prof:web
Learning Objects
and Inspiring Learning

Publications

Teaching and Learning Using Blogs

✉ Charles-Antoine Bachand Educational Advisor, Cégep de l'Outaouais

Charles-Antoine Bachand of *Cégep de l'Outaouais* explains why and how blogs can be interesting pedagogical tools.

Table of Contents

The Issue

Thanks to my own blog, pinpointing when I found out about blogs and when I took my first steps into the blogosphere is a snap. One of the principal advantages of blogging is that it leaves a record of our movements, the evolution of our thoughts and the influence of others' comments. I can say with authority that I published my first entry on April 21, 2005 after reading various Quebec teachers' blogs.

But, before delving further into my memories and discoveries of using blogs in a pedagogical context, let's examine this tool itself and its possibilities.

Describing blogs

Definition

The blog, a contraction of the word web-log, has been widely discussed and defined over the last few years. Blogs are generally understood to be Internet sites which take the form of a diary or intimate journal containing a series of articles presented in reverse chronological order. Each entry to the blog is generally composed of text, images, videos, audio recordings or hyperlinks. What differentiates a blog from just being an Internet diary, however, is the opportunity offered to readers to make comments about the author's entries on the same Internet page. This difference therefore makes a blog more dynamic and interactive than a traditional Internet page. The author can make regular entries and readers are at liberty to react to them in an ongoing manner.

Essentially, blogs have a theme around which entries are published. There are blogs on education, politics, *macramé* and even the personal life and experiences of the author.

A Short History

Without returning to the 18th Century as some authors do, let's accept that blogs are a result of the simplicity of the WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) concept being applied online to content management tools. Although initially the Internet necessitated the use of complex HTML conventions and code, the

appearance of HTML editors simplified the task of publishing formatted hard copy to the Internet with an appearance similar to the original. This new ease of publication not only permitted comments and reflections from across the planet but also set the scene for the visionary work which was to follow.

In 1994, Justin Hall began his "Filter Log" which was dedicated to the concept of categorizing Internet sites of interest. Four years later, John Barger proposed the term 'Weblog' to describe this new reality. In 1999 the site Blogger.com saw the light of day. Since then, this site has allowed anyone to create a blog simply by filling out a short registration form and has fueled a growing interest in blogging. Today, tens of millions of people including researchers, politicians, teachers and artists profit from the convenience of blogging tools (Warlick, 2007).

The best way to understand what a blog is and what makes it so attractive to teachers and their students is to illustrate its inner works. It is important to remember, however, that not all blogs are created equal and that they can present an impressive diversity of forms.

As an example, here is a blog created for IT integration at *Cégep de l'Outaouais* called *Cégep en TIC*. This is a rather typical blog, if one can say that such a thing exists, which illustrates the different elements that make up the so-called typical blog.

The Anatomy of a Blog – An Example
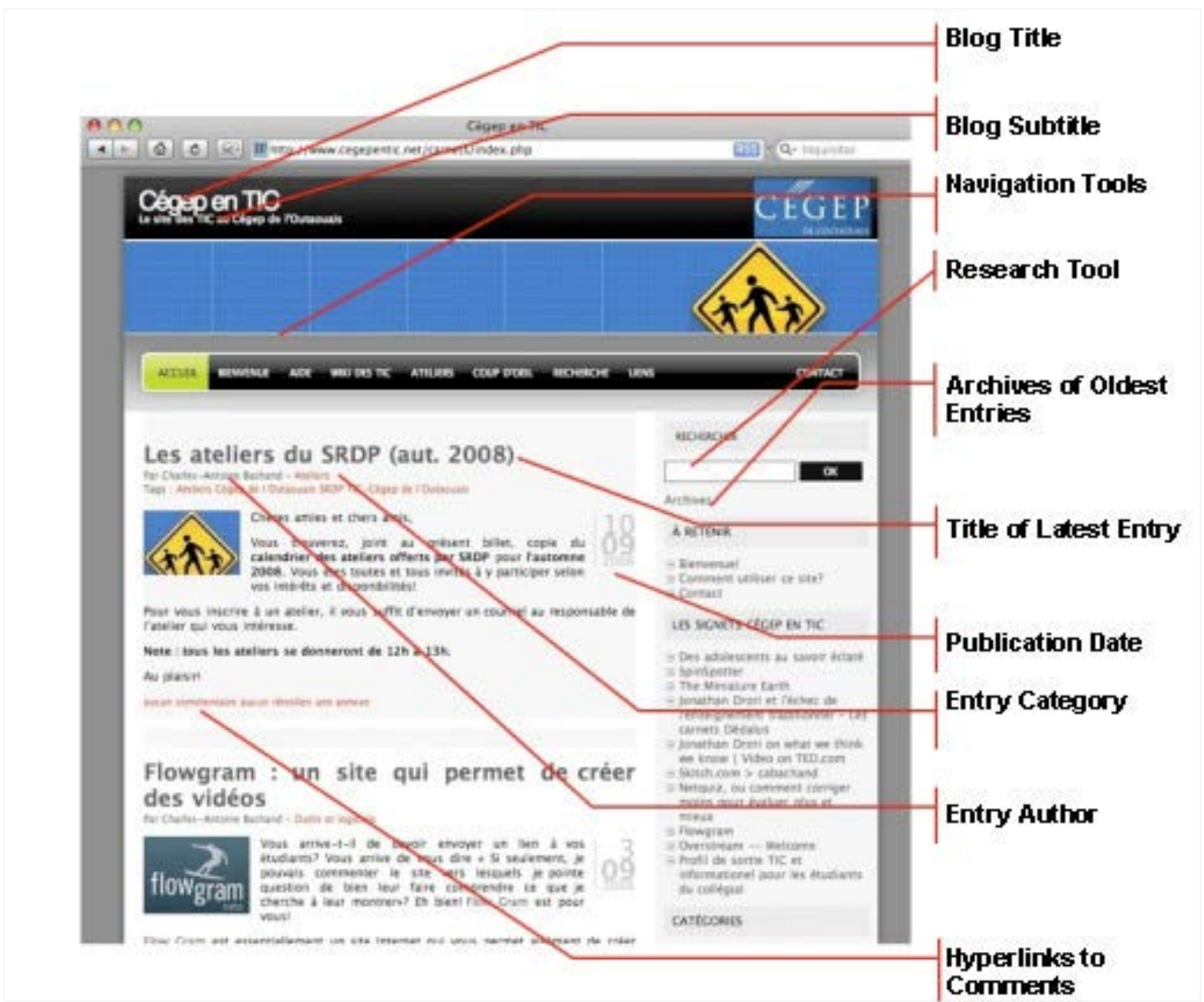
The main page of *Cégep en TIC*

1. Blog Title: The Blog Title is the blog's principal identification indicating its theme.

2. Blog Subtitle: The Blog Subtitle gives the exact objective established by the blog's author or authors.

3. Navigation Tools: Blogs offer a full range of navigation tools. They can include important entries, a calendar or a list of entry categories.

4. Research Tool: A research tool enables the user to locate a particular entry or series of entries.

5. Archives: The majority of blogs offer this tool which allows the user to go back in time to see what the blog author published at a particular point in time.

6. Entry Title: As a blog is essentially a diary composed of entries or articles, what is of most interest to the reader are those elements which are the work of the author. Each of these will have a title explaining their contents.

7. Publication Date: The strength of a blog is its timeliness. In contrast to the traditional Internet site, the blog

is in constant flux. To facilitate reading the blog, each entry is automatically dated.

8. Entry Category: The most popular navigation feature in blogs is classification by category. A blog can contain many distinct categories, each containing the author's entries on that subject. As an example, Cégep en TIC contains ten categories ranging from 'Research' containing entries about interesting research to 'Resources' highlighting Internet finds and 'Workshops' listing current offerings at the cegep.

9. Entry Author: Blogging software generally automatically inserts the name of the author of each entry. There are many blogs that are authored by more than one person.

10. Hyperlinks to Comments: As discussed earlier, the other principal characteristic of a blog is its interactivity. The hyperlink to comments allows readers to view comments left by others or to add their reactions to the author's entry.

Various Blogging Software

There are literally dozens of tools allowing easy blogging on the Internet. Most of them are similar and contain many identical features.

It is therefore important when evaluating the different choices available to carefully determine the best match with your needs. Even though the majority of these applications do the same thing, certain are simpler to operate than others and certain allow greater flexibility for future changes.

Blogger

The most used and simplest tool of them all remains Blogger which can get a blog up and running in a few minutes. Undeniably dependable and universally recognized, Blogger is an attractive option for someone looking for a simple efficient blogging solution. This simplicity of operation, however, has its drawbacks such as its limited options for appearance and address. This tool can be quite useful for the teacher asking students to create their own blogs.

Posterous

Posterous was created with simplicity of operation in mind. Someone who wants to be blogging in seconds can do so if they are ready to live with the restricted presentation options that Posterous offers. Authors can even publish by e-mail. This tool is only available in English for the moment.

WordPress

WordPress is the standard against which other blogging software is judged. Although originally developed in English, it is available in numerous other languages including French. WordPress can be installed on the Internet site of your choice as long as it can handle a MySQL database or you can blog directly from the WordPress site. Furthermore, since a few months ago, the Personal Space of Profweb.qc.ca besides offering

free hosting to any cegep personnel, also features extremely easy installation of this tool; the user need only select 'Applications to install' from the 'My Space' tab. It is important to note that one copy of WordPress allows the management of several blogs. Concretely, this means that one installation of the software allows the management of all of your students' blogs.

DotClear

DotClear resembles WordPress, although it must be installed on the server of your choice. The main difference between these two tools is the simplicity of DotClear's publication interface and the energy of its users; a question asked on the DotClear forum rarely remains unanswered. This tool was entirely developed in French for francophones and therefore satisfies those not content with the possibilities offered by Blogger for example. DotClear, like WordPress allows multiple blog hosting and offers an interface which can be personalized to the last detail.

At this point, let us remember that asking students doing as much of the work as possible is pedagogically the best strategy. Asking students to create their own blogs is an excellent way of teaching them how to operate them. In this vein, the use ofBlogger is a logical choice given its simplicity of operation. Besides limiting the need to help students to a strict minimum, this exercise will develop students' IT skills. Several studies have demonstrated that students will be far more active on their blogs if they feel that the blogs are their own and not merely a tool developed uniquely for a class. Once the course is finished, a Blogger blog remains with the student and therefore can be of great personal interest to them. The usefulness of the blog at semester's end extends to instructors using a program approach tracking learning acquisition through several courses.

Appropriate pedagogical contexts for blogging

Now that we have taken a quick overview of blogs and their features, their pedagogical applications merit examination.

The blog's essential function is to enable wide scale discussion by making our thoughts and deeds public. This exposure is done in the hope of stimulating comments by others in reaction to the author's views. This formula is also particularly interesting in contexts where the students are called upon to track their own logic, to document stages in a process or a long project or to work in cooperation within a group assigned a common task.

Illustrating the utility of blogs in several educational contexts provides easily understandable examples of their pedagogical potential.

The Teacher's Blog

Teacher blogging can be quite useful as an easy entry to the Internet. A blog provides quick web access to an instructor's thoughts, links, texts or work. As the blog is a tool that can continuously change, an instructor can use this feature to invite students to comment on material that has been published whether it be a pertinent

text or a question to stimulate debate. This simple way to make a public space for a course can also easily adapt to become accessible uniquely to class members. The Personal Space of Profweb as well as other hosts allow users to password protect blogs.

The Blog as a Learning Portfolio

Asking students to make their own blog is without doubt the most innovative and interesting use for blogging. A student's blog being an Internet space to publish their thoughts, their activities and their products motivates them by allowing successes to be shared with the world at large and not only the instructor for evaluation. Simultaneously, a learning portfolio is being created. The teacher and the student will have access at the end of the course or program to a documentation of the student's academic progress.

The public nature of this portfolio adds a new and fascinating factor to the student's acquisition of knowledge. Their learning is not hidden within the classroom but on display to the curious and possibly interested passerby examining this material and the student's thoughts as the process advances. The public nature of the work also invites classmates to give feedback to their colleagues.

The Blog in Language Classes

Student blogging can be particularly interesting in language class where the student must become familiar with writing and reading in another language. Internet publishing of texts and essays allows students to not only read the work of their classmates, but also to benefit from outside commentary. In a recent study by the research team of Ducate et Lomicka (2008), students were asked to create a blog and to read and comment on blogs in the target language. The experience was fascinating not only for the practice in reading and writing but for exposure to another culture. Research demonstrated that the students who had their own blog as opposed to a class blog seemed to create a space that was both public and private, but remained the property of the student. This feeling of ownership of the space had a particularly beneficial effect on the number of entries and the ease of publication as perceived by the student.

Blogging and Metacognition

The importance of metacognition (i.e. learning to learn) has no need to be proven in education any longer. Furthermore, the blog is a wonderful tool to develop metacognition. It can be used to ask students to identify questions and points of confusion in their learning process. The researcher Xie and her associates dealt with these issues in a 2008 study. The methodology 'forced' students to use a part of their work time to consider their learning tools and their learning styles. In 1985 Boud and Australasia showed even then that incorporating a learning diary into a course of study favoured metacognition. The blog is really nothing more than a step forward from this strategy. In this sense, the simple act of formalizing reflections in writing seems to have a positive effect on learning.

The Blog as an Apprenticeship Diary

Blogs are also ideal for apprentice supervision. It is possible to create blogs to allow apprentices to share their thoughts and discoveries. It is also possible to create a common apprenticeship blog for all members of a particular work study program. Such a blog not only permits teachers to communicate news, but also allows students to relate experiences occurring in their particular apprenticeship situations.

The Blog as an Artistic Portfolio

In an art class, it is sometimes difficult to organize a launch or an exposition for each student production. Blogs allow students to present their work in an informal context where friends and colleagues can be invited to view their creations.

Blogging the "Lost" Diary

In different contexts, for example History, it can be of interest to publish the diary of a missing character. Recently, a group created the [diary of George Orwell](), seventy years after the fact. Of course, it is possible to ask students to make comments about entries or to discuss such a project in their own blog. It would also be possible to imagine the diary of a character from the past in order to illustrate daily life or events happening during a critical historical period.

Techno-pedagogical characteristics of blogs

Blogs are characterized by a number of technological and pedagogical features from other resources such as forums, course management systems or traditional academic Internet sites.

Technical Features

Technically, blogs have several advantages which are presented summarily below.

- Ease of publication: publishing on the Internet had been a bit complex for a long period until tools such as Blogger, WordPress (the choice of blog for Profweb's Personal Space) and Posterous were developed principally to make on-line publishing as simple as possible. Using blogs automated the passage of personally written documents (or documents copied from other sites or e-mail) from the computer to the web with formatting automatically adjusted. One cannot help but agree with Warlick (2007) when he affirms that teachers don't have the time to be webmasters.

- Asynchronous Communication: the fact that blogs offer asynchronous communication as do forums allows users to think through their comments and above all to return to them.

- Archives: a great number of academic resources used by teachers do not easily allow archiving of thoughts and comments made by students. An online course is often locked or erased at the end of the semester. Blogs are long lived and certainly can extend beyond the fifteen weeks of a course. It is also possible not only to evaluate a student's progress during a course, but if necessary well beyond.

Furthermore, once the course is over, the student remains the owner of their blog and can use it however he judges fit.

- **Neutral Territory:** it has been demonstrated in an increasing number of occasions that resources which rely on a central location for exchanges or comments have a positive impact on student motivation. The fact that the blog belongs to the student and not the teacher tends to create a pride of ownership which encourages learning how to use it. The blog can then become a piece of neutral territory where the student feels at ease to invite friends and colleagues.

- **Integration of Different Media:** blogs facilitate the use of different media in information and communication technology. It is quite simple to incorporate text, images, videos, audio files, drawings and hyperlinks into a blog.

- **User Centered Bias:** essentially a diary, a blog is one of the rare IT tools which is truly student-centered. Several computer resources favour a teacher-centered approach, sidelining the thoughts and academic progress of the student. Blogs by their very nature place power and responsibility in the hands of students.

Pedagogical Features

Blogs present an impressive array of pedagogical features inherent in their form and in the fact that they are essentially diaries promoting exchange.

- **Putting Ideas into Written Form:** it has been shown for quite awhile that the simple act of concretizing ideas by putting them on paper can have a quite positive effect on learning. Blogs make this activity rather interesting.

- **Reviewing Concepts:** several studies indicate that reviewing learned concepts has a major effect on in-depth learning. As reviewing concepts is a particularly challenging activity the diary function of blogs facilitates this task.

- **Tracking Progress:** diaries and portfolios as well as blogs allow students to track their own progress. This feature can be useful in a number of contexts including allowing the teacher to discretely evaluate student performance.

- **Interacting with Others:** socioconstructivism, largely through Vygostky and Piaget, has shown the importance of social interaction for learning. Blogs foster peer and community interaction among students and therefore foster a more complete and holistic view. Furthermore, peer interaction has been shown to promote reflection. Also, as comments from third parties are real, they can initiate individual and joint review.

- **Publishing:** publishing itself has a beneficial effect on student learning. Students are encouraged to publish their thoughts in an authentic context. The notion of the teacher being the single reader falls by

the wayside as students have been known to receive comments from authors, researchers and visitors from foreign countries.

- ■ Discussing Democratically: according to Habermas (1984), an ideal setting for a discussion will have three elements: the ability for anyone to initiate the discussion; no power imbalance among the participants and the good faith of the participants. Given this fact, several researchers have noted that blogs promote a truly democratic and authentic exchange. The most timid student in a discussion in class will sometimes contribute to a blog exchange with gusto.

- ■ Improving IT Skills: it is a given that asking students to create their own blog will improve their academic and technical IT skills.

- ■ Evaluating Critically: finally, it is generally acknowledged by students themselves that as they author their own material, they can more easily critically judge others' materials. They become readier to admit that what is published may be biased or deficient in some other way.

Note: In the above tables, we have not made references to studies in many of the elements in the interest of brevity; however, each element above has been the object of well-documented research.

Other elements to consider

The Right to Err!

It is important to note that the right to make a mistake is fundamental to blogging in a pedagogical context which is as authentic as possible. If students perceive that they are being judged, it's a sure bet that they won't express themselves freely. Free exchange, interaction and reflection are key components of the blogging experience, and students must feel at liberty to reflect and post as they wish at some point in their blog.

The Question of Anonymity

In the same vein, it is important to offer students the possibility of assuming a pseudonym. This allows them to express themselves more freely still without fearing others' opinions, with or without justification. Obviously, the instructor can have a list of pseudonyms but must decide whether this list is to be made available to students. This point could become the basis for a first blog entry.

Practical Applications

As discussed above, a multitude of ways to use blogs in a pedagogical context exists. Below, the steps necessary to provide students with a portfolio blog or a diary are presented.

How to start pedagogically blogging

In an imaginary situation, students have a long term assignment as part of their course. Periodically, they must hand in copies of progress reports explaining their activities, a projected schedule, and a preliminary project as well as their thoughts about these activities. What would be the best tool to use to accomplish this task?

Blogging could be the perfect solution. The blog would permit you to accomplish the following activities:

- Create an authentic situation
- Promote self-reflection
- Promote student exchange
- Allow archival information
- Create a feeling of control in students over their own learning process

In fact, the steps presented below could lend themselves to any learning situation where students are required to formally consider their learning and the process of its acquisition.

Preparation

1. Familiarisation : The first step of the process is to become familiar with blog creation. Logically, the best way to do this is to create your own blog using WordPress software. It is also possible to receive technical support for installation as well as to consult their website. Another option is to use very simple tools like Blogger or Posterous. Don't forget to erase your first attempts! Visits to a certain number of other blogs are in order to familiarize yourself with their operation. Take a look at the blog by D. Warlick or the one by W. Richardson. These sites are known internationally for the quality of their thoughts about using blogs.

2. Setting a Publication Date : The second step is to go to your course plan to identify when students will need to publish their thoughts or material. These moments can be determined by time period, such as every three weeks, or by goals such as publication of plans, reading journals, etc. Of course, these times can be official or informal. Furthermore, you can allow your students to publish as they wish. In this vein, tolerance is the order of the day as students publish material that is perhaps less on task and more personal as they familiarize themselves with the process of putting their thoughts online and working with others. These first entries will most likely not contribute much to the overall quality of thought but can foster a lasting community of learning within the group.

3. Identifying an Operating Protocol : Are you taking a team oriented approach or not? Are you going to ask your students to make a minimum number of comments about classmates' entries? Are you going to give the address of a group's blog to other members of the class or retain these addresses for yourself only? It is important to note that forcing students to make peer comments does not always produce positive results.

The quality of comments can be compromised. Furthermore, it seems that the act of formalizing ideas on-line does have an effect on learning. Finally, students in general do not like to be obliged to read or comment on classmates' entries, but do appreciate visiting the blogs of their peers. It may therefore be useful to make a repertory of student blogs available to the class.

Classroom Protocols

1. Requiring Students to Create a Blog: It seems that imposing a particular tool on students or worse yet imposing a group blog is a mistake. The feeling of blog ownership is important. You can, however, suggest the tool (Blogger,WordPress ou Posterous), leaving the final choice open for each student to heighten student motivation.

2. Explaining Blog Operation: As this will most likely be a first experience in the blogosphere for some of your students, take the time to explain the anatomy of a blog in class.

3. Explaining Your Expectations: Students need to know what you expect of them on their blog. Give them publication deadlines, select team members (if there are teams) and even provide the questions and themes that could be helpful in their tasks. It might also be helpful to ask them to consider what elements they didn't understand and what difficulties they encountered during the course of their learning.

4. Validating the Publications of Your Students: To maximize interest and efficiency, the teacher should consult student blogs regularly to make constructive comments (remember the blog is public) or to simply stay informed of the progress of students. As well, the judicious use of RSS feeds greatly facilitates the surveillance that the teacher must perform with student blogs. RSS feeds will keep you informed of any new entry on your students' blogs. Don't hesitate to ask your students to consult a particularly interesting post of a classmate or to ask an outside source to make a comment of particular interest. Use the reflections published in your students' blogs to stimulate discussion in class.

Note: If you need to communicate something confidential to your students, use old fashioned e-mail or a personal meeting.

A Final Report of the Blogging Experience

At the end of the semester, it is important to take stock as a group of the effect of blogging on the group's learning experience. It is also important for the teacher to evaluate the use of blogs in their pedagogy. These exercises can result in modifications to future courses which could be changed to take further advantage of blogs' usefulness in student learning. Notwithstanding the personal and less pertinent aspects of some entries, blogs open the classroom to the world and create a community of learning which can rapidly become rich and motivating.

Finally, it is important to note that the more the use of blogs is supervised, the less beneficial are the results.

Furthermore, certain students will probably not appreciate the experience. You must ask yourself if it is imperative that everyone participate to the same degree. The principal objective must always be to advance student learning. As diaries have proved their value as has the teaching portfolio, the blog with an ever simpler operation, can be an extremely productive option.

Note: Don't forget that blogging is a relatively labour intensive option for learners who must think about their processes and procedures. Comments from students about using blogs frequently reflect the effort expended in considering their methodology.

Variations

Considered Evaluation and a Community of Learning

Earlier, we presented the use of blogs in a project context. However, it is also possible to proceed in the same manner for a more traditional course. Asking students to consider what they haven't understood well or to comment on readings, for example, would allow teachers to take advantage of the boost that self-reflection brings to the process of learning. A well-presented use of blogs can create new links among students during the course and because of the personal ownership of most blogs, this relation can continue throughout their studies.

The Teacher's Blog

The blog can also be used exclusively by the teacher to distribute content as a quick route to the Internet. The blog can contain texts, videos or images of interest for the course and its students. The teacher's blog can allow students to interact with the teacher and other students outside of class hours which is its prime advantage. Once the teacher's blog is up and running, the site can deliver material as diverse as addresses, RSS feeds and passwords to students. The teacher can take advantage of the easy operation of blogs to emphasize pertinent resources for students, ask them to react to a text or ask them to express their personal or team opinions on a theme or a work-study experience for example.

Useful References

Profweb Stories about Blogs in College Teaching in English and in French

- Martin Benoit (2008). "*Martin Benoit – Pedagogical Blogger*", Profweb, March 17, 2008.

- Remy Katshingu (2008). "*Un blogue pour concilier la culture du « zapping » et l'école*", Profweb, November 24, 2008.

- Benoit Daviau (2008). "*Une expérience de carnet de voyage «vite fait, bien fait»*",Profweb, October 14, 2008.

Texts by Two Dedicated Academic Bloggers in English

- D. Warlick http://davidwarlick.com/2cents/

- W. Richardson http://weblogg-ed.com/

Research Bibliography

- Xie, Y., Ke, F., & Sharma, P. (2008, January 1). The Effect of Peer Feedback for Blogging on College Students' Reflective Learning Processes. Internet and Higher Education, 11(1), 18.

- Ellison, N., & Wu, Y. (2008, January 1). Blogging in the Classroom: A Preliminary Exploration of Student Attitudes and Impact on Comprehension. Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia, 17(1), 99.

- Kim, H. (2008, November 1). The Phenomenon of Blogs and Theoretical Model of Blog Use in Educational Contexts. Computers & Education, 51(3), 1342.

- Ducate, L., & Lomicka, L. (2008, February 1). Adventures in the Blogosphere: From Blog Readers to Blog Writers. Computer Assisted Language Learning, 21(1), 9.

- Warlick, D. (2007). Classroom Blogging. Raleigh: The Landmark Project, 183 pages.

Other Reference

- FLENET: "*Français langue étrangère et Internet*". BLOGS / Carnets web – EDUCATION. Universidad de León. (page consulted January 12, 2009).