

Weblogs and Wikis in the Classroom

by *Teresa Coffman, Ph.D.*

Although weblogs have been in existence since the mid 1990s, many teachers are still trying to decide whether to use this tool in the classroom, and if so what is the most effective means to integrate this technology. Wikis have been in existence for the same amount of time and are just as mysterious. Even as this article is being read, these tools continue to be explored by many educators for the very first time! Studies are being done in a variety of contexts to ascertain how these tools can effectively be utilized for internal communication and collaborative tools for project completion. One of our roles as teachers and administrators is to provide students with the skills necessary to compete in the 21st century. To do this, we need to be aware of and introduce our students to the technological tools presently being used. But first, we need to determine whether these tools will be effective in our classrooms.

As an assistant professor of education, I teach instructional technology courses in a graduate teacher education program. The effectiveness of these technology tools is exactly what my students, consisting predominately of pre-service and practicing teachers, are currently struggling with. As different technology tools are developed, how can we determine if they will enhance our classrooms and be effective learning tools for our students? Over the past academic year, students in my classes explored weblogs and wikis to determine their effectiveness for use in the classroom as a teaching and learning tool. Of interest was whether Vygotsky's educational theory of social interaction and knowledge construction could be enhanced by these social communication tools (Vygotsky, 1978). This article presents a historical perspective of the past academic year where students in my classes defined, practiced, and developed strategies for using weblogs and wikis effectively in the K-12 classroom and academic environment.

Weblogs (or blogs)

A "blog" is a frequently updated web page with content shown in chronological order with the most recent posting first. Weblog postings frequently incorporate web URLs or hyperlinks to outside resources. Blogging is the act of writing one's thoughts into a blog and hence they are often referred to as online personal journals (Wikipedia, 2005a).

Blogs can include just about any type of imaginable content. They can be personal accounts or academic and topic based. Weblogs usually revolve around a topic or idea of the author(s). While they can include hyperlinks and images, no knowledge of hypertext markup language (HTML) is required. Thus, blogs can be created quickly and easily. This is a very enticing feature

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because creating web pages can be time consuming. Teachers function under numerous time constraints and therefore need teaching and learning tools that are effective and aid in student achievement, but do not take a lot of time and effort to figure out. Blogs are tools that teachers and students can set up and use quickly and easily in just a few simple steps (Winer, 2003). In my classes, students first developed a definition of blogging based on the available research and literature and then studied blogging to understand its purpose. They searched for blogging software to determine how easily this tool could be used in the classroom setting. Several free blogging software tools are available on the Internet that teachers can use. In my classes, blogger.com was the software chosen for our purposes of exploration.

In our search, we also found blogging software designed specifically for school-age children called KidzLog. There is a free trial period to test KidzLog to ensure it will meet the user's needs. It is easy to use, allows images created by students to be uploaded onto web pages, and is affordable. The software is loaded onto the school's server and, if adopted, must be purchased. The benefit of loading blogging software onto a school's server is that it gives the school more security options. This may be an important component to consider when teachers and schools begin to plan for student web publishing.

Blogs in education

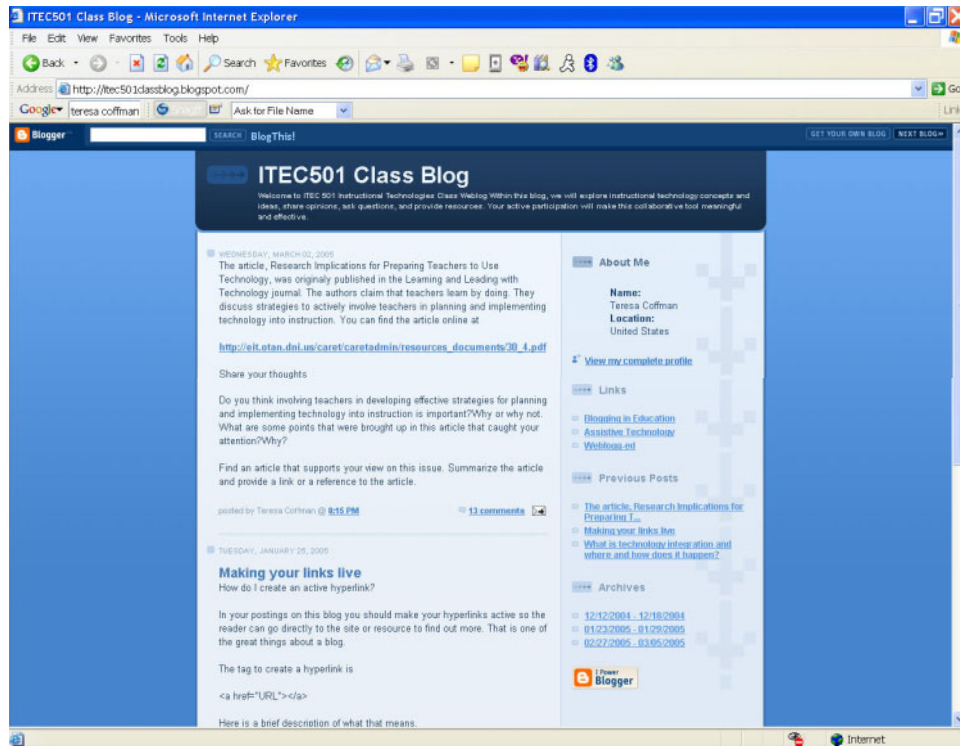
Through their exploration of blogging, students discovered several uses for this tool. For example, creating a class blog to keep parents and students up to date with homework, student projects, and contact information for the teacher. Providing a class blog is an effective way to communicate with both parents and the school administration about classroom activities. Students also discovered that blogging can be used as an informational tool to create a resource page. By creating informational resources, authors are collecting important information that will aid the community using the Weblog. In this case, useful resources were created for other teachers, school officials, parents, and/or students.

Another use of blogging is as a reflection journal. A journal allows students to identify new terms, outline important concepts identified in their readings, highlight important ideas brought out in classroom discussions, and express what was learned by completing a project or activity. Journals are good learning tools. Having a public journal tends to focus students' writing because their peers have the opportunity to read each other's words.

In my classes, we used blogs as both a reflection journal and as a group project where students focused on instructional technology topics and ideas. In each project, students explored topics and provided opinion, research, and resources to readers. They also reflected on their learning goals and objectives throughout the course, providing thoughts and ideas coupled with outside resources for further research. In each instance, the students had a difficult time in the beginning. They felt uneasy with the public nature of the blog. However, as the course progressed, they began to add to their blog without complaint, taking ownership and expressing their ideas and opinions freely. Many began to go to other blogs and post comments, sharing ideas

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and redirecting people to their blog. The blog became public and personal. It became a good tool for expressing ideas and exploring concepts in more depth.



Screenshot of a weblog

Teachers began to take this tool to their own classrooms, creating class weblogs that identified classroom activities, student work, ideas, and homework. Teachers also began to incorporate blogs into learning activities. A fifth grade teacher created a blog for her students to discuss books they were reading. An eleventh grade teacher created a blog for her students to verbalize math equations and work through math problems. These students also provided web references on their blogs to help support their ideas and provide additional information for their students. As the class continued throughout the semester, more teachers began to incorporate blogs into their classrooms. It was determined that blogs are good communication and collaboration tools for students and teachers because they encourage students to become experts in the topic, are simple to use, and are public.

Privacy and security

In conducting our exploration of weblogs, students soon discovered one of the recent issues regarding blogging in education. Weblogs, for the most part, are public unless they are hidden behind a password on a school's server. Public means that anyone on the Internet can happen upon a blog and make a comment. Being public is

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one of the most important features of web publishing, especially with blogs. Communities develop around blogs due to the topic and interest of readers. This means that classrooms can use blogs to connect students from other schools or experts in the field being studied. Group projects can be developed and topics explored with participants both inside and outside the classroom. Students working on similar topics can share thoughts on students' blogs in other classrooms across the country. This activity engages students in meaningful learning. Students become more involved because their work is not held inside the walls of the classroom. It is now global and public. Because others are now involved with their work, the assignment becomes more meaningful.

However, this is also where student security and privacy come into play. A question that must be addressed by K-12 teachers when planning to use a public forum such as a blog is how to keep students safe from the possibility of inappropriate visitors to the student blog. There are ways to help ensure that students are safe. Schools should have an "Acceptable Use Policy" (AUP) that identifies guidelines for Internet use. Teachers should get permission from parents before allowing students to post on a blog. It is suggested that teachers not post a picture of the student on a blog and if a picture is posted, that the student not be identified. Having students not use their full name when they make a posting is another option.

Teachers can attempt to keep their class blogs private by giving access to only students and parents. This is easier if the blogging software is on the school's server because it can be password protected. But teachers can also do this by closing the blog so that no one can post a comment. To do this, though, limits the full power of blogging and limits the opportunity to build a community around the blog, creating a collaborative learning environment.

Wikis

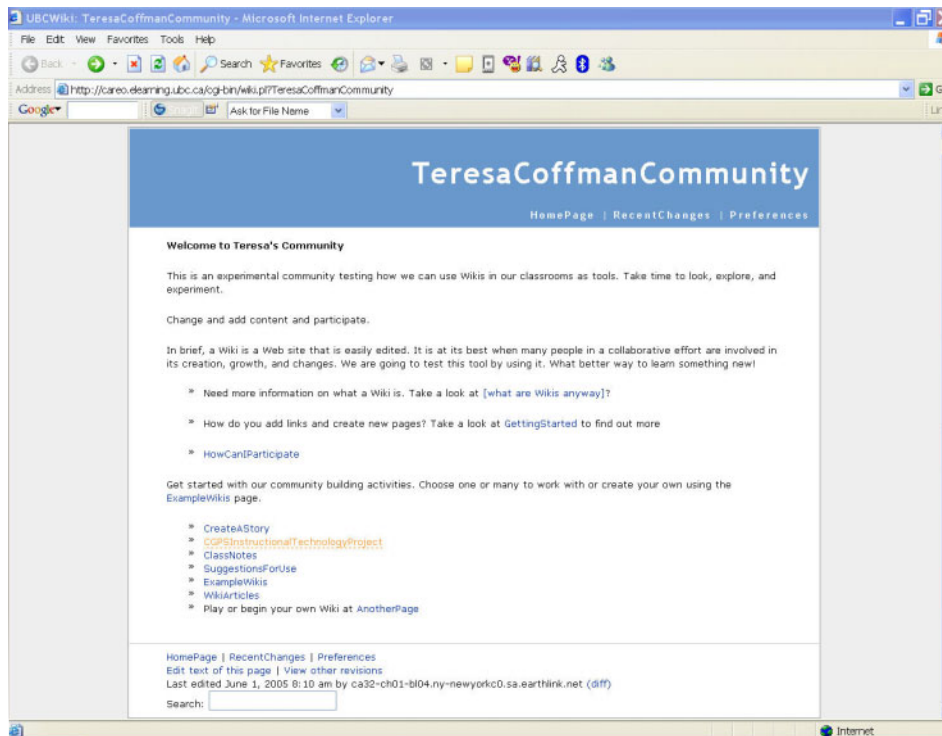
A second collaborative tool explored in my courses during this academic year was the use of wikis. Wikis are easy to create web pages that work best when there is a group problem to solve, a project to work on, or meaning to be made on a particular topic or idea. The great thing about a wiki is that anyone can make changes to the web page. The most popular wiki is Wikipedia, a free encyclopedia that can be modified.

Wikis are different from blogs.. The format of wikis is controlled by the content and the users. Postings are contained within the web page, therefore, they are not in chronological order like a blog. Also, anyone can go to a wiki page and edit, delete, or add to the content. Organizations like this tool because it allows employees to work on projects as a collaborative group. Each member has the ability to participate and take an active role in the project. Once the project is completed, the content can be exported and a report completed (Wikipedia, 2005b).

In my class, students had the task of determining how wikis could be beneficial in their classrooms. Could students work with other students throughout the school, grade, or in other schools on projects and activities that involved planning and idea

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generation using a wiki? Would this tool be simple and effective? In our initial exploration of wikis, we found they can be somewhat complicated. We had to learn some HTML coding to create links and new web pages. Students found that wikis can be one long web page or linked together to break down the content into meaningful chunks. The simple interface of a wiki allows students to focus on the content and less on the tool.



Screenshot of a wiki

In our search, we found a few free software programs that are available. We also found software that could be placed on a school's server. We chose software that was free and readily available via the Internet. The wiki that was chosen for our purposes is at the University of British Columbia's Office of Learning Technology. This is an experimental web site that anyone in the educational community can use to test and work with wikis. Another resource that schools can use is the seedWiki (*wiki URLs posted at end of article*).

The concept of wikis is to create a network of webbed hyperlinks to join together content. This idea of connecting similar ideas through hyperlinks was a difficult one at first. As the project progressed, it became easier and students began to participate more and take ownership in the project. Students determined that wikis could be utilized in their classrooms by engaging students in the creation of content within a group. This tool was not tested out in any of my students' classes during the semester, but we determined that this tool was useful due to its collaborative nature. Wikis are good for group work. Students can participate by adding information and each stu-

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dent can build on the information by adding to or changing existing content. After a project is completed, the information in the wiki can be transferred to a word processing document to create a report of the information collected and worked on as a group.

When we searched the Web for “wiki uses” we found that both teachers and schools are using this tool. Wikis are being used as information tools such as school web sites, teacher web pages to introduce homework, and to present syllabi to students. As a collaborative tool, Wikis are being used to work on group problems, share information and resources, and to analyze information and challenge other group members.

Conclusion

Students were excited about the benefits and use of weblogs and wikis in their classes. Allowing students to participate with the creation and maintenance of a weblog or wiki provides opportunities for students to create knowledge and optimal meaning. Consequently, this enhanced opportunities for students to begin to think critically by analyzing content through research and discussion (Jonassen, 2000). The social interaction that each elicits is positive for teaching and learning. Students from elementary grades through graduate school are able to construct knowledge through reflection. Additionally, they have the ability to publish their results real-time in a public space. Through this public presentation, feedback is immediate and scaffolding opportunities are available. Using these media, students are afforded ownership of the content. They are able to interact with others, share ideas, and explore new concepts.

Article Resource Links

Blogging Tool: <http://www.blogger.com>

KidzLog: <http://www.haranbanjo.com/kidzlog/>

WikiPedia: <http://www.Wikipedia.org>

Wiki software: <http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/Wiki.pl?HomePage>

Wiki software: <http://www.seedWiki.com/>

Examples of how blogging is used in the classroom:

<http://bloggingineducation.blogspot.com/>

<http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?TeresaCoffmanCommunity>

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