

Teacher Weblogs in a Small School District

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### 1. Introduction

Blogging, or the act of publishing content on the World Wide Web through a weblog, is currently a hot trend in the educational technology press and literature, in addition to the mainstream media (Martindale & Wiley, 2005; Lyons, 2005). Since 1997, with a small crop of websites appearing online for the first time, similar in the way they linked to other sites, and organized by content in short, personal chunks by date, weblogs have grown in popularity. According to a Pew Internet & American Life report published in January, 2005, 27% of Internet users in the United States were reading blogs in 2004. 62% of the population surveyed still did not know what a blog is, and over eight million Americans have created a blog (Rainie, 2005).

In another Pew report published in 2001, asking teenagers between the ages of 12-17 and their parents, we learned “that teens use the Internet as an essential study aid outside the classroom and that the Internet increasingly has a place inside the classroom” (Lenhart, Simon, & Graziano, 2001, introduction). A more recent report, from 2005, indicates that among the same demographic, 87% routinely use the Internet, and 68% of this group surveyed uses the Internet at school (Rainie & Hitlin, 2005). These statistics would not surprise many teachers in Goochland County Public Schools, in Virginia, where I work as an instructional technologist. With a student to computer ratio of 2:1, and mandatory classes that require the use of technology, the percentage of our students who use computers, and the Internet at school, is high.

## 1.1 Focus

This paper aims to investigate the current state of blogging on the Internet, and how blogging is affecting education, teaching, and students in K-12 schools. Weblogs are part of our national vocabulary: popularized by politics, a war, and news, and yet, the majority of "bloggers" are folks in their teens and twenties (Eide & Eide, 2005). "Blogs" are powerful because anyone can publish online, and do so easily. Blogs are "new" in the sense of how information is published, how it's digested, and how it gets served. Following a literature review, I will describe a blogging initiative for teachers in Goochland County Public Schools (2,200 students, 201 teachers, pre-K-12), and discuss teacher reactions to blogging. Is blogging by teachers worth their time, according to our teachers? Might teacher blogs lead the way to student blogging? I will conclude with recommendations for other school districts who see benefits in blogging and what recommendations we proffer through our own experience.

## 2. Why Blogs?

In many of America's schools today, the Internet is being used by both teachers and students. A 2005 CDW-G report indicates that nationwide, 54.1% of teachers integrate computers into their daily curriculum (CDW-G, 2005). This is no new trend, as the data from the introduction suggests, but how the Internet is being used, is changing. (The CDW-G report also reports that computer technology is changing the way teachers teach, too.) Appearing online for the first time in 1999, by the small, San Francisco-based startup Pyra Labs, *Blogger.com* emerged as a service dedicated to "push-button publishing" free of charge. Today, in late 2005, after having been acquired by Google, this site still offers free blogs to anyone. The site quickly describes a blog as "your easy-to-use web site, where you can quickly post

thoughts, interact with people, and more” (<http://www.blogger.com>). The interaction possible through a weblog, in addition to the “and more” possibilities which are continuing to emerge, have made blogs, as a phenomenon, immensely popular. In fact, statistics from a March, 2005 report increase the findings from the data in the January *Pew* report, and indicate that there are nearly ten million bloggers, 90% of whom are between the ages of 13 and 29 years old (Eide & Eide, 2005). Grumet (2003) tells us, “Weblogs are everywhere... weblog authors count among their ranks a Stanford law professor, a cast member of *StarTrek: the Next Generation*, a woman who works in the adult film industry, a popular humor columnist...” (first section). Weblogs are unique in the short history of the Web because their authors are continually, actively linking to other sites on the Web, many other blogs. According to Grumet, “it is common for weblog writers to advertise list of sites they read, also known as their ‘blogroll’” (Grumet, 2003). “Weblogs exist chiefly as a part of a larger ‘blogosphere,’ a term that has been employed in various ways to describe this collective hyperlinked subweb” (Halavais, 2004, paragraph 7). It is not surprising, given the current cultural popularity of blogging, the demographics of bloggers, and the ease of use involved in setting up a weblog inexpensively, that blogging would find its way into the world of K-12 education.

### **2.1 Blogging in Goochland County, Virginia**

We began our first foray into the world of blogging in Goochland County in the 2003-2004 school year. We had adopted the MovableType (<http://www.sixapart.com>) weblogging system as an inexpensive way to add and change content on our school district website (<http://www.glnd.k12.va.us>). We used the “easy-to-use” aspect of blogging to reproduce material on the web, without

actually creating something the public might interpret as a “blog.” Yet, we were also approached by teachers who wanted to publish content online, such as homework and assignments, but were not interested in learning HTML or using an editor such as Macromedia Dreamweaver or Microsoft Front Page. A handful of teachers started during the 2003-04 school year with their own teacher blogs, because the medium was very easy to use.

Informally, I noticed a positive response from most of the blogging teachers, in terms of the blog meeting their needs. We continued offering teachers blogging space on our web server into the 2004-2005 school year, with more teachers participating in staff development workshops to learn how to get started. By the end of this year, we had roughly 15 regularly-updated school-sponsored blogs among our 201 teachers. Nearly 13% of our teachers had begun to explore the world of blogging to keep parents and students with Internet access at home (or work) informed of classroom news and assignments.

For the 2005-2006 school year, I continued our tradition of helping each teacher within Goochland County establish two individual technology goals. These goals require teachers to document and carry-out two “technology-integrated lessons” with students in the schools, or, if need be, help teachers by learning new skills to better their own comfort level and ability with using their school-district issued laptop computer.

We define “technology-integrated lessons” along the lines defined by the LoTI scale developed by Christopher Moersch (“What is LoTi?” 2004). Primarily, these types of lessons require students to interact with a variety of technologies, but most often computers, through a specific lesson developed by the teacher. Well-integrated lessons encourage a project-based learning style, and promote the use of

higher-order skills (Bloom, 1956) on the part of students to develop new knowledge. The goals established for each teacher are customized based upon their curriculum, their familiarity with technology, and their interests in emerging technologies.

The 2005-06 school year, as determined by our school administration, would require each teacher, as one of their two technology plan goals, to establish a weblog for the purpose of communicating with parents. The latest literature suggests that blogging in schools, by teachers (and by students), is likely a positive phenomenon. Our administration saw it as a positive means to increase the level of technology integration by every teacher within Goochland County.

### **3. Literature Review**

Blogging by educators is served by no-better an endorsement than this positive reflection by two college professors: “These blogs [of ours] have been a unique and convenient way for us to write about our own work and also direct others to interesting research, resources and viewpoints in instructional design and technology (IDT) as we interact with a network of colleagues, scholars and favorite writers across the Internet” (Martindale & Wiley, 2005, section 3). They continue, regarding the blog’s ease of use: “As we have described above, we consider blogs to be significantly easier to use than other web-related programs, including popular course management systems. Of course, blogs do not have some features, like live chat, that are available in CMS software, but we were willing to trade away some of these features for far greater ease of use in managing our course in a distributed fashion” (Martindale & Wiley, 2005, section 6).

For author Catherine Poling, “blogging” is now a “common term used by students and staff” at a public elementary school, in Maryland (Poling, 2005). At her school, students and staff use weblogs for the support of learning, through individual

blogs, collaborative blogs, classroom blogs, and through blogs dedicated to teacher staff development.

This section will review the current research on educational blogging. It first summarizes literature on the benefits of blogging in instruction, followed by a review that applies both to teacher blogging and student blogging. The last section will discuss diversified areas where weblogs can be used in and outside of education, as well as pragmatic issues with relation to reading and managing weblogs.

### **3.1 Benefits of Blogging**

The benefits of blogging lie in the collaborative environment these webpages proffer readers and authors, the ease of use in publishing weblogs, and the promise for sound educational experiences that can take place. de Moor places importance upon the conversational nature of blogs through commenting for “developing innovative ideas” (de Moor & Efimova, 2004). Halavais (2004) sees social groups emerging from following, and interacting with, popular blogs online. “These practices provide for serendipitous, unstructured learning, as differing perspectives and discourses come into contact with one another” (paragraph 8).

#### **3.1.1 Blogging Reflects a Changing World of Information**

David Warlick is quoted by Will Richardson with regard to how the practice of blogging in education can help students with new forms of literacy. “In this published, print-based information environment, the principal literacy skill was the ability to read the information that was in front of you. But as the nature of information and how we access it evolves, that is no longer the case. Educators need to replace practices that teach students to assume the authority of the content around them and instead teach students to prove the authority” (Richardson, 2005b). By having teachers link to other, multiple sources of information online, and

by students being able to write from their own unique perspectives, this type of literacy training can take place using some of the same technologies (Web, blogs) that require a definition of literacy to be refocused.

### 3.1.2 Collaboration with Weblogs

“Unlike other tools that support conversations weblogs provide their authors with a personal space next to a community space. As a result at any given time a blogger is involved in two types of conversations: (1) conversations with self and (2) conversations with others” (de Moor & Efimova, 2004).

Also mentioned in the literature are community blogs, such as *Metafilter* and *LISNews*, who are maintained by more than one blogging author. “Diversity among both contributors and editors fosters broad content and instigates free exchange... Libraries can serve diverse groups of users with blogs. Imagine academic staff members sharing news in their subject area, such as links to book reviews, or notices of conferences, or links to papers posted on the web” (Carver, 2003).

Kajder and Bull identify six instructional characteristics of a blog. Among them is the ability to comment on what is written. Others include: economy, archiving, multimedia, immediacy, active participation (Kajder & Bull, 2003). While these benefits are framed as benefits for student bloggers, the same benefits apply to students and parents reading teacher weblogs.

In an article identifying the benefits of using blogs for student learning journals, several blogging benefits are identified, including: “ease of use, no need for installing server software, extensive control over how their blog looks and operates, instant updates online, blogs can be simply linked to, and navigated” (Armstrong & Berry, 2004, introduction). These benefits also extend to weblogs used by teachers as communication and instructional tools.



### **3.1.3 Successful Cases of Weblogs**

In fact, a lot of literature can be found that tells us that blogging is an emerging technology within schools, and that the benefits of blogging are many in number. Will Richardson, who has started a successful blogging project by high school students in New Jersey, writes: “But as more and more people get on the blog bandwagon, more and more teachers and schools are starting to experiment with the technology as a way to communicate with students and parents, archive and publish student work, learn with far-flung collaborators, and ‘manage’ the knowledge that members of the school community create. In fact, many are seeing Weblogs as a cheaper alternative to course management systems,” confirming the experiences above by Martindale and Wiley (Richardson, 2004, section 3).

Another teacher in Ohio is using blogs instructionally. “She has used what are called “audioblogs” to help her students work on their reading and pronunciation skills. Pritchard records her students and posts the audio files on a Weblog. Then her students play the files back at school or at home when they want to hear how they sound. She has also used Weblogs with great success as a teacher mentoring tool” (Richardson, 2004, section 4).

## **3.2 Teachers versus Student Blogging**

### **3.2.1 Blogging Teachers Model for Blogging Students**

Blogs in schools can be used by both teachers and students. Ferdig and Trammel suggest that before students blog as part of a classroom experience, teachers ought to model blogging for students. No better example, perhaps, is a teacher’s own blog used as a mechanism for instruction and communication (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

Many articles mention the “convenience” of blogging, focusing on the “ease of use” factor for teachers. But how are teachers using blogs? “Teachers use blogs as classroom portals, where they archive handouts, post homework assignments, and field questions virtually” (Richardson, 2004, section 4). Richardson speaks about schools keeping control over their communication, and why administrators are not using the blogging medium more. “What about blogs as a way to let parents enter into conversations and perhaps even level-headed debates about the general goals and directions of the district? Superintendent as teacher or facilitator, not just CEO” (Richardson, 2005a). In fact, the conversational nature of blogs, though trackbacking and comments, are noted as one of the innovative features of the medium.

### **3.2.2 Student Blogging**

More articles focus upon the benefits of blogging by students. While some see weblogs replacing the need for some course content software (such as Blackboard) in higher education, other reports outline benefits to students of all ages when students are engaged in the blogging process. Two doctors note five core benefits with regard to student blogging: 1. Blogs can promote critical and analytical thinking, 2. Blogging can be a powerful promoter of creative, intuitive, and associational thinking, 3. Blogs promote analogical thinking, 4. Blogging is a powerful medium for increasing access and exposure to quality information, and 5. Blogging combines the best of solitary reflection and social interaction. “[Blogging] holds enormous potential in education” (Eide & Eide, 2005). One college-age blogger, who blogged within a college course, believes “Blogging is an excellent way of showcasing your talents to the world. It is the closest you can get to having your own [news]paper” (Kapur, 2003).

Two ten-year-old students from the United Kingdom have created a weblog about animals, which they put together in after-hours sessions at school (<http://www.hangletonweblogs.org/14/>). In fact, their school, Hangleton Community Junior School, is noted as being the “first blogging junior school in the United Kingdom.” (<http://www.hangletonweblogs.org/>) Mention of the blogging school in *Teachers* magazine notes that leaders at the school see student blogging as a key to their literacy program (“Me and my blog”, 2004).

Anne Bartlett-Bragg recognized five stages towards blogging by her college students, and suggests that the blogging process takes on different interpretations by blogging authors, and that blogging readers may find the content in a weblog more or less useful, depending upon which stage a individual is found writing. The fifth stage, called “knowledge artefacts” is where the author is providing “guidance to readers.” “At this stage the students may start to read each others’ blogs and make comments in contrast or agreement - intentionally providing their experience and opinions as an opportunity for others to learn , so creating knowledge artefacts” (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003).

Yet, despite what everyone promises blogs can do for students, one report suggests that easily-found student blogs lacked the level of quality necessary to count as a sound educational practice. “The school blogs we have located to date on the popular Schoolblogs.com hosting service provide little evidence of students and teachers working from a base of authentic purposefulness. Many student posts to school-endorsed blogs look like being compulsory requirements and linked to student grades for the course. The lively humour and wit of blogger posts elsewhere and the written comments they often attract from readers are missing—few school blogs even have the ‘comments’ function enabled. The quality of writing posted to

school blogs varies from the ‘why bother’ to lists of items pertaining to a subject area topic or theme being studied in class, through to essayist texts. There is little evidence of idea development” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, section 5). Yet, these same authors point out to the powerful pedagogical tool a blog can become for students, “blog as research, and research by blogging.”

### 3.3 The Blogosphere

#### 3.3.1 How Weblogs Are Being Used

Weblogs have already had such an impact on education that a new term has been established to describe blogs for “educational purposes”: edublogs ("Edublogs"). Yet, the literature recognizes a multiplicity of uses for blogs, including this list from George Siemens (Siemens, 2002):

- Knowledge sharing and knowledge management
- Customer service
- Interactive journalism
- Communication
- Self-expression
- Learning
- Self-marketing
- Campaigning/social reform
- Community building
- Experience tracking
- Storytelling

In fact, “edublogs” are not the only branded type of weblog, another author notes “medlogs” (health and medicine), “blawgs” (law-related), and knowledge-management weblogs (Efimova, 2004).

The *Intel Innovator* notes that “weblogs offer a wide range of advantages in teaching and learning in the classroom,” and that blogging helps one teacher differentiate instruction for her students ("How Educators Are Using Weblogs",

2003). Other reports suggest blogs are excellent conduits for professional, or student portfolios, or online writing journals (Kennedy, 2003).

Within the blogosphere, then, teachers have found a niche for online publication, and many are exploring the medium as an instructional tool.

### 3.3.2 Blogging and Syndication

The literature also points to some of the technical and pragmatic issues with blogging. How does a teacher keep track of student weblogs? How does a principal keep track of teacher weblogs? Many point to a technology called R.S.S., or Really Simple Syndication to help a user maintain a subscription to blogs they may regularly read (Doval, 2003). Using news aggregator software, a parent could “subscribe” to the content published by all of her child’s teachers (Grumet, 2003). Some authors see syndication content as a means of “pushing-out” content to be used as learning resources. “The next educational use of blogs will be for the distribution of learning content. Blogs form an ideal medium for the distribution of professional development and other learning resources. Some initiatives have already started as places such as Maricopa College and the University of Calgary are experimenting with the use of RSS to distribute learning objects and learning object metadata” (Downes, 2003).

What is missing from the literature now is promising, proven pedagogical approaches to implement teacher- and student-blogging successfully. Also lacking were teacher attitudes towards self-publication. A positive acceptance by teachers is key to successful implementation of educational blogging. Teachers not only can use blogs to communicate with parents, students, and administrators, but they can also teach students to create student-authored blogs. Understanding a teacher’s attitude and background can also help school administrators to design efficient training

programs. This paper aims to fill in gaps within the canon of literature currently available to describe the planned implementation of teacher blogs to assist teachers with a means for technology integration, and to provide a medium of communication with parents and students.

#### **4. Teacher Survey**

Amid the preparation of a new, dedicated server for teacher blogging, I sent out an electronic, anonymous survey to teachers in Goochland County. 67 teachers who teach in schools serving kindergarten through fifth-grade responded between three schools, and 61 teachers who teach in two schools serving sixth- through twelfth-grade students responded. Approximately 36% of our teacher population did not respond to the surveys. This included a number of teachers who are not regular classroom teachers who do not work with students on a regular schedule.

The survey questions were designed around four major areas. For the first, I wanted to be able to describe the background experiences of teachers with blogging as a medium. For the second, I wanted to poll the potential effect of blogging on teaching and communication. For the third, I wanted to establish whether or not there was a correlation between teacher attitude about blogging, and their background experience. The fourth, and final area, focused upon a comparison of attitudes about blogging between elementary (K-5) and secondary (6-12) teachers.

##### **4. 1 Background Experiences**

For this area, I asked teachers eight questions. Teachers responded to these questions on a 5-point scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree). We learn that while every teacher uses e-mail in our school division, many also use e-mail to communicate with parents. A fair number of teachers had created, or updated,

some type of webpage in the past. Many teachers had not authored a weblog, but many more have an understanding of what a weblog is. Teachers are not using their own webpages instructionally, but many do read websites that deal with their profession. Fewer teachers read education-focused blogs, and an almost equal number read blogs on topics other than education.

Table 1

*Teacher Experiences with Online Communication*

Question	Response (1-5)
I regularly use e-mail to communicate with parents about student issues.	2.17
Before this school year, I have used some sort of webpage to communicate with parents.	3.69
Before this school year, I have used a blog (weblog) to communicate with parents.	4.80
I have a clear understanding of what a blog is, and how they work.	2.97
Before this school year, I have used some sort of website to organize curriculum materials for students (posting of links, assignments).	4.00
Currently, I read websites online that deal with education, learning, or teaching.	2.36
Currently, I read weblogs online that deal with education, learning, or teaching.	3.96
Currently, I read weblogs online that deal with subject areas outside of my profession (politics, movies, family members, anything outside of education).	3.93

**4.2 Blogging Effect on Teaching and Communication**

A clear majority of teachers in Goochland County believe student success is linked to communication between teachers and parents. Many teachers feel blogging can contribute positively towards school and parental communication. Teachers felt the maintenance of a weblog will require a lot of time. Teachers were balanced with regard to the ease of managing digital resources for students (sharing, or distributing



documents, images, etc.). Fewer teachers felt student achievement would change due to the maintenance of a teacher weblog, and many teachers did not foresee a significant way that their blog would change the way they could interact or teach their students. A larger sentiment of agreement was placed on the possible reaction of students to the teacher blogs—they may in fact enjoy them.

Table 2

*Teacher Beliefs About Weblogs*

Question	Response (1-5)
I believe communication between teachers and parents is important to the success of students in my classes.	1.51
I believe using a weblog will be a positive contribution towards school and home communication.	2.66
I believe maintaining a weblog will require a significant amount of my planning time.	2.27
I believe maintaining a weblog will contribute to an easier management of digital resources for my students (pointing to websites and resources online).	3.01
I believe maintaining a weblog will equate to better student achievement in my classes.	3.31
I believe the maintenance of my weblog will change the way I teach and interact with my students.	3.25
I believe my students will enjoy having access to classroom information through my weblog.	2.88

**4.3 Correlations**

The survey data from teachers were organized different ways, but I was able to examine the responses from any one individual. I was interested in seeing if correlations existed between responses from different questions, among the population.

The survey results show that there is a strong correlation between the answers to questions 7 (“I believe using a weblog will be a positive contribution

towards school and home communication.”) and 10 (“I believe maintaining a weblog will equate to better student achievement in my classes.”), with a correlation coefficient of 0.696. This high correlation indicates that for those teachers who believed the weblog could be a good communication tool, many also believed that a weblog could improve student achievement in the classroom.

The correlation between teachers’ experience generally confirms the notion that teachers who have more experience dealing with the Internet would also have a more positive attitude toward the use of weblogs as a communication medium, and also as a learning tool. The correlation between question 2 (“I regularly use e-mail to communicate with parents about student issues.”) and question 7 is 0.38, indicating that teachers who have used e-mail to communicate with parents are more likely to believe a weblog is a good communication tool between teachers and parents. Those teachers are also more likely to believe weblogs can contribute to student achievement, with a positive correlation coefficient of 0.26 (questions 2 and 10). The correlation coefficient is smaller than 0.38, indicating that even for teachers who use e-mail to communicate with parents, they are a little less certain regarding the weblog’s role in learning than in communication.

The correlation pattern is different between teachers who regularly read weblogs (question 17: “Currently, I read weblogs online that deal with education, learning, or teaching.”) and those who are strong e-mail users for communication. For those teachers using e-mail to communicate with parents, there is a more positive attitude toward using the weblog as a communication tool, over a learning tool. However, for those who know and read weblogs regularly, there is a stronger positive correlation toward weblogs being used as learning tools, rather than a communication tool. The correlation coefficient between question 7 and 17 is 0.24,

while the correlation between questions 10 and 17 is 0.35, greater than 0.24. This indicates that reading a weblog regularly gives teachers an appreciation for ways it might improve student achievement, not merely letting it serve as a communication medium. At the very least, we might assume these teachers are better integrators of technology in the classroom, in terms of the LoTI scale.

#### **4.4 Primary and Secondary Comparison**

In four of the questions asked to both primary and secondary teachers, the differences in their averaged responses varied greater than 10%. The differences in responses may suggest differences in the way training or support for these populations of teachers is handled.

Table 3

*Comparison of Responses Between Primary and Secondary Teachers*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Primary Average</b>	<b>Secondary Average</b>	<b>Percent Difference</b>
I regularly use e-mail to communicate with parents about student issues.	2.44	1.88	26%
Currently, I read websites online that deal with education, learning, or teaching.	2.24	2.49	11%
Currently, I read weblogs online that deal with subject areas outside of my profession (politics, movies, family members, anything outside of education).	4.12	3.72	10%
I believe my students will enjoy having access to classroom information through my weblog.	3.05	2.69	13%

From this data, we can see secondary teachers trade e-mails more often with parents than primary teachers do. This suggests that either secondary teachers are more comfortable with e-mail communication, or individual teacher-parent communication becomes more prevalent at the secondary grade level.

Secondary teachers also believe that student reaction to the teacher weblogs may be more enjoyable. This may affect the frequency of weblog posts by secondary teachers, or the amount of time they invest in maintaining the blog.

Also examined between the two populations was how frequently teachers may update their weblogs. The question posed, was, “I plan on updating my weblog at least...”

Table 4

*Frequency of Planned Weblog Updates by Primary and Secondary Teachers*

	Primary Teachers	Secondary Teachers
<b>daily</b>	3.28%	5.45%
<b>2-3 days</b>	6.56%	21.82%
<b>weekly</b>	52.46%	47.27%
<b>monthly</b>	37.70%	25.45%

Clearly, secondary teachers are prepared to update the content on their websites far more often than primary teachers. Roughly half of each population plan on updating their site once a week. This was the expectation set by a number of principals within the school district’s five schools. Observations made by Lankshear (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, section 2) indicated that blog update frequency varied: “Some bloggers chose to update several times a day, while others may update every few weeks, or once a week, or so.” Comparing these numbers to actual frequency data after our blogging project is well-underway may indicate truly how easy teachers do find publishing content online through a blog.

I also asked teachers in both groups how much time they estimated would be required to learn how to blog. Roughly 8% of the primary teachers felt they would need two or more hours to learn how to blog, while 22% of secondary teachers felt they would need the same amount of time. 14% of primary teachers believed they could pick up blogging in 5-10 minutes, while 10% of secondary teachers believed

they could pick up blogging in the same amount of time. This evidence suggests that primary teachers are better-prepared to begin blogging than are secondary teachers.

## 5. Conclusions

Both the literature dealing with education, with blogging, and the intersection of the two, foretell many applications for blogging in education. While starting teacher blogging can pave the way for student blogging, teacher blogging alone offers two major applications for teachers: blog as communication tool, and blog as an instructional tool.

My preliminary survey of teachers in Goochland County's schools tells us that communication between the school and home is important. We also learned that teachers, along with the general population, is still learning what blogging is, and what weblogs can do, as tools. A good number of teachers in Goochland County believe that teacher blogging can contribute towards a positive communication exchange between themselves and parents at home.

Teachers were less convinced at this point that the maintenance of a teacher weblog equates to better student achievement. This questions whether or not a rise in achievement equals success for students, or if communication plays a major role in student achievement. Some teachers, however, do see the act of blogging as possibility for their students. 65% of secondary teachers are considering having their students blog, but only 40% of elementary teachers are similarly interested.

The excitement that is observable regarding blogging in education is encouraging for teachers embarking out into the blogosphere themselves, or with their students. This excitement prompted us in Goochland County, Virginia to try blogging for our teachers as a district-wide initiative, after two years of positive reactions from teachers at the forefront of exploring new technologies.

Based upon the preliminary survey, and our experiences thus far, I am making the following recommendations for other school districts interested in pursuing blogging for their teachers.

**Start small and work out any “kinks.”** There will always be different levels of comfort in any teacher population towards adopting the use of new technologies. Let teachers at the forefront test new technologies and mould their use within their many professional duties. Respect their input and reflection.

**Be prepared with hardware and software.** This study, and our initiative was set-back 2.5 months due to delays with the procurement and installation of servers and blogging software. We wished to have our infrastructure in place to begin blogging when teachers began the year this August. Instead, full roll-out did not take place until November.

**Fully educate teachers about the blogging phenomenon.** In order to see the potential benefits for a teacher blog, or even possibly a student-maintained blog, teachers need to understand fully what blogging, and weblogs specifically, are. George Siemens tells us "The best way to learn to blog is to blog," (Siemens, 2002) and this is confirmed by Halavais: "Weblogging is essentially an evolving collective and social practice, and therefore easier lived than described." (Halavais, 2004) To understand, and buy-in to what the literature promises for blogging, teachers will have to try the blogging publishing process.

**Establish policies and a framework if teachers wish to try student blogging.** The literature suggests that student blogging is better tied to increase achievement than teacher blogging. We found blogging teachers who wanted to begin student blogging projects as soon as teacher blogging unfolded.

## 6. Going Foreword



To see if the blogging done by teachers in Goochland County is a success, we will need to evaluate teacher impressions later in the school year. To confirm these impressions, we may also survey parents, students, and administrators. As with any initiative, it may work well in one location, and less well in another. The quality and nature of training, implementation, and the specific technology configurations used, can each play a role in the overall success or failure of the project.

I am encouraged with the findings presented here from our survey that suggests more advanced web-using teachers (those who read and find information online through weblogs) believe blogging can have a positive impact on student achievement. Teachers who believe in a technology are more likely to use it, and if the literature is correct, this can indeed benefit our students, especially so when they are themselves using blogs in the classroom. The first step there is to introduce this Internet-based medium to teachers. Ferdig and Trammell tell us: “Take the time to understand blogging and different possibilities of blogs before using them in the classroom. [...] Model blogging for your students.” (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004) Further research, to focus upon the implementation strategies and training for teachers to blog, is needed alongside an evaluation of a school- or district-wide blogging program.

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