



Blogging Best Practices for Educators

a presentation by John Hendron

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THE RATIONALE FOR BLOGGING

Some of you reading this may be educators yourselves. And I suspect there will be at least a percentage of educators reading this who today are not actively blogging. If that's you, you've yet to be convinced that blogging is for you, or maybe if the medium is all that important to our profession. For the rest of you, skip ahead if you're already blogging. Or, read on to re-affirm why you've joined this bandwagon of online publishing.

The act of self-publishing in the format we recognize as “blogging” is now well-over 10 years old. Micro-articles, organized in reverse chronological order, hanging out on a webpage with all sorts of accoutrements: permalinks, metadata, comments, and blogrolls—this is one of the fastest growing areas on the Web over the past five or more years. Our culture is one that likes to communicate. While the vast majority of the millions of blogs won't be of interest to us, it is fascinating to note just how many well-done blogs are available today for free. You don't need a job like Anderson Cooper (of CNN fame) to be well-known via the Internet. The well-regarded bloggers fill a niche, and it might just be a very specific one that didn't make sense before. If you've read the book *The Long Tail* by Chris Anderson, you'll recognize the concept of fulfilling niche interests. Blogs provide information, resources, opinions, and entertainment to those who read them. They are such a mighty force that traditional media outlets have turned to blogging themselves just to try and compete for your time.

As an educator you have choices with regards to this form of media: just read blogs like we read magazines or newspapers. Write your own blog. Read and comment on other blogs. What we cannot do is ignore this medium. There are too many voices already established online to ignore.



For me, there are probably enough political blogs already out there to be found. I'm not saying our society couldn't do better, but for me personally, there's already enough being said in the world of politics to whet my appetite. But in education? I don't think we're there yet. As an "edublogger" (yes, with technology there are always new terms at bay), you have the capacity to share your experiences for the benefit of the profession. The teacher who blogs about how they handled a difficult situation is helping another less-experienced teacher. The principal who shows leadership through their blog and initiatives at their school can influence the quality of teaching and learning in another school—a thousand miles away. The education professor who shares their insight into sound benefits of the use of technology in education is helping the thousands of us who assist teachers in using laptops, interactive white boards, and personal response systems. But beyond the call for helping the profession

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improve through dialog and conversations that blogs spawn, blogging teachers especially are helping open their classroom walls into the homes of the children they serve. This is not a new-fangled concept. It's good, old-fashioned communication. **Blogs are simply a conduit for making this process easier.**

When thinking about what benefits have come to our blogging teachers I think back several years (now) to that young boy in his third grade class. His teacher invited me to watch the movies her class had made about simple machines. After enjoying the fruits of their labors in a "screening," the boy raised his hand and asked the teacher: "Can you put that on your blog so my mom can watch it?" When she looked over at me to see if indeed that was possible, I smiled, and smiling herself she told him, "I think we can do that!"

WHO'S READING?

12.	Goochland High School - Library Media Center	2,439
13.	Goochland High School - Teachers and Staff	2,354
14.	Randolph Elementary - Teachers and Staff	1,733
15.	GCPS - Central Office Contacts	1,425
16.	Ms. Smith's Drama Blog	1,209
17.	All About Mrs. Parrish's Class + 5th Science	1,003
18.	Byrd Elementary - Homepage	940
19.	Goochland Middle School - Library Media Cent	862
20.	GCPS - Goochland Job Fair	851
21.	Mrs. Wickens' 1st Grade Happenings	773
22.	Ms. McTernan's Minutes	700
23.	Ms. Turner's Civics Blog	631
24.	Salaries and Benefits - Goochland County Sch	609
25.	Byrd Elementary - Teachers and Staff	574
26.	GCPS - Goochland Schools Application Proce	572
27.	Goochland Network - GCPS - February 2009	446
28.	Cookier Corner	477

A website statistics package such as the free Google Analytics can provide a detailed report on who is visiting your blog or website.

Once we started blogging in Goochland County (VA) in the fall of 2005 for all of our 215 teachers, the question soon arose: “Who’s reading this? How many hits am I getting?”

This is an important question for all bloggers. How do you increase readership, engage conversations through comments, and “drive traffic” to your site? The answer is quite simple. Communicate what’s important. The hard part is deciding what is important. The even harder part is keeping up with the writing. Consistently, experts tell us that to maintain healthy readership to your blog, you have to keep the content fresh.


If you don’t think there’s “news” each day, then perhaps a blog isn’t for you. Or, consider making the burden of communication easier by joining with other educators. There’s no reason a small team of educators (say in one grade level or in one department) cannot all “group” blog in one space. The basic rule here is: frequent updates generate traffic. **Even if your posts are small, people tend to visit sites that stay fresh.** Beyond forming a group blog, you can help keep your site fresh by inviting your students to post their own insights, work, and projects on your blog (with supervision).

You can also drive traffic to your blog by letting people know it exists! Drive traffic to your blog by creating links to specific blog posts (permalinks) when sending out e-mail announcements. Add your blog U.R.L. to a business card, or your e-mail signature. Another way to carve out a path to your blog is through linking to other websites. Not only can others link to you (read: your school webpage, other education blogs), but you can also link to others who are blogging. Strength in numbers.

BEST PRACTICES

Here are some best practices I recommend after five years of experience in working with blogging educators.

1. **Tell us a little about yourself.** On an “About” page, tell us how to contact you, where you work, and don’t forget the city and state. Many visitors from around the world may be curious as to where you teach and some of your qualifications.
2. **Tell others what’s going on in the classroom.** Telling a parent that we studied fractions today is only so helpful. Provide detail in what you decide to share. Give us a link to a website where kids could practice making fractions, give a tip for that evening’s homework, or share some success students had in their first exploration of fractions during their study of math.
3. **Share student success.** Students will become your biggest cheerleaders for your blog when it shows-off great work. Highlight student projects and artifacts through the blog. Before you do, however, notify parents that you plan on sharing good student work throughout the year online. Take care not to reveal student identities through their work in light of your school’s Internet safety guidelines.
4. **Show us, don’t just tell us.** Today more than ever, images are powerful. No matter how great your writing is, your blog will get noticed and used by parents and students when it contains pictures. Just be sure photos of classroom activities follow guidelines in your school for the release of directory information and the A.U.P.



5. **Define your audience.** Who are you talking to? Use blogging software to help direct your audience. Many teachers write for the parents, but you can write to both the parents and the students. You may even be writing for your colleagues. Consider using categories within your blog for your different audience groups.

6. **Get bookmarked.** The more folks who link to you and bookmark your site in social spaces, the more traffic you'll get. "Linkage" is a sign of a better website. Consider the content you are publishing and the quality of that content. Sites that lead people elsewhere, that provide hyperlinks to other resources, and target the kinds of things people want, are indeed better. And then people will be bookmarking you and linking to you.

7. **Be honest, be sincere.** These are always great traits to have when communicating with others.

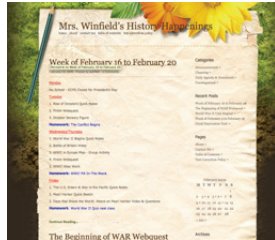
8. **Share what works.** If you're sharing resources for your colleagues, do more than just link to the latest and greatest website. Tell us only if you've used it, and if you can, tell us more about the experience you had with it, and how precisely you used it. The more websites educators can find that actually real-world test new Web 2.0 sites, the better.

9. **Read blogs, read education literature.** Teaching is a challenging profession. Not only are you in the business of teaching, but you're also constantly learning yourself. Take the time to read the current literature in your field, and that includes other blogs online.

10. **Content over aesthetics, content over tools.** The most important thing is the reading and writing. Make the process of blogging as easy as you can. Consider using tools like *Ecto* or *MarsEdit*.

EXAMPLES

You can find many examples of these best practices “in play” by visiting some of the teacher weblogs from Goochland County Public Schools. Their main web URL is: www.glnd.k12.va.us, and the teacher blogs are housed at: <http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/>.



Featured blogs include:

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/jbocrie/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/ekuhns/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/akeo/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/sjones/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/bcantor/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/kberry/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/pgretz/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/eagle/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/jwinfield/>

<http://blogs.glnd.k12.va.us/teachers/clong/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Hendron has been a presenter for the Virginia Society for Technology in Education for over eight years. John serves on the **Greater Richmond Area Educational Technology Council (GRAETC)**. He currently is employed as supervisor of instructional technology for **Goochland County Public Schools** (Virginia). Among his accomplishments in Goochland, John implemented the *Teacher Blogging Initiative* in 2005 and the *G21 Projects* in 2008.

John was recognized in 2006 by the **Virginia Department of Education** as Virginia's state technology leader at their **Educational Technology Leadership Conference**. He is a member and director for the **Virginia Society for Technology in Education (VSTE)**.

John writes regularly for four weblogs, including *Hendron's Digest*, a blog dedicated to education and technology, available online for free at <http://www.johnhendron.net/digest/>.

