Joey Adventures: Year 1 students blog to Learn

Chris Reading
SiMERR National Centre, University of New England

Leanne Chape
St Joseph's Primary School Walgett

Bonnie Lance
St Joseph's Primary School Walgett

Increasingly Web2.0 tools are being used to improve the social aspect of learning. The blog tool allows students to share their work with a wider audience but use in schools is limited. As part of a project into the use of social computing in remote schools, blogs were used with a Year 1 class to improve both English and Technology outcomes. Part of the implementation was a shared negotiation of what the Year 1 students would be able to achieve independently and what they could only achieve with assistance. Interviews with students and teachers identified benefits to learning, as well as challenges and factors that supported the students and teachers in meeting those challenges. Results are presented as a case study. Teachers identified a range of benefits and drew attention to the enthusiasm shown by both students and parents. From student interviews it became apparent that they did not see any clear distinction between the writing task and the technology used to support it. The success of this learning experience for the students is reflected in the school's decision to include the use of blogs in future programmed learning for Year 1 and also other grades.

INTRODUCTION

Some primary school teachers still doubt the value of blogging for their students and systemic education authorities are devising even more ways of restricting student access to blogging tools. By contrast, one Catholic primary school in remote north-western New South Wales has successfully used blogging to motivate Year 1 students to write. This paper reports on this learning activity and interviews with the participating teachers and students, which provide information about the impact on student learning.

The weblog, or *blog*, has revolutionised web publishing by allowing anyone to publish on the web, removing the need for a dedicated technical person to 'publish' the content as was necessary in early content management systems (Weiler, 2003). The tool has become transparent, allowing the 'blogger' to focus on the writing rather than the technology. Early views of blogs focused on their value as a 'personal journal' but they have always been more than this and Downes (2004, p. 20) believes the coming-of-age was post '9/11' with blogs providing a critical source of up-to-date information for concerned people worldwide. The blog has become very popular in social spaces and there is now an increasing range of uses in education (see, e.g., Bias, 2007; Downes, 2004; Weiler, 2003) including personal journal, student portfolio, classroom management (assignments, notices), student-created discussion board, class seminar or discussion organisation, and outside-experts posing questions to students. Models for individual, classroom and collaborative blogs (Poling, 2005) provide a guide for teachers who want to incorporate blogs into student learning activities.

BLOGS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

When blogs are used for student learning peers and teachers are able to react to students' writing. This leads to many of the advantages of using blogs (see, e.g., Bias, 2007; Wu, 2005) including:

- students improving their own writing by contributing to editing the writing of other students;
- students realising that others outside the classroom are interested in their writing;

- students becoming more analytical and critical in their writing;
- parents being able to see what is happening in the classroom; and
- teachers being able to organise student writing.

A wealth of examples of student use of blogs and positive outcomes that the students have observed are available. Students blogging in Taiwan to learn their second language, English, believed that posting to the blog was a good idea (Wu, 2005). Students blogging in Canada to update their cyberportfolios believed that this motivated them to write (Weiler, 2003). Students blogging in the USA to communicate with the author of a book no longer had to guess what the author intended (Bleimes, 2006). Not surprisingly, much of the current web-based information on blogs is actually contained in blogs (see, e.g., supportblogging.com). However, teachers wanting to use blogs to support student learning need to plan carefully which tool to use and what security is necessary for student users. Blogs can be created through a hosting service, such as Blogger (Wu, 2005), or by installing application software on a computer (Downes, 2004, p. 20). The hosting-service choice is recommended for teachers because it requires less technical knowledge.

SOCIAL COMPUTING ENHANCING LEARNING IN REMOTE AUSTRALIA

The National Centre for Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR) funded a national project, *Social Computing enhancing learning in remote Australia* (scs.une.edu.au/web2)*,* to raise the awareness of the possibilities for, and impact of social computing on, student learning. Five SiMERR state 'hubs' collaborated on this project, which involved remote Australian schools. Teachers at each school were supported by critical friends from the SiMERR hubs in trialing student use of social computing tools. Each school focused on social computing tool(s) that best suited their students' needs. The project was designed to investigate what pedagogical approaches could be used with social computing to support student learning and collected data through teacher and student interviews to report on the benefits, challenges and what provided support. In New South Wales, teachers of a Year 1 class at St Joseph's Primary School Walgett chose to focus on using blogs to encourage their students to write. Reports of teachers 'getting students to write more and with emphasis on better writing because of the open audience' (Bias, 2007, p. 22) and of students as young as seven using blogs (Turnbull, 2006) support this decision. A description of the Year 1 learning activity is followed by a discussion of the impact on student learning informed by teacher and student interviews.

YEAR 1 LEARNING ACTIVITY: 'JOEY ADVENTURES' BLOG

The 'Joey Adventures' blog (stjoeys.edublogs.org) learning activity was created to allow the students to share their writing with a wider audience. The activity addressed both English and Technology syllabus outcomes. The class teacher worked with the teacher-librarian to plan and implement the learning activity during which the students only had access to computers and the internet in the library. Each week, Zoe the Joey (a soft toy pet kangaroo) was taken home by two students to have some fun and adventure. Back at school, each student told the story of her/his adventure. The classroom teacher wrote each story on the whiteboard and used it as a 'model writing' activity (correcting spelling, grammar and punctuation) developed together as a class. To help support the young students (aged six to seven years) all editing was done prior to typing up on the computer. Depending on camera availability, photographs were taken at school or at home. The stories (text and photograph) were placed on the blog (see, e.g., Paige's entry in Figure 1) by the students and the teacher. The blog provided the opportunity to publish a set of postings in sequential order, forming a diary of the adventures.

The general school community were provided with the URL to access the blog (in read-only mode). This allowed the students to share their stories with a wider audience, especially their families. Year 6 students acted as 'buddies' to help the Year 1 students type their stories and access the blog to read the stories. For security, contributions could only be posted by students and known adults, the posting of public comments was not allowed, and only given names were displayed for the students.
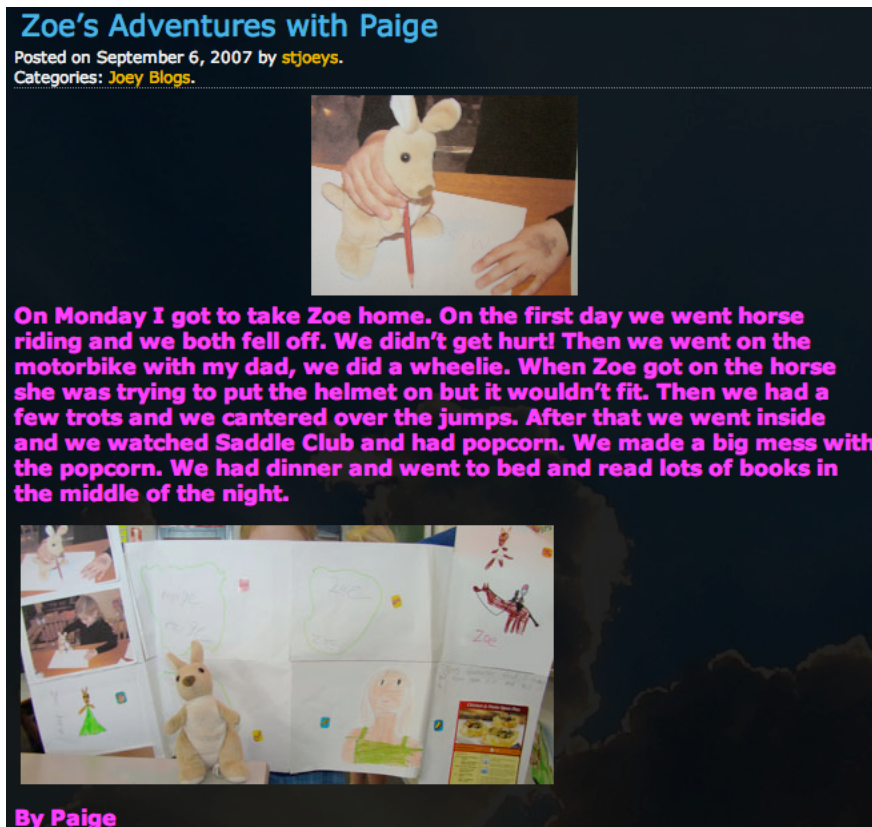
Figure 1. Paige's entry in the Joey Adventures Blog

LEARNING ACTIVITY IMPLEMENTATION

A challenge for the teachers was finding a blog tool that was simple enough for their young students to use and could be accessed through the school internet restrictions. The *Edna Groups Blog* was investigated but found to be difficult for the teachers to set up, too complicated for students to access and navigate, and to have an appearance that did not appeal to students. However, the site was designed for teacher communication rather than for student-friendly use. The second option considered was *Edublogs* (edublogs.org), which proved easier to establish, allowed easier access and navigation capabilities for students, and provided more options for changing the appearance of the blog. Before using the blog with the students, the teachers set up and used a blog because they had not created or posted to a blog before. Technical assistance provided by another educator in the town was greatly appreciated by the teachers.

For this learning activity there were clear roles for both teacher and student. The teacher role was to set up the blog, assist with final editing, guide the students when typing their stories into the blog, and insert photos to accompany the story. The student role was to type the story, change font size, change text colour, change the background, access the blog from school and home, and navigate the blog. To assess achievement of student learning outcomes the teachers used a rubric to measure against the English outcomes and a checklist for the Technology outcomes. The teachers shared the following some classroom management tips to facilitate implementation:

- have clear expectations of what students are to do;
- give clear instructions to the students;
- have a clear process for students who have forgotten what to do, e.g., ask a friend, display simple steps such as with three pictures;
- have clear rules for the transitions between non-computer and computer activities; and
- remember that using the computer keyboard is a slow process with Year 1.

METHODOLOGY

After implementation of the blog activity for a ten-week term, the two teachers involved and four of the Year 1 students were interviewed. The four students were selected randomly from those who had returned consent forms and were expected to be more likely to talk to someone they did not know. The interviews took place at the school with a teacher present and were recorded digitally. The researcher-interviewer analysed the interviews by noting key points in interviewees' responses to each question and then sharing the list of key points with the teachers for verification.

Teacher and student interviews began with a short recap of the blog-based student learning experience implemented in the school to focus attention. Then the teachers were asked three questions.

- What benefits do you see blogging bringing to your students' learning?
- What are the challenges with the use of blogging for your students' learning?
- What supports the use of blogging for your students' learning?

The students were asked three similar questions.

- How does blogging help you to learn?
- What causes you problems when you use blogging to help you learn?
- What helps you to use blogging when you learn?

Following is a discussion of key points that were evident in the interviews with the teachers and students.

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING: TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

Both teachers were enthusiastic about the experience and keen to continue to use blogs with young students. As one teacher observed 'It has been the best learning for the students as well as myself.' The main points made by the teachers in the interviews are presented as benefits, challenges and what supported the use of blogs.

Benefits that blogging brought to student learning
- *Students published stories to a wider audience*, including other students (their own class and Year 6), family, and other teachers. The students were excited about showing the blog, especially to older siblings most of whom had not used blogs.
- *Students learnt about a new technical aspect of using computers*, accessing the internet. Students typed the URL into the address bar to access the blog and navigated around the site.
- *Students shared their learning at home.* Students could show their work by typing in the URL themselves. Parents reported how keen the students were to access the blog at home.
- *Students achieved English learning outcomes,* especially when they were motivated to edit their writing and to speak about their adventure.
- *Students achieved Technology learning outcomes*, such as typing and knowledge of the computer keyboard. While the alphabet itself is still a mystery, students experienced the extra challenge of dealing with capital letters on the computer keyboard.
- *Students developed a basic knowledge of how a blog site works* and how information can be placed on the blog site.
- *Students developed a less mystical impression of the internet*. They were amazed when they realised they could log into an internet site that contained their own work. This demonstrated that 'ordinary' people are publishing on the internet.

- *Students were more excited about their learning* because it was 'out there' for other people to see. This was evident when they engaged in all aspects of the learning activity, both computer and non-computer related.
- *Students were more likely to 'look back over' their work* because it was published in the blog.
- *Parents were more enthusiastic about the classroom learning*. Some parents had set up shortcuts on their home computers to access the blog.

Challenges with the use of blogging for student learning
- *Students could not do as much independently as anticipated*. While there were many steps in the process that students wanted to complete independently, they often needed at least some level of supervision. Support provided by Year 6 buddies was very useful.
- *Students found the concept of a blog difficult to understand*. Although students were able to achieve basic steps in creating an entry for the blog, they did not necessarily understand what was happening technically. Students needed to be involved with the process more regularly and to practice dealing with problems that arose to develop a better appreciation of the concept of a blog.
- *Students typed very slowly*. Some on-computer time reduction was achieved by having the editing of the stories done off-computer and as a whole class activity. Students need plenty of time to find the correct letters on the keyboard. Computer activities that teach the location of keys would be an advantage.
- *Time was needed to complete, and learn, each step of the process*. The more opportunities (time) students have to practise the more able they become.
- *Technical problems intervened*. There was a major problem with the blog because the hosting site managers were upgrading the system. Computers often froze and so it was safer to have the text for each story saved in a document to be copied to the blog.
- *Resources were limited*. Students had to move to the library to use computers connected to the internet and could not access the blog daily to improve their proficiency. An electronic whiteboard with internet access would have been useful in the classroom to work with the students.

Supporting the use of blogging for student learning
- *Edublogs was a student-friendly blog site* for creating and accessing the blog. Students could change text colour and background images and did eventually learn not to change the formatting too much.
- *Students learnt from their peers*. As students discovered new features, they would teach other students what to do, e.g., how to do a capital 'A' by pressing shift and the letter.
- *Students benefited from working with Year 6 buddies*. Having buddies made it easier to get all students into the blog site and navigating around it during the restricted on-computer time.
- *Teachers were encouraged by their colleagues*. Both teachers commented on the value of the technical and collegial support provided by the other in-school teacher involved and by the educator from outside the school.

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING: STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

It is acknowledged that the students found it difficult to share their ideas and the researchers would consider using a focus-group style interview with Year 1 students in future research situations. To settle students they were encouraged to talk about the blog and how it compared to writing a story on paper. When the students were being reminded about the learning activity, three (out of four) remembered the word blog and all had showed family and friends the blog at home. One student could recount in detail his adventure with Zoe, including riding on the International Harvester and falling off the motorbike. However, the technical processes were not so clear to students, e.g., they could not explain how their digital photos had got from home to school. Interestingly, one student reported that her younger brother did not believe it was her own work on the blog until he looked at the picture and recognised the home setting.

When asked to compare the process of writing a story on paper and on the blog, students found it difficult to identify what was different. This was despite the fact that students had already said that they liked to be able to show other people their stories on the web, which was one obvious advantage. Two students said it was different but could not say what was different. One student pointed out that you write in one and type in the other. The fourth student said that it was easier to change the colour of the text, easier to show people, and good to have his story with other students' stories. All said that they would like to blog again but not immediately. One student added that next time he wanted to write about something different.

How the use of blogs helped students to learn

The 'how' proved difficult for students who tended to focus instead on 'what' they learned. Students recalled learning about technology and other syllabus outcomes with more focus on the latter. The technology learning included how to: log onto the computer, set up shortcuts, look at other students' stories, get to different pages on the web, change backgrounds, change colours, and access the blog at home. For a number of these skills students also reported helping others to learn both at school and at home. It was encouraging that students were able to focus on their learning in other syllabus areas and not be distracted by the technology. The learning content included kangaroos, what an adventure was, what other students did on their adventures, and how to get along with other people.

Problems with the use of blogs to learn

Every problem identified was technical. These included finding the letters on the keyboard, accessing the blog the first time, going back when a mistake was made, and not being able to access the blog at home. Most problems were shared in story format.

Helping with the use of blogs to learn

All four students reported that other students had helped them with at least one technical aspect such as accessing the site, changing colours, changing backgrounds or finding letters on the keyboard. The only non-technical assistance identified by students was helping with spelling. Most students indicated that they had helped other students, with one student even pointing out that he had helped with the actual story. Also, assistance was needed from parents when accessing the blog site for the first time at home. It was interesting that no student mentioned the teacher as 'helping'. Two possible explanations are that students viewed the non-teacher support as more powerful to their learning or that students just assumed teachers should help and so they did not need to mention such help in the interview.

CONCLUSION

It was obvious from both the teacher and student perspectives that this learning activity based around creating a blog was worthwhile. Particularly interesting was the students' view that technology and learning were integrated. It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm of both students and teachers. Some principal success factors in engaging the students were the mystery and excitement of something new and different, watching individual adventures build up into one joint adventure and having the adventure easily accessible to show family and friends.

What does the future hold for St Joseph's Primary School Walgett? The intention is to use a similar experience again for the Year 1 students with Year 6 buddies but to also introduce a new blog-based learning activity for Year 6 with a Science focus. There are also plans to allow identified groups of students from other schools to respond to the students. Future research project support could be designed to assist the school to more thoroughly measure the improvement in achievement of student learning outcomes that occur as a consequence of using blogs to help students learn.

Now, what advice can the Joey Adventures experience offer to others considering using blogs with students as young as six or seven years of age? Go for it. Creating blogs is a powerful experience that allows the students to be more involved with and share their learning, as well as to improve their technology skills. Key considerations that can assist with planning a well-designed blog-based learning experience for young students are to ensure that it has an appropriate context, allows for

collaboration and caters for student diversity. The context chosen for the blog should be relevant to the curriculum and of interest to the students. The activity should be designed to allow students to collaborate in creating the blog. This collaboration can be between students within the class or across classes, or with students in other schools. The activity needs to be designed to allow students some choice to cater for diversity and to allow students to demonstrate their creativity.

When addressing the challenges with using blogs, most technical problems can be overcome. However, informed choice of a student-friendly blog site will help to reduce the number of issues that arise. For young students there will always be new basic skills to be acquired. Enough time needs to be allocated to learn these skills and also to complete the planned activities. For young students support structures should be designed into the blog-based experience. This support can be provided both formally and informally by peers, buddies, and parents.

Finally, teachers who want to plan blog-based learning experiences for young students should not be afraid to take risks with new technologies and should seek opportunities to collaborate with other teachers. This might be in a formal project-based situation or it might be in an informal arrangement with teachers in the same school or other schools. Working with other teachers helps to create a supportive environment as colleagues embark on their learning journeys together.

REFERENCES

Bias, G. (2007). Reluctant Writers? Try blogging. *The Education Technology Guide, 16*, 20-22.

Bleimes, A. (2006). Blogging now begins young. *USA Today 14 November 2006.* Retrieved 21 February 2008 from www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-11-14-blogs-education_x.htm

Downes, S. (2004). Educational Blogging. *EDUCAUSE Review, 39*(5), 14-26. Retrieved 14 December 2007 from connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Review/EducationalBlogging/40493?time=1203818989

Poling, C. (2005). Blog on: Building communication and collaboration among staff and students. *Learning and Leading with Technology, 32*(6), 12-15.

Turnbull, T. (2004). The seven-year-old bloggers. *BBC News 14 June 2004*. Retrieved 15 January 2008 from news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3804773.stm

Weiler, G. (2003). Using weblogs in the classroom. *The English Journal, 92*(5), 73-75.

Wu, W. S. (2005). Using blogs in an EFL writing class. Paper presented at the *2005 Conference on TEFL and Applied Linguistics. Department of Applied English, Ming Chuan University*. Taipei: Crane Publishing (pp. 426-432). Retrieved 14 December 2007 from www.chu.edu.tw/~wswu/publications/papers/conferences/05.pdf