

Blogging and Web2.0 Considerations for Schools

The purpose of this document is to assist schools in developing a policy for the safe and educationally appropriate use of web-logs or blogs. Although the document addresses blogs specifically, the concepts can be applied to the use of a variety of read/write web tools designed to facilitate communication, commonly called Web2.0

This document is divided into 6 sections. The first five sections have information about specific aspects of blogs. Section 6 lists discussion points schools should consider in developing an educational blog or Web2.0 environment.

- 1. Why use a school blog**
- 2. Establishing an educational blog**
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Section 1. Why use a school blog?

Many teachers are making effective use of Web2.0 tools as a way to extend learning opportunities for students, and professional development opportunities for themselves. There are potential benefits to students writing blogs as well as reading the ideas and comments of their peers. The effective use of a teacher-supported learning blog can:

- Create opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss what they are learning
- Practice the written expression of ideas and opinions with an authentic audience
- Help students explore classroom learning through what others have written
- Receive support and feedback on their own ideas through teacher / peer comments
- Learn about and practice collaboration, respect, and relating to others online
- Promote the overall teaching and learning goals of the classroom.

The use of school blogs also has the potential to give parents and caregivers a unique view into their child's classroom. The regular flow of information and student discussion about learning can strengthen the school partnership with families and whanau. Some schools may consider or actively encourage parents and caregivers to make contributions to school blogs as a means to enhance communication with the community.

Small rural or remote schools using a common or linked blog can provide opportunities for student and teacher collaboration.

This potential to increase student and parent engagement in learning through the use of blogs has created a wave of teacher enthusiasm to set up classroom blogs. This enthusiasm has, in some cases, overshadowed the fundamental considerations educators should address to ensure the use of school blogs remains focused within an educational context and that students and their work are safe online.

Before developing a school blog, educators should consider how the features of a blog and the regular communication it promotes, will contribute to the overall strategic plan or vision for using digital technologies in the classroom. Just as any school expenditure must be justified in terms of its educational benefit, the use of a blog should be considered in the same light. It is also important to establish how a school will evaluate the school blog's contribution to educational outcomes for students.

Section 2. Establishing an educational blog

The use of online web pages that inform parents about school expectations and organization are common in New Zealand schools. These school web sites are generally static pages administered by a single individual with a certain level of expertise.

By contrast, a blog is an ongoing chronicle of information created by individuals or groups to share events and experiences. They can be created using software that allows people with little or no technical background to easily become regular bloggers. Bloggers typically update their blogs often, make use of links to articles or other web sites and blogs, and invite their readers to comment on the blog posts.

Blogs are generally public and posts can be read by anyone on the internet. Even if an administrator deletes a post or comment, it may have already been archived elsewhere on the web.

Ensuring that staff, students and the community have a shared understanding of the purpose and expectations of an educational blog is a fundamental step. A school blog is in essence, an extension of the classroom and can be a learning tool that promotes conversations and thinking outside of regular class time.

Staff and students may already be using social networking tools or blogs to keep up to date with friends in their private life. These have a different purpose and intent from a classroom blog. Teachers may need to help students understand this difference and provide ongoing guidance to help students separate out personal issues that are not related to school topics. It is also important to help children understand the long term impact of the digital foot print they create through blog posts and online activity.

For educators, a personal digital footprint can impact on their professional lives. Educators who establish or make contributions to professional blogs where their employer is clearly identified are encouraged to discuss this online activity with school management. Clear social media guidelines for staff can pave the way for educators to be involved in conversations with national and international colleagues which enhance professional development opportunities for them and their school.

Section 3. Monitoring and managing a school blog

School blogs need to be monitored and managed to ensure that posts remain in the realm of an educational context and that all contributors are adhering to agreed policy and ethics. Monitoring and managing a blog with enthusiastic contributors can be time consuming.

Often educators who start class blogs have not considered what happens to the blog after it has served its purpose. Last year's class blog may be a useful induction tool for new staff and students and contributors should be made aware of this potential and ongoing use. Schools might consider a blog "life cycle" and what happens at the end of the school year or when staff or students leave the school. Some New Zealand schools have adopted blog platforms that allow student contributions to be carried over from year to year with new teachers.

Having more than one blog account administrator is an important safety consideration for school blogs. Giving students administrator rights to a class blog needs to be made with very careful consideration of student maturity, established school blogging culture and potential benefits and challenges to bloggers.

Schools should also consider the challenges associated with allowing students to create links from their school blog to personal blogs or personal online content (i.e. gaming profiles, online photo sharing sites, social networking sites, music or fan sites).

Section 4. Privacy and Copyright

Privacy

The Privacy Act sets out principles governing the collection, use, and disclosure of personal information. These principles provide guidance to schools about the collection of student information and the subsequent use of that information. It is vital for those schools to communicate to students and parents:

- What information is collected
- The purpose for which it is collected
- Intended recipients

The principles require that schools hold personal information for no longer than is required for the purposes for which the information was collected. Schools considering the use of blogs or online environments available to the public will need to be explicit about their policy for identifying student names, images, photos, artwork and all student produced material.

Owing to the nature of the internet, there are an unlimited number of people worldwide who could view information that identifies both staff and students. Educators need to be aware that there is no way the school can stop a third party website from creating a direct hypertext link from its site to a school's *public* website or blog.

Copyright

Students have rights to the work they produce and each student owns the copyright to their own artistic and literary works. Schools cannot publish student work online without authorization from the students and parents.

Many schools have created a parent / student authorization form that covers online publication in school newsletters or a school web page. Often these are considered at enrolment and cover the entire period the student is enrolled at the school. Schools considering the use of a class blog should review these consents and consider their application to the use of a school blog

The Ministry of Education has provided detailed guidelines for schools on the topics of privacy and copyright. These can be accessed at:

http://www.tki.org.nz/r/governance/curriculum/copyguide_e.php

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner has provided a guide to the Privacy Act for principals, teachers and Boards of trustees. It can be accessed at:

<http://www.privacy.org.nz/assets/Files/Brochures-and-pamphlets-and-pubs/Privacy-in-Schools-September-2009.pdf>

Section 5. Platforms and Tools

There are many blogging platforms to choose from, some designed specifically for classroom and student use. The decision about which one to use should start with consideration of the education purpose and requirements of the blog.

What platform:

- best suits our education requirements
- is easy for teachers and students to use
- provides effective methods for staff or administrators to monitor or manage blog posts.

Some blog platforms are free to use but display advertising on pages as a source of revenue. A blog platform that is ad-free today has potential to introduce advertising at any point in the future. Reading the platform's terms and conditions is the first step. Be aware that free blogging environments can and do sometimes change their terms and conditions and if this happens the continued use of an existing blog may need to be reconsidered.

There are a wide variety of tools that can enhance a blog: Site and traffic meters image editors, video, RSS and twitter feeds. All need to be considered for their ability to enhance learning opportunities for students.

The following discussion points are provided as a guide for educators to consider within their specific context.

Section 6. Discussion points for your school

- How will class or school blogs contribute to our overall strategic plan or vision for use of ICT?
- How and when will we evaluate the blog's contribution to educational outcomes for students?
- Do we have sufficient input and appropriate consent from students, parents or caregivers to publish student work, images and videos?
- Do staff and students know what is effective and acceptable use of learner centred blogs?
- Who will address inappropriate use? What are the consequences?
- Will parents and caregivers be invited to view or contribute to classroom blogs? Will the wider community have access to our blog?
- Does our current Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) need to be revised to reflect the use of Web2.0 tools and blogs?
- How will we manage and monitor blog posts? Who will have *administrator* passwords?
- Do students, teachers and parents know what to do if something on a school blog upsets or worries them?
- Who will choose the blog platform(s) or tools and on what criteria?
- Will we allow blog contributors to link to other school blogs, personal blogs, flicker accounts?

NetSafe has developed these guidelines in a collaborative endeavour with New Zealand educators. The NetSafe team would like to thank all those who took time to provide comments and feedback.

We are always interested in talking to educators about how they use NetSafe resources. If you have comments or suggestions about the *blogging guidelines* or any NetSafe services, please contact us at queries@netsafe.org.nz