blogger platform as a vehicle for a team of students to exchange updates on progress on team tasks, to ask for and extend help to each other, to alert team members to any problems, and to support individual reflections on their joint progress. Clearly, the range of possibilities for adoption and adaptation of blogs to educational contexts is broad.
Features crafted specifically to enable collaboration are still in their infancy. One important step in this area is the CommentPress theme for WordPress, recently relaunched as the digress.it service. While maintaining the conventional blog divide between authors and readers or commenters, it allows readers to attach comments to long posts on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis as well as make standard comment responses to whole posts. An example is W1N5TON, an annotated version of Cory Doctorow’s work, Little Brother, intended to serve as “a resource for those discussing the book and interested in uncovering the facts beneath this piece of fiction”. While this example is a finished work—annotations can be added but the work itself cannot be changed—this kind of system lends itself also to co-authoring of hypertextual documents without jettisoning the notion of primary author.

**Incorporation of course management features**

One motivation for the development of VLEs was the desire for a tool to manage students, online activities, content and courses. While for student tracking on a large scale a VLE is still probably required, it is possible to incorporate modest course management features into ordinary blogs. On the most basic level, this may entail simply posting details of assignments and important dates on a teacher’s blog, perhaps one reserved solely for this purpose. A course typically will have certain information associated with it that is not time-sensitive, for example a syllabus and a course calendar incorporating non-negotiable dates such as the times of the first class session and of final exams. It is not appropriate for this kind of information to disappear over the horizon of recent posts.

Blogging platforms such as WordPress and Blogger, in addition to posts, have entities called pages. These appear in the site wherever theme or template options allow the author(s) to put them, are accessible through hyperlinks put anywhere at all, and do not move around as new content appears. With platforms that do not have such a feature, one can usually incorporate such information in headers or sticky posts that stay at the top of home page displays, in footers if templates allow them, or in posts dated in the future. Barrett (2007), for instance, discussed leveraging page affordances of WordPress to create a combined blog and ePortfolio, a natural combination for academics and students. Barrett’s “second WordPress ePortfolio” is a prime example (My Portfolio).

**Self-expression and personal presence**

Because blogs represent the personal space of their authors, they not only serve as a way for teachers to present more information about their classes and themselves, but also as an excellent venue for student self-expression. We have found that students often become attached to their blogs in a way that may rarely occur with discussion forums, where they are likely to exert less control over both content and form of their contributions. This can lead to greater writing quantities, something of particular value in language education. By writing a lot, students have more time to find their own voice, and, by personalizing the look of their blog and being encouraged to post personal views before they are fully formed, they are given more opportunities to do so, and thus gain a greater stake in making their blog a success. Having a genuine audience, even if only other students, makes the process more authentic. Responding to and expanding on the views of others can provide further opportunities for writing and reflection.
Blog Orientations

Purposeful uses of blogs may vary widely among and within educational contexts, as well as across and along personal blogging trajectories and professional careers. Rather than give a long list of activities, we will here offer a conceptual lens through which it is helpful to view the broad spectrum of blog uses. We suggest that blogs should be viewed along a spectrum of intra-, inter-, and extra-personal orientation, which loosely corresponds to notions of a blog as a repository, as a middle space, and as a community centre.

Intra-personal orientation

When blogs serve as reflective journals, we can say that they reflect a largely intra-personal orientation; in other words, blog owners focus on their own thoughts and experiences. It is instructive to think about the extent to which a journal maintained on a blog is similar to a paper journal. Whereas a paper journal is by default readable only by the writer and perhaps one or two trusted friends, the default setting for a blog is for it to be open to reading by the general public. As we saw above with Gumbrecht’s (2004) notion of “protected space,” being readable does not necessarily represent a threat to the feelings of ownership and sacrosanctity of the space. Nor does allowing comments on all or selected posts, as long as this happens as a policy or decision by the blogger. In the words of Herring at al. (2004), blogs “allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space” (p. 11). It provides a kind of “safety net from immediate social interaction” (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 4), encouraging reflection and consideration of purpose and audience.

When comments from the public are allowed, or even a select group of users, a clear shift along the spectrum towards inter-personality occurs; however, the fact that usually only blog owners have privileges enabling them to make original posts means that their agendas are still intra-personal.

An interesting case is one where a blogger maintains a personal journal blog that is readable only by him/herself; here the focus is clearly intra-personal, but we would suggest that choosing a blog as the medium for the journal suggests the possibility of a future opening up, and it is likely that this potential use will influence the style and content of the journal. Groulx (2010) emphasizes that “[d]iarying [is] NOT a private genre” (slide 8), even if the audience numbers only one person. For instance, diary blogs may serve as intimate chronicles and confessionalists, yet their authors, he insists, “are always taking into account some sort of audience” (Groulx, 2010, audio recording [4:00+]). Some systems, as we will see in Features of Blogs and Blog Hosting, actually lend themselves to gradual overture by providing fine-grained publication and even commenting options on a post-by-post basis.

Inter-personal orientation

Blogs where dialogue or conversations with readers and other bloggers is the primary aim manifest an inter-personal orientation. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the base of an inter-personal orientation can be a personal journal blog that is open to comments, or a new blog started for a separate purpose. Over time, by writing more or less consistently about an identifiable range of topics, a blogger may come to be known as an expert in certain domains, and other bloggers active in those domains may become regular visitors to, and commenters on, the blog. Those visits are likely to be reciprocal.
In preference to peer-to-peer comments, a blogger may use her blogging engine's backlinks or trackback capability to respond on her own blog to a fellow blogger's post, in which case the response will automatically include a link to the original. Thus, while posting privileges on an individual blog may be unequal, the fact that anyone can use their own blog to post a response to another blogger's post means that blog clusters or communities can be interpersonal and democratic in nature. Co-owned or group blogs over which multiple bloggers would share comparable privileges for both posting and commenting may also in large part reflect inter-personal orientations.

**Extra-personal orientation**

The first wave of blogs was generally simply collections of links that the blogger considered interesting and useful. The idea was that, as the Web grew and keeping track of more than a small portion thereof became impractical, surfers would find one or two bloggers whom they trusted to provide good links and start their surfing at those sites. In the words of Blood (2002), “[t]he Web has been, in effect, pre-surfed for them” (p. 9). Since the focus on these sites is on the information embodied in the collection of links, we can say that they are largely extra-personal in orientation, and fulfill a filtering purpose (Milne, 2004).

It should be clear already that these distinctions in orientation are not absolute. As we have noted, with regard to inter-personal orientation, the most personal of journals can be opened up to comments and may later participate in weblog conversations. A link collection, by its mere choice of links, embodies something of the interests and values of the compiler. By means of trackback or backlinks, other compilers may respond to a collection of links by posting a complementary or rival collection. If the compiler adds a short commentary, and opens posts up to comments, the blog moves further towards an inter-personal orientation.

**Foregrounded and Backgrounded Blogs**

Working in conjunction with the three different orientations is the role that the blog plays in the class. Gomes (2005; cited in Coutinho, 2007, p. 2), distinguishes between blogs as “educational resource” and as “pedagogical strategy”. A similar distinction is made by Ganley (2004), who talks of backgrounding and foregrounding blogs:

> The weblog is at once backgrounded as invisible mechanism for course activities as it is foregrounded as locus, as space for collaboration and connectivity. (Section 2, Paragraph 6)

In a given course, a blog may be more or less of one or the other, resource or strategy, and within a course it may be more or less foregrounded at different times. While we have generally made the focus of our courses student blogs for writing courses, the literature on reflective journaling, where teacher-practitioners or students record observations about classes, materials, and organization in order to find improvements and/or chart progress, has begun to include both teacher practitioners and students keeping blogs as reflective journals. Any blog used for such purposes is a prototypical example of a backgrounded blog (cf. Stiller and Philleo, 2003; Hernández-Ramos, 2004).
Another helpful decision for educators to take is:

- Is blogging itself a major objective of a course or program? or
- Is it primarily a vehicle or platform to promote or support other objectives?

Your decision may influence the extent to which you wish to implement the strategies that follow.

**Websites Mentioned in this Section**

- Digress.it: http://digress.it/
- W1N5T0N: An annotated version of Cory Doctorow’s little brother: http://w1n5t0n.com/
- My Portfolio (Helen Barrett’s): http://hbarrett.wordpress.com/my-portfolio/

**Blogging Strategies**

We have discussed a range of issues to be aware of when using blogs in the classroom, and now we would like to move to some strategies that you should make your students aware of when they begin using blogs and that you, as an educator who blogs, should be aware of. The strategies we discuss here are by no means the only ones, but we feel that these will provide a firm foundation for blogging efforts of both students and educators.

**Digital Identities and Personal Expression**

As we outlined above regarding intra- to extra-personal orientations, even blogs with a largely extra-personal orientation allow personality to shine through. Emphasizing the notion of digital identities in a class using blogs grants students license to express their personal views and experiences on matters relevant to the class—as well as on matters unrelated to the class. A comfortable atmosphere that encourages original and personal content can of course help in this regard.

Educators may wish to discuss with students how much of themselves it is appropriate to expose, after checking applicable national and local policies, as there are legal, safety, and privacy issues to be considered. While it is almost always inappropriate to give details such as postal addresses and phone numbers, there is less consensus on items such as full names/first names or only pseudonyms. In general, we would say that each educator needs to strike a balance appropriate for each group and setting with and in which they blog. While privacy and security are important, we wish to avoid smothering students’ identities to the extent of diluting their social presence (Short et al., 1976). At the very least, it is important that class members be not only identifiable to each other and to the teacher, but also visibly present in online exchanges.

Choice of blog design and imaginative use of avatars can serve as a valuable form of personal expression. We have found that attractive presentation can be key to inter-personal developments: Students may for example compliment a peer on a modified custom colour scheme, and the recipients of such comments become more aware of audience as they experiment with first design, perhaps, then content. Peer-to-peer (or near-peer) commenting can serve as a springboard for longer, and possibly more thought-provoking exchanges.
Blogging for Developing Writers

One of our primary concerns as teachers of English as an additional language (EAL) in tertiary institutions in western Japan is the notion of quantity of writing that students produce. We hope that, while reading along, educators in other fields or locales, or at other levels of instruction, may see connections or opportunities for adoption and adaptation of this notion to blogging and related strategies for settings and purposes of their own.

Vinall-Cox (2005) is one of many writers who have noted the usefulness of blogs in promoting writing quantity. Quantity is of course not everything in writing, but an ability to produce a reasonable amount of text in a reasonable amount of time can be considered a minimal requirement of many tasks, and achieving greater writing speed and flow can clear the ground for improvements in other areas. Even where requiring long posts would not be consistent with the objectives of the class, it is generally advisable to gently encourage frequent posts. Anecdotal evidence and our own experiences suggest that for most learners there is what we call a threshold of participation beyond which the perceived difficulty or trouble involved in writing a post becomes minimal and blogging, and writing, can really take off.

In our experience with low-proficiency EAL writers, we have found it invaluable to take advantage of a range of techniques and tools that allow students to complete meaningful posts in a modest amount of time, either by making it easier to generate text or more usually by temporarily lowering our expectations regarding the quantity of student-generated text within individual posts.

Perhaps the simplest way to make shorter posts meaningful is copious use of graphic elements. For a novice student blogger, writing a first blog post, especially if in a non-native language, can feel like a high-pressure assignment, akin to an essay. A photo taken by a student, or chosen from an appropriate open source collection, provides an easy focus for a post, making a very short post describing the photo adequate, and removing any pressure from the situation. In the case of a book review or report, a quote from the book (suitably formatted to show that the copied passage is a quote and its source), followed by a short comment regarding its importance or the student's reaction to the quote, can serve as an easy path into book reviews, as well as a gentle introduction to the concepts of appropriate citation and avoidance of plagiarism.

To encourage the generation of more actual text, timed writing is a technique in wide use that can be especially useful with non-native language learners. We commonly use a 10-minute timed writing, usually on something that students have done or experienced over the past week, as a warm-up activity at the beginning of each weekly class meeting, and we find it motivating to encourage students to log their progress in this activity. Tools that aid in the generation of text include concept or mind mapping tools and outliners. Using these tools and techniques may also be helpful in avoiding plagiarism, as they firstly remove the necessity to generate instantly extended texts, providing a scaffolded process towards any longer assignments, and secondly document the process, reducing perceived opportunities for inappropriate copying.

---

1 See, for example, the LTD Project Wiki: Blog Related Resources: Image Banks.
The most radical way to lower quantity-based barriers to participation is to use a micro-blogging tool such as Twitter (Mork, 2009). An extended discussion of micro-blogging tools is outside the scope of this chapter, but we will note here that we consider an approach based on conventional blogging of the sort outlined here to represent the best of both worlds: Being sensitive to students’ abilities and perceptions when using blogs means that any perceived lower limits on quantity can be dissolved; at the same time, the absence of any upper limit means that posts can stretch to accommodate any kind of use, no matter the student’s progress.

Readers may have become aware here of a possible trade-off between technical and writing proficiency. For younger learners or for learners in low-technology environments, mastering even such simple steps as uploading photos may require considerable class time. The benefits are such that we consider the short-term trade-off, such as it is, to be generally worthwhile; in addition, by lowering any barriers to blogging, we enable students to write more posts, which in the longer term can lead to greater overall quantity of writing.

**Encouraging Blog Reading**

In situations where course requirements are stipulated in terms of blogging at a certain frequency or writing a certain number of words, there is a danger that learners will come to see their writing as simply a quota to fill. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with our ideal of blogs enabling and facilitating peer-to-peer commenting and conversation among members of a community of bloggers. It is important to develop measures to encourage learners to read and respond to fellow learners’ blogs regularly and respectfully.

A first step is to create a hyperlinked list of all the individual student blogs in a class or cohort and the teachers’ and assistants’ blogs. We do this on a wiki, which makes the process of updating relatively easy. The next step is to make sure that all students know where the list can be found, and to encourage students to visit their classmates’ and peers’ blogs and post comments on them. One of the institutions at which we use blogs employs near-peer role models (predecessors and graduate students) and assigns them the task of routine commentary on recent posts found by browsing blogs on the list.

In the early stages, clear guidelines for student browsing and commenting may be advisable, such as to look at all classmates’ blogs over a two-week period and to comment on at least six of them, or to browse specific categories, labels, or posts on blogs in a fixed sequence at a set weekly rate. Guidelines should reflect educators’ expectations for quality of comments, as well as quantity.

An alternative is to require students to comment on certain assignments, such as essays due for revision or selected movies or book reviews. Requiring students to comment on the essays of five peers and summarize their comments, incoming and out-going, in follow-up comments or separate blog posts habituates students to the process of commenting or back-linking, and to summarizing, reflecting, and action planning. Most blogs also include some email notification when follow-up comments are added, allowing students to see when other students have commented. Where such functionality

---

2 For an overview of wikis, see Lavin et al., 2008; our favorite ready-to-use wiki services include PBworks and Wikispaces.
is not available within the blogging system, educators may see fit to make use of external services such as FeedBlitz or Feedburner.

**Fostering Awareness of History and Social Context**

When introducing any new activity to students, it is common practice for educators to introduce the purpose of the activity as well as to check for prior experience or learning. In the case of blogs, we suggest that a certain amount of awareness of the history and social context of the tool may be helpful. We are reminded of Kerawalla et al.'s (2008) warning against being “ahistorical” when introducing new tools for learning, behaving “as if the new tool is entering a pristine environment in which it can find its niche wholly on its own merits” (p. 32). Naturally, you will want to avoid a study of blog history from diverting attention from the goals of the course, but a brief account of your purposes for choosing the tool, how it has been used for related purposes elsewhere, perhaps even your own experiences as a blogger, may make it easier for students to begin to share your goals and engage fully with the tool.

If you already have experience with educational uses of blogging, you may opt to take students on a guided tour of near-peers’ blogs, showing how they have approached blogging for similar purposes, and allowing your current students to learn from and perhaps build on their efforts. If you are implementing a new plan for the use of blogs, finding colleagues near or distant who have used blogging and presenting the work of their students can help you jumpstart your first foray into blogging. Also consider students’ prior experience, if any, with educational blogging or with blogging for other purposes.

For this purpose, it may be just as useful to show examples that you consider unsatisfactory in some way, as well as those displaying excellence: Excellent examples can provide models for students to follow, while unsatisfactory examples offer the opportunity to look at ways to improve. We find it useful to frame our ongoing educational efforts with blogging as introducing blogging to the curriculum rather than to students, as this encourages us to seek ways for students to learn from each other as well as from us.

**Using Syndication and Aggregation**

Lists of links, for example, a hyperlinked list on a wiki, serve the purpose of establishing connections to encourage blog reading (Encourage blog reading, in Blogging Strategies, above), and link you and your readership with kindred bloggers; these have traditionally appeared in the form of blogrolls in blog sidebars showcasing favourite sites. However, the more links you have, the more challenging it becomes to keep checking them. Fortunately, syndication and aggregation provide the means for both extending and streamlining interconnectivity.

Aggregation, through tools such as Atom and RSS, can be considered as a kind of glue that holds together the modern Web, especially Web 2.0 tools such as blogs. At its simplest, RSS or Atom involves taking a simple feed to a single blog. A good example to start with is a feed from the teacher’s blog, by means of which notifications of any new posts by the teacher will come directly to the student. This eliminates the need for the student to visit the teacher’s blog to check for new posts. Notifications may be set to come to a dedicated feed reader, such as Google Reader or NetNewsWire, or can be channeled to an email notification. Another common use of feeds is to display their
Students can of course gather individual feeds of this sort to any blogs they choose. Yet RSS and Atom can be used in more fine-grained ways. Modern blogging platforms usually create feeds for individual categories or tags, and also for individual authors on group blogs. Thus, one could opt to receive notifications of all posts tagged with “book reviews”, for example, if one were looking for ideas for books to read, or perhaps for other class members’ reactions to books read in class to refine one’s own perceptions.

It is also possible to combine multiple feeds into one feed, and it is this aggregatory function that makes handling multiple feeds feasible, and multiplies the amount of information that blog readers can realistically deal with. A teacher, for example, might create a combined feed for each class to keep track of class activity and perhaps step in if any problems occur, or if there is a prolonged dearth of posts. She might require students to subscribe to this feed so that they too can remain engaged with the class. Then she might combine all the class feeds into a super-feed that gives her one window into all her classes and allows her to comment as appropriate on students’ posts. If she wishes students to form a larger community extending beyond the bounds of the classroom, she may encourage students also to subscribe to that feed as well. Comments on specific blog posts will also usually have their own feeds; these can be useful to keep track of reactions to a particularly controversial post, or one asking for opinions or preferences.

In the early days of edublogging, many educators introduced blogs to their classes in a burst of enthusiasm with little forethought, and some were disappointed by the reactions of students. Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg (2005) suggested that “[the lack of] any significant shift in student perceptions and activity could be attributed to the use of blogs as collaborative areas without the use of aggregation” (p. 199). Parry (2006) proposed that “[t]eaching students to write blogs without at least providing the idea behind RSS is like teaching them to write papers on word processors, but never showing them how to use spellcheck, find and replace, italics or any of the formatting tools” (p. 4). The power of syndication and aggregation is perhaps best summed up by Warlick (2007): “Yesterday, we used search engines to find information. Today, with RSS, we are training the information to find us” (p. 59).

Approaches to syndication and aggregation can be situated anywhere on a continuum of teacher-directed to student-determined. An example of a thoroughly teacher-centric approach is provided by our work with lower-division students in EFL writing classes, especially at the beginning of the academic year, in provincial tertiary institutions in Japan. While nearly all students have mobile phones and regularly engage in text messaging, relatively few (although many more than when we started using blogs in our classes in 2004) have computers at home, and almost none have engaged in blogging, at least in English. At the beginning of each year, one of our priorities is to quickly set up an infrastructure whereby students can update their own blogs and gain access to their peers’ and teachers’ blogs easily. Later in the year, students can be encouraged to create their own aggregate feeds, perhaps using the “follow” function (Blogger), or similar functionality provided in other blogging software, or an easy-to-use external reader. In upper-division courses, students tend to naturally be more self-directed, and may spontaneously choose blogs to follow and include in an aggregate feed of their own. Some even discover tools
for this purpose for themselves. As with most teaching endeavours, an important aim is to provide scaffolding for higher levels of autonomy.

**Making the Blog an Online Hub**

Up to this point we have discussed strategies for drawing writers out, for encouraging them to read and respond to each other, and for providing technological scaffolding for feeding and reading peers’ posts readily. We want students to be aware in a timely fashion of other students’ writing, and of comments made about their own writing. We want them to have quick and easy access to reference information. We also want them to have tools to generate, organize, and outline their writing. All of these wishes presuppose the ability of blogs to incorporate resources and interact with other tools.

Thus, while a blog may be defined as a series of dated entries viewed on the web, from the point of view of the learner maintaining the blog, it may be more useful to view it as the learner’s personal hub that gives her access to the resources and tools she needs. Since the same goes for educators’ blogs, and there are numerous such blog-integrable resources and tools that we recommend to students and use frequently ourselves, we will give an overview of such tools in the section Tools to Use with Blogs.

**Considering Authenticity and Ownership**

Before moving on in Features of Blogs and Blog Hosting to consider details of specific blog tools and features, we would like to mention something that is key to understanding why so many educators like using blogs as the main or a major tool in their repertoire—authenticity. Authentic learning is defined by Newmann and Wehlage (1993) as learning that is “significant and meaningful” rather than “trivial and useless” (p. 8), and their criteria involve students constructing meaning through disciplined inquiry and working towards production of artefacts with value or meaning beyond success in school. Likewise, Petraglia (1998) argued that, above all, authenticity involves learners’ feeling ownership or responsibility for learning. Although the notion of authenticity is contested (see, for example, Johnson, 2000), we find it to be a useful guide for evaluating activities in the classroom.

Bolker (1997) mentioned a problem common to many kinds of writing done in class for a teacher: “The furthest many students get towards ‘considering the reader’ is to try to ‘psyche out the teacher’” (p. 171). By moving writing by default into a public arena, blogging sidesteps this problem by supplying a genuine audience. We know that, in many contexts, many or most students will have their own blogs outside of school. We also know that many adults outside of formal education have their own personal blogs, and that many blog as part of their work. Thus, blogging in general is highly authentic in nature. The degree of authenticity and the educational value of blogging to your students will depend on the detailed nature of what they do with their blogs.

Another factor that can contribute to authenticity and to students’ consciousness thereof is for the educator to be a blogger, preferably not only to the extent necessary to manage a course. As we saw above in relation to autonomy, an educator who blogs as a part of her life not only realizes the value of and problems associated with blogs, allowing her to more effectively negotiate specific problems that arise in class, but also becomes able to model blogging practices and embody the principle of authenticity in her own behaviours.
When a student puts great effort into maintaining a blog, it becomes part of her digital identity. She may consider it strictly part of her identity as a student and be ready to discard it as she moves on to another stage in her life. Equally, she may wish to emphasize the continuity in her development as a blogger, in which case it is important that measures taken by the institution or by the teacher not deny her continued access to the blog. Since an account in an institutional VLE often requires that one be a current student, this may constitute another reason for favouring a less monolithic approach. Again, we point to the necessity for educators to consider any applicable national and local policy about privacy, access, and ownership.

This issue also has implications for educators who choose to host student blogs on their own servers. If a large number of graduating students choose to continue with their blogs:

- Does your server have sufficient capacity to continue to host them?
- Does the blogging software have an export function that would allow former students to take their blogs elsewhere?
- Are the blogs accessible from elsewhere, to enable students to import them to alternative servers or sites?
- Do students have the technical skills to carry out these operations should they become necessary, presumably without technical support from you or your institution?

Another issue to bear in mind is whether continued hosting of students’ blogs after they complete a course or graduate implies any responsibility for the content of those blogs.

Using a hosted service such as Blogger or WordPress.com allows educators to skirt both of these issues. The negative side of this is that students and educators are bound at all times by the rules of these services and subject to the vagaries of service outages as well as facing the risk of the company running the service going out of business. If Blogger, for example, were to suspend services in the middle of a semester, or shortly before exams, it is difficult to imagine how we would cope. (For suggestions regarding hosting, and a cautionary tale of a service closure at short notice affecting our classes, see the next section, Features of Blogs and Blog Hosting).

**Assessment**
Assessment is an issue that has important implications for ownership, quantity, and plagiarism.

**Authenticity**
If students see assessment criteria as trivial or irrelevant to anything other than getting a good grade, blogging loses some of its authenticity. Educators should be able to justify their assessment criteria by reference to something beyond success in school. In general, broader skill sets such as careful reasoning and efficient and courteous online communication, including the ability to create hypertextual documents, are ones that will serve students well in many walks of life. We also note that authenticity travels in both directions. While teachers should make authentic assessment criteria, students need to display authenticity on their blogs, too. Authenticity in this sense is signalled by postings that represent some kind of engagement with and processing of the course content, whether that be careful
selection of material to quote, posting of one’s own ideas, or commenting on a peer’s ideas. Authenticity thus is highly relevant to the issue of plagiarism (below).

Ownership
Earlier, we discussed blogs in terms of protected space. The nature of this protection is questionable if a teacher has reserved the right to judge the contents of a blog. We believe it is possible to mitigate the encroachment by refraining from commenting on posts in an excessively critical way, and thus positioning oneself as a peer more than as a superior with the correct answer against which to judge students’ posts. This stance of course makes little sense if the blog will ultimately be assessed according to such criteria. It is important that, as far as possible, students should be led to understanding of assessment criteria by such means as rubrics.¹

Quantity
It may be necessary to give reluctant bloggers quantity-based targets but this should be done with caution, as it is easy for such targets to become, or to appear to be, just the sort of trivial criteria we warn against. We have found with many of our EAL students that their writing fluency is initially so low that word targets, alongside timed-writing exercises, are an important measure to build up a critical mass of blogging. Quantity-based targets may also be in terms of number of posts rather than words. In this case, it may be more effective to look at post frequency rather than the total number of posts over a term or year, since frequent blogging represents engagement with peers and with the course. Another useful frequency- or quantity-based measure is to count comments or hyperlinks to other blogs, which may equally serve as a measure of engagement with peers and other online content.

Plagiarism
By assessing the content of blogs, we almost automatically increase the temptation to plagiarize. The use of simple detection strategies such as a Google search for the text of a student’s post can identify cases of plagiarism and discourage future instances. More important, however, is the overall approach to teaching and learning. As we discussed in Blogging Paradigms, a process approach, by not requiring a correct answer or a polished version, encourages regular engagement with content and with peers, and allows students to show how they are processing the information given in class.

According to Howard (2003), plagiarism is often regarded as a kind of theft, but it also deprives students of opportunities to engage authentically with the course and thus hopefully acquire skills and concepts. We are interested primarily in this latter aspect rather than the idea of intellectual ownership, which may vary from programme to programme and culture to culture. There is evidence (see, for example, Pecorari, 2003) that much plagiarism occurs unintentionally. Therefore, the greater part of our anti-plagiarism efforts focuses on teaching useful skills such as how to cite other writers, and we actively encourage students to post quotes from works that they have read, along with attribution, the benefits are twofold. First, it discourages intentional plagiarism based on the sources that have already been cited, since that would be exceedingly easy to detect.

¹ For example, see a Rubric for Assessing Reflective Writing from the San Diego State University website. For a basic introduction to rubrics, mainly for K-12 education—what they are, ways to use them, and how to develop them—see TeAchnology.com: Why Rubrics? For more professional development resources, see the University of Wisconsin–Stout Rubrics for Assessment website.
More importantly, it forces students to make choices as to what information they find most significant, and gives them the opportunity to comment on that information, working their way towards new understandings.

**Privacy**

One concern of many educators considering blogging for their classes is the issue of privacy and online writing. It is possible to set up blogs to be read only by the blogger and the teacher, but such an extreme step defeats the whole purpose of a blog. A less extreme measure would be to make blogs accessible only on campus, yet this too would deprive blogs of much of their potential audience, and arguably of their authenticity. In addition, such settings are not possible with publicly hosted blogs, so such a choice would reduce the range of software options. If you adopt the default position of blogs accessible to the whole Internet, you may need to confront the issue of how to protect students’ privacy. This issue tends to be most problematic with younger learners, but may still apply in tertiary institutions.

Unfortunately, we cannot give clear guidelines in this area. Not only do notions of privacy vary from culture to culture, but there also seems to be a generational divide. Additionally, your workplace may have its own rules and codes concerning what can or cannot be shared and, indeed, what privacy actually entails. While we reference Gumpherz’s notion of protected space, we use that term to denote the pedagogical idea of providing a (virtual) location for students to work with their ideas and experiment; it does not imply that there are any technological measures in place to prevent unwanted access to information.

Similarly, teachers adopting blogging may well face new and novel situations where previous concepts and regulations may not hold and regulations in their strongest sense could be interpreted as preventing the dissemination of any information created in class to online forums. Indeed, it is our experience that administrators and colleagues uncomfortable with technology and computers are particularly likely to raise privacy concerns. The only advice that we can give is that you strive to keep abreast of exactly what your students are putting up online, and make sure that you have a pedagogical purpose in mind when you create assignments. Beyond simple instructions such as to avoid posting credit card numbers or full postal addresses online, teaching students about online etiquette and privacy is not something to be relegated to a single class but an on-going process that will demand your attention and thought.

**Websites Mentioned in this Section**

- FeedBlitz: http://www.feedblitz.com/
- FeedBurner: http://feedburner.google.com/
- Google Reader: http://www.google.com/reader/
- PBWorks: http://pbworks.com/content/edu+overview
- San Diego State University Rubric for Assessing Reflective Writing: http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec296/assignments/blog_rubric.html
Features of Blogs and Blog Hosting

Educators who have decided to use blogging in their classes, and have reflected on the strategies and techniques they intend to employ, still need to make decisions on software, for example: What kind of blogging software will you use, and where will it be hosted? Your answers to these questions are likely to affect your and your students’ blogging experiences profoundly. Tools evolve, and some that we discuss may not be available when you read this. The general principles, though, remain the same: It is useful to survey a range of tools with a view to finding a comfortable match with the kind of experience you want your students to have, which may depend upon both hosting and features.

Hosting

Blog software can be hosted on your own server. If you go this route, you will probably need to install the software yourself, and look out for and resolve any technical problems that may arise. The advantage is that you can customize the software as your needs dictate and your time and abilities allow. Probably, most educators will choose software hosted elsewhere, either in a technical department of a larger educational institution, or by a service such as Blogger, WordPress.com, or Edublogs. The first two are at the time of writing the giants of the free blog hosting world, while Edublogs is the only large service aimed specifically at education. This service offers a free and paid option.

Another free blog hosting service, Vox, was made by the well-known developers of TypePad, and was interesting for its colourful designs and its approach to interaction between users, covered below (Social networking).1 If funds are available (the cheapest option at the time of writing is around $100 a year), SquareSpace may be worth a look. Its ease of use and easy customization features attract many users who find options offered by Blogger and WordPress unsatisfying.

Two other free services, tumblr and Posterous, arose as a reaction to the increasing complexity of the more advanced blogging software and the perceived need of some bloggers with traditional blogging software to carefully prepare each post. Tumblr or Posterous may be good options if your chief concern is to start posting immediately, and if a post is as likely to be a link or a photo as a longer piece of writing.

Features

Most blogging software is similar in terms of features. Every major engine (blogging software package) has reverse-chronologically ordered posts as the basic model. Every major engine and service also offers a variety of themes that help bloggers customize their blogs.

---

1 Vox closed on October 1, 2010.
No blogging engine, as far as we are aware, has been expressly created to meet the needs of education; thus, you may find yourself wishing for features that do not exist. We suggest that the choice of blogging engine is not crucial: While no engine is perfect, most are pretty good. At the same time, we would caution against the view that time spent evaluating tools is time wasted. Tools are not inert; they can exert a subtle influence on the things we do and even on the things we can imagine doing. Comparing tools can bring these influences to the fore, and allow us if necessary to work around any limitations.

While no blogging engine as such has been created for and advertised to education at large, Edublogs is an example of a service, built on the popular WordPress engine, designed to meet the needs of education. WordPress also supports themes and plug-ins that add significant extra features in addition to changing the appearance of a blog. If you choose this platform, it is worth also spending some time looking at available options. In the following paragraphs, we generally use WordPress to illustrate the points that apply to multiple engines, as it is currently the most popular Open Source blogging engine, and is available for downloading and then installing on one's own server, as well as ready-hosted at WordPress.com and in the form of Edublogs.

Themes
Although every major blog service offers a variety of themes (bundles of settings governing the appearance of blogs), at the time of writing the free hosted service with the largest number of themes—some free and some paid—was WordPress.com. The WordPress software and services based on it also offer a large number of options regarding extra elements to install and how to arrange them. Blogger has a reasonable number of themes, although we have found them to be rather limited in terms of variety. Blogger also allows the addition of a large number of extra elements to blogs. However, it does not offer any three- or four-column designs, which can be limiting when there are many external elements to be incorporated into a blog.

Permalinks and backlinks
Permalinks are URLs that apply, and do not change, for individual posts, and often also for individual comments on posts. Permalinks allow us to be precise in referencing others’ posts. In the absence of permalinks, we are restricted to giving the URL for an entire blog and a text description, such as “In John’s post of September 1st, 2009, he suggested...”. If John wrote two posts on that date, or if we are lazy and write “John’s most recent post”, then later readers are left with a lot of guesswork. While it is not absolutely essential that beginning bloggers understand permalinks, it is advisable to introduce them as soon as is feasible.

To be useful, permalinks have to be used. To insert a permalink in a post, you have to know what it is, which requires that another browser window or tab be open with the linked post, page, or comment visible. Where the main focus of a post is a response to another post, bookmarklets are invaluable: clicking on a bookmarklet while reading a post brings up a posting window for one’s own blog, with a link to the post you are responding to already inserted.

These days, while every major blogging engine has permalinks, backlinks, depending on the engine, are sometimes unreliable. Backlinks, when available or installed and activated, enable backlinked posts that readers construct from posts on which a backlinking option
appears. However, in certain cases backlinking functionality may depend upon other blog settings, global or possible even post-specific. For example, in Blogger, where we recommend for the sake of security that learners refrain from listing their blogs with Google (to prevent them from showing up in Previous/Next blog displays), links to backlinked posts are unlikely to appear along with comments on original posts.

Though it is possible to view such features as conveniences—nice to have but not really necessary—our experience suggests that they can make all the difference in creating and sustaining satisfying blogging experiences. Without them, precise referencing becomes too much trouble, and blogs can become inwardly focused; with them, blogging becomes a means to support conversation, in which students engage almost effortlessly.

**Archives**

Another means of facilitating reengagement with earlier conversations is provided by Archives. Again, every major blogging engine provides these in some form, usually subdivided by year and month. In general, it is better to choose an engine that provides flexible and fine-grained displays. For example, displays of numbers of post for years, months, or weeks enable teachers and students to monitor general trends in individual productivity. Weekly subdivisions, precise dates, authors’ names, titles, snippets, and a graphical, calendar-like display may all prove useful as efficient means of access to particular posts or periods of blogging.

**Non-chronologically organized elements**

Some bloggers have experimented with alternative modes of organization of posts —for example, Brazell’s (2006) Conversation mode, which brings posts with recent comments, even if the posts themselves are old, to the top—but, as yet, these types of organization have failed to capture the imaginations of many blog software developers.

Some blog software and services, such as those based on the WordPress engine, also have hierarchically organized pages. These are useful for housing items such as syllabi and class calendars that are unlikely to require regular changes and that should be in a fixed location throughout a semester or longer period. Hierarchical organization allows easy access to any element on the blog, enabling a portfolio-type presentation.

**Taxonomy**

These days, nearly every major blogging package will have some taxonomy features for organizing posts. These may be called Categories, Tags, Labels, or Keywords. In the case of WordPress, a small number of fixed Categories, perhaps decided before a course begins, is often supplemented by Tags, which are usually keywords or phrases added to a post at the time of posting on a more ad hoc basis. Furthermore, the categories can be hierarchically arranged. These features provide multiple points of access to the content of interest on the blog and permit the display of a particular group or intersection of multiple groups.

**Flexible layout**

People view web pages on a large variety of devices with differing screen sizes, and they may also choose different browser window and font display sizes. Blog engines help smooth these transitions by both adapting to new displays and devices as well as by allowing users flexibility in the selection of themes and templates from the blogging services themselves.
or available from external sources. Built-in layout flexibility, a basic tenet of optimal webpage design (Nielsen, 2003), such as that allowed by the K2 theme for WordPress, can make browsing a much easier experience. Attempts to make mainstream blogging tools, developed on traditional PCs, more accessible to mobile devices are in their infancy, but we can expect to see the pace of development increase, as platforms such as Apple's iPhone, Google's Android, and devices such as netbooks become more and more common.

**Synchronous features**

In the last few years, the spotlight has moved away from conventional blogging tools and towards micro-blogging tools such as Twitter, which favour very short and frequent posts called tweets. Since people may also need to make more discursive posts, they often need to maintain both a Twitter account and a standard blog. The P2 theme for WordPress engine incorporates a window that allows tweet-type posts. These occur on the front page of the blog rather than requiring a trip back to the posting interface, after logging in and displaying posts. Similarly, Edublogs provides a quick and simple interface for these types of posts that appears on dashboards at login. Convergence among tools (Lavin, 2004), in which selected features of one medium are transposed into another, appears to be a long-term trend, and we can expect to see more examples of this emerge.

**Social networking**

As long as educators take steps to make sure that their learners have easy access to other learners’ and to the teacher’s blog, the possibilities for inter-personal communication are great with any blogging engine. (We do not cover here social networking services such as Facebook that are not based on a blogging paradigm.) A service such as Vox, however, added an interesting extra dimension before its demise in September, 2010.

Vox allowed a user to mark any other user as neighbour, friend, or family. Each individual post, link, or media item uploaded could accordingly be marked as viewable by the user only; user and family only; by family and friends; by family, friends, and the user’s whole neighbourhood; or by the world. The relationship was not automatically reciprocal, and thus this allowed fine-grained control over the extent to which a user wished to share their content. Two of the authors regularly used Vox for their classes. One found it useful to have students make all classmates their neighbours, and also to ask students to make their teacher a neighbour. Moreover, students were required to make sure that posts they wished to be considered as coursework be open either to their neighbourhoods or to the whole world.

A separate framework from the private-family-friends-neighbourhood-public continuum was Vox Groups (see Figure 1). Whereas family, friends, and neighbours represented a network model, in which each Vox member chose connections individually and no automatic reciprocity was involved, Groups offered a membership model of interaction, which the authors found useful in a number of ways, initially in a teachers’ group for facilitating collaborative professional development.
For classes, we made our Groups joinable only by invitation, thus ensuring that only class members could join the Group, and teachers and students alike had access to a list of class members, linked to those members’ blogs. Further, using the same Group in successive years forged a link between cohorts, allowing current learners to build on the experiences of those who had moved on.

Readers may be wondering why we devote so much space to a description of a service that is no longer available. We believe that Vox represented an intriguing example of a hybrid blogging/social networking site with many useful applications in education, and we hope that it will serve as inspiration to developers of future blogging software. The Vox story also underscores the need for careful assessment of public services before deciding which to adopt, as well as an exit strategy in worst-case scenarios. Fortunately, the Vox developers offered a transfer strategy to a sister product; unfortunately, they announced the closure at very short notice, and during a summer vacation when not all students were checking their email regularly. The instructor was able to capture some of those blogs to PDF before they disappeared, but the volume was too great to do so for all blogs. The result was that several students lost more than two years’ worth of blogging.

Personal Choices
Educators yet to make a decision regarding appropriate blog software to use may find the table below helpful, showing the options favoured as of early 2010 by the three authors of this chapter for classes that we teach. Each of these services is/was a free one. Readers will note that we all use Blogger. This is due as much to an appreciation for the wide range of services (including the Gmail webmail service) offered by Google, as to an affection for the features of Blogger. Each author favoured a different service for his other classes, attracted
by a different constellation of features. In general, we have found it necessary to stipulate
a choice for the students in our classes, though greater technical facility on the part of
students may in many situations enable students to decide for themselves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lavin</th>
<th>Beaufait</th>
<th>Tomei</th>
<th>Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>Blogger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Edublogs*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vox**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>WordPress.com*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* based on the WordPress blogging engine; ** now defunct
Table 1: Authors’ choices of blogging services for teaching purposes

Websites Mentioned in this Section

- Blogger: http://www.blogger.com/
- Edublogs: http://edublogs.org/
- Posterous: http://posterous.com/
- Squarespace: http://www.squarespace.com/
- tumblr: http://www.tumblr.com/
- TypePad: http://www.typepad.com/
- Twitter: http://www.twitter.com/
- WordPress free hosting: http://wordpress.com/
- WordPress software: http://wordpress.org/

Tools to Use with Blogs

The features of blog engines themselves represent only a small fraction of the possibilities
offered by blogs. Most blogs allow their owners to include small snippets of code, usually in
JavaScript, to add a variety of resources and tools. A huge range of personalization options
exists thanks to this functionality, allowing learners to express their own individuality. We
would like to present a few options that we have specifically found useful in our teaching
with blogs.

Feed Widgets

In order to read new posts gathered from elsewhere, as we suggested in the Blogging
Strategies section, rather than make a trip to a separate feedreader, it may be more
convenient for students to keep some key feeds, such as an aggregated class feed and a feed
from the teacher’s blog, in compact widgets within their blog sidebars. Such widgets are
easier for learners to create and install when they come as part of the blogging platforms
they use, but learners can also adopt and adapt ready-made widgets from teachers,
technologically adept peers, or specific blog-compatible online repositories.
Reading and Writing Widgets
For classes where reading is a major feature, we sometimes require students to incorporate widgets from services such as LibraryThing or Shelfari, which allow students to display lists of the books they have read. This provides a means for us to quickly see what titles the students have read, and to help other students get an idea of what their peers are reading.

To enable quick access to reference information, for purposes of both reading and writing, we recommend thesaurus and/or dictionary and thesaurus look-up widgets.

Outlining and Mapping Tools
In our use of blogs for EAL writing, we ask students first to brainstorm and free-write, in quick posts on their blogs, then to outline their compositions. We have used LooseStitch, but there are a large number of free online services that will permit the creation of structured lists that can be repurposed for outlines, including Checkvist, Thinklinkr, and Todoist.

Concept mapping and mind mapping are useful for clarifying ideas, especially on more complex topics. In this realm, MindMeister offers many worthwhile features, most notably a gallery of mindmaps made by other users. Other concept mapping services include bubbl.us, Creately, LucidChart, and Mind42. FreeMind is another free, relatively easy-to-use option; IHMC Cmaps is also free, and offers a variety of attractive features such as embedding of graphics in mind-map nodes.

In a traditional approach to process writing (paper- or computer-based), this work of outlining and concept mapping would be carried out behind the scenes, becoming invisible to blog readers. However, using the JavaScript export capabilities of mapping and outlining tools allows bloggers to incorporate these earlier stages of their work into their blogs, in order to document improvement of, and elicit feedback on, their thinking and writing, thus amplifying use of their blogs as ePortfolios.

Synchronous Communication Tools
Some inline chat tools also exist, for example: the AIM Wimzi Widget, meebo me, or TagBoard. These can be useful as synchronous supplements to the essentially asynchronous medium of blogs.

Office Documents
Blogger, already integrated with Google Apps, offers the best integration with documents, presentations, and spreadsheets, but other blogging engines offer similar capabilities.

Multimedia
Photostreams as well as individual photos from photo services such as Flickr and Picasa can be added to blog posts quickly and simply. Most blogging engines also allow incorporation of audio and video files into blog posts, enabling any blog to become a vehicle for audio and video podcasts. It is worth emphasizing that this does not have to entail a sudden transformation: Rich media can be incorporated as slowly and frequently as needed. A variety of video sites permit the embedding of their videos into blog posts.
Other Tools
More exotic tools are appearing on the horizon, allowing embedding of timelines (Dipity and xTimeline), maps (Google Maps) and virtually any other data that can appear on the Internet, in blog posts. Generally, if something is popular enough to be used on the Internet, it is popular enough for people to figure out a way to embed it into their blogs. This allows educators to bring the real world into their classrooms in a variety of ways.

Evaluation Schemes
All tools that you wish to use in your classes should be evaluated from the point of view of their interoperability with blogs. By deciding which tools you will use alongside blogs, and which tools you will bring into blogs (or require students to add), you are in effect assembling a personal learning environment (PLE)\(^1\), the logical conclusion of the ecological approach that we have been advocating.

Websites Mentioned in this Section

- AIM Wimzi Widget: http://wimzi.aim.com/
- Blogger: http://www.blogger.com
- bubbl.us: http://www.bubbl.us/
- Checkvist: http://checkvist.com/
- Creately: http://creately.com/
- Dipity: http://www.dipity.com/
- Flickr: http://www.flickr.com/
- Google Apps: http://www.google.com/apps/
- Google Docs and Spreadsheets: http://docs.google.com/
- Google Maps: http://maps.google.com/
- IHMC Cmaps: http://cmap.ihmc.us/conceptmap.html
- LibraryThing: http://www.librarything.org/
- LooseStitch: http://loosestitch.com/
- LucidChart: http://www.lucidchart.com/
- meebo me: http://www.meebome.com/
- Mind42: http://www.mind42.com/
- MindMeister: http://www.mindmeister.com/
- Picasa: http://picasa.google.com/
- Shelfari: http://www.shelfari.com/
- Tag-Board: http://www.tag-board.com/
- Thinklinkr: http://thinklinkr.com/
- Todoist: http://todoist.com/
- xTimeline: www.xtimeline.com

---

\(^{1}\) See Learning Objects and Personal Learning Environments, this volume.
Summary

Blogs offer teachers and students a flexible and comfortable online space, one in which novices can learn to take their first steps, opening themselves to the public at a speed and to a degree that suit them, while veterans can stretch their wings and soar. The basic design of blogs, combined with the vocal and talented portion of their user base, has led to the incorporation of more and more capabilities, which means that blogs can meet a wide variety of needs. While it is impossible to predict the future with any degree of certainty, it appears that blogs are here to stay. We believe that blogs are one of the first tools educators should look at when deciding what options to explore in their courses, whether their teaching is centered around a VLE or more off-the-shelf components.

Arola (2010) asked a class of U.S. university students how many of them own a homepage, and reported that, in contrast to the response in earlier years, “the silence was deafening” (p. 5), which points to a trend by which blogs may have largely displaced traditional personal websites. Likewise, though perhaps to a lesser extent, it appears that uses of Twitter, or similar micro-blogging accounts and interrelated services, may be supplementing or supplanting use of traditional blogs. It is quite possible that this trend will accelerate, while at the same time the range of blogging software will continue to grow, meeting the demands of those who need blogs but find traditional formats or services constricting in one way or another.

One area where greater effort from developers would be appreciated, and where input from educators and researchers can play a valuable role, is additional features applicable in education. We would certainly find it useful, for example, to have tools that would automatically count and display the number of words in each individual post. (WordPress can do this in editing windows, but not as yet in blog public displays.) Semantic blogging (Cayzer, 2004; Moller et al., 2006), in which custom fields associated with posts contain machine-processable metadata to aid in later data mining, is supported by a few engines such as WordPress, but has yet to catch on widely.

As Bonk (2009) stated, “we now all have a voice. We have many voices, in fact. And we can use these voices as well as our fingers to share learning-related ideas and experiences with others on similar pilgrimages” (p. 248). While email, Twitter, wikis, and other tools all have a part to play, we would like to suggest to educators that blogs deserve a place at the heart of their education initiatives.
Glossary

*Aggregation*. A system for collecting multiple RSS or Atom feeds (below) in one place or in one “feed of feeds”. A typical example from education would be collecting the feeds from the blogs of all the students in a class into one feed.

*Asynchronous*. A term used to describe communications technologies, or interactions using those technologies, in which there is a significant time lag between turns. Major examples are email, blogs, and discussion forums. Contrasted with synchronous.

*Atom*. One of the sets of technologies used to provide feeds.

*Avatar*. A representation, commonly in the form of a small two-dimensional graphic file, of a computer user. Discussion forum posts and blog comments are often considered more personal and friendly, allowing users to have greater social presence (below), when accompanied by avatars.

*Backlink*. A kind of link that turns the source of an originating link into the target of a reverse link automatically generated with the original target as the source.

*Bookmarklet*. A browser bookmark that contains code (usually JavaScript) rather than a URL.

*CMS*. A Course Management System or Content Management System. The former is specific to education, while the latter represents any software used to organize Web pages and other resources.

*EAL*. English as an Additional Language, nomenclature that serves several purposes:

- Emphasizes the positive value of learning more than one language;
- Avoids distancing or devaluation implied by English as a Foreign Language (EFL), when English can be seen as a global language.
- Covers not only English as a Second Language (ESL), but also frequent instances of learning English as a third or even fourth language.

*EFL*. English as a Foreign Language, a description of EAL common in settings where, for most people, English is neither a language spoken at home, nor one used widely in commerce or education.

*ESL*. English as a Second Language, a description of EAL common in settings where, for most people, English is a language spoken at home, and one used widely in commerce and education.

*Feed*. A data format used for providing frequently update content, such as blog posts or podcast episodes, to users, usually via RSS or Atom.

*Feedreader*. A program which takes feeds and organizes them for ease of use.

*Fine-grained*. A synonym of detailed. Used originally in photography, but now often used in computer science to represent the ability, for example, to search for and quickly find the exact item one requires.
Hypertextual. Describes computer-generated documents that allow the readers to jump to various locations in the text or elsewhere, usually by means of links, or that reveal additional (hidden) layers of text or illustration when readers pass their cursors over, or scroll through, certain areas. Most often used in reference to web online documents that have added hypertext links.

LMS. A near-synonym to CMS (Course Management System), an LMS helps educators and administrators deliver and manage content, enables learners to communicate with each other and educators, and often provides ways to assess learners’ work.

Metadata. Generally defined as data about data, metadata typically describes the contents and context of digital documents, such as the language in which they are written, or the tools used to create them (see: Wikipedia.com: Metadata). Metadata may also include information about who created and revised digital documents and when, or content tags assigned by developers or publishers. View source commands in web browsers reveal such information on webpages, which is often hidden in page views.

Permalink. A hypertext link that is designed to point in perpetuity to the same resource.

PLE. Personal Learning Environment; a cluster of tools and content assembled by an individual for learning purposes. See Taylor, Lavin, and Deutsch (this volume).

Social presence. The degree of awareness of other people during social interaction. The face-to-face medium is considered to have the highest degree of social presence, traditional written communication (books, etc.) the least.

Syndication. In the context of the Internet, a system to supply content from one site in another.

Taxonomy. Classification of items or concepts.

RSS. Really Simple Syndication; one of the technologies (more accurately, a family of technologies) used to provide feeds (above).

Rubric. In education, rubrics are schemata used to assess learning outcomes. They consist of objective criteria describing desired outcomes, combined with rating scales to evaluate levels or ranges of performance in either an analytical or a holistic fashion. For an example, a tutorial, and other resources, please see the footnote on rubrics in the section on Assessment (above).

URI. Universal Resource Identifier, which identifies a resource on the Internet. It includes URLs.

URL. Universal Resource Locator. A kind of URI that also points to the resource so that the user can obtain it.

VLE. Virtual Learning Environment. A near-synonym of LMS (Learning Management System).
Part Five: Learning in a Participatory Digital World

Weblogs for Online Education

References


