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Linkin' (B)Logs:
A New Literacy of Hyperlinks

Editor's note: This is a hyperlink-annotated version of the "New Voices" column in the September 2007 issue.

While I (Bud) knew that I would never quit learning once I became a teacher, I had hoped that the learning curve would decrease as I gained experience and became familiar with my particular courses and students. Boy, was I wrong.

We live in the middle of an amazing revolution of publishing and creation. As the Internet continues to grow and develop, more power to create and publish is in the hands of everyone who wants it. Participation in the world of publishing was once limited to those who had access to the press. Five years ago, when I started teaching, it was prohibitively expensive to publish a book or a magazine, audio, or even a Web site. That's not true anymore.

A few mouse clicks and some typing can result in instant publication of audio, video, or text. This new publishing medium, known to some as Web 2.0 and to others as the read/write Web, has been incubating for some time. Recently, it has exploded into the public consciousness. Some find this unnerving, perhaps even dangerous; I find it quite exciting. Students are immersed in this participatory culture. They write and read at MySpace, Bebo, and Xanga. They draft and share poetry at VampireFreaks.com; they share photos and text messages via their computers and telephones. They watch, create, and share funny, and sometimes scary, stuff at YouTube or Google Video.

But much of this activity occurs outside of school, at home or at friends' houses, on portable devices in school parking lots, at the public library, or in the computer lab when no teachers are looking. While some creations do belong outside school, the processes of reading, writing, and creating material are ones that we teach. I believe that our teaching can be more effective if we find ways to connect out-of-school practices with important language arts objectives.

Honoring students' work, though, is not easy. Many of their creations are blocked at school, kept out of classrooms and school computer labs by filtering software installed at the mandate of the federal government. It is a cruel irony that schools that rely on e-rate funding to pay for Internet connectivity receive less value from the connection when so many sites are mandatorily blocked. The filtering software is imperfect at best, blocking harmless, informative sites as well as those that do not belong in school. This filtering is one of the obstacles to unleashing the power of the read/write Web at school.

Tapping into the power of the read/write Web can only improve your practice while enriching students and preparing them for a world where they will be judged not on the amount of knowledge they possess, but instead on the information management skills that they demonstrate. The purpose of schooling in the 21st century is not to accumulate knowledge but to learn how to access, evaluate, and share information.

Believing that I could help students read and write better using the tools of the read/write Web, I started blogging, both as a professional development tool for myself and as a writing tool for students. Blogging has tremendous potential for learning and growth, but it is certainly not a magical fix for all of the issues of the writing classroom. In terms of professional development, I have learned more from blogging and the community of readers and writers I have met than I have learned anywhere else. Teaching blogging, on the other hand, is hard.

Learning to Teach Blogging

In the spring of 2005, I taught a pilot course on blogging with five hand-picked students. Four of them were tech-savvy students who were using social networking applications such as Xanga and MySpace in their personal lives. One student was a technical newbie, taking the class at my request to help us understand some of the technical hurdles we would need to overcome.

I wanted to see if we could use those technologies in school to help capture thinking, share ideas, and write for authentic audiences. How much more authentic could you get than the entire world? I thought that blogs might serve as a better tool for our school's portfolio system than the manila folders that we were then using. I wanted the good stuff that students were writing, creating, and learning in their schoolwork to be accessible to a larger audience than just their academic adviser. Wouldn't it make sense for the material in their portfolios to be available for public perusal and consumption?

As we began to use blogs at school, learning the basics of writing, publishing, and hyperlinking, we were engaged in a worldwide conversation with other educators and interested members of the public. The students' ideas were embraced by the academic community as we were all trying to understand what it meant to put our thinking and writing online. In particular, we were learning what it meant to blog, as opposed to simply journal or write online. In an exchange with Will Richardson, a blogger and educator in New Jersey who blogs at weblogg-ed.com, I finally began to articulate my understanding of blogging as a genre or mode of expression, and why it has so much potential for student writing, thinking, and learning. I began to understand what it is that I needed to teach when. Will wrote,

> But the one thing the blog allows me to do that I could not do easily in my classroom before is to link, to connect ideas, to make transparent my thinking about those ideas, and to have others link to them and do the same . . . . But it is the essential piece of Weblogs to me: blogs allow me to *create* content in ways I could not before, not just post what I could create otherwise in a different form. And in the essence of that creation I use and learn all of those skills that will serve me in my lifelong learning that were (I think) *much*

more difficult for me to learn before: close reading, critical thinking about information, clear and concise writing for a real audience, editing, and reflection, all of it understanding that whatever truth I may put forth will continue to be negotiated by readers and more reading. This, by the very nature of the process, develops reading, writing, information, collaboration and computing literacies, literacies which I think most of us would agree are going to be crucial in navigating what's ahead.

As he explains, the value of blogging is in the way this practice requires that I interact with source material—another blogger or text that I can find to quote and think about. That interaction with sources is what I think is so essential in the education of students. If we are to teach students to teach themselves, we must focus our efforts on basic communication and interacting with other information. Interacting with sources is not new pedagogy. Much language arts teaching is about helping students interact formally and informally with different source materials. What is new is that a blog, as a tool, can facilitate the interaction differently and helpfully.

Writing with a blog is not necessarily the same as blogging. Lots of the "successful" uses of blogs that I am beginning to see touted by teachers and schools aren't about interacting with sources. They are repurposing offline texts by posting them inside a blog. Posting homework online, unless the homework is source-specific, isn't blogging, although it is a step in the right direction. Much of the blogging that I have done with students, unfortunately, has fallen into this category.

To blog well, a student needs to be able to summarize. To analyze. To contextualize. To synthesize. I teach these skills in my offline courses, but teaching them online requires extra steps—and the frustration of dealing with the technological aspect of a blog. Yet, blogging well provides learning advantages that offline learning cannot.

Teaching *Blogging* and Not Just Writing with *Blogs*

For two different quarters in two different school years, I have been attempting to successfully integrate blogging into my speech course, English 10B, a standard course for tenth-grade students in my district. Using

a blog as both a research log and a tool for reflection while preparing for a speech is a good idea. The trick has been how to teach students to use all the different aspects of blogging that make it so valuable. I want them to internalize the process and carry it over into their offline work. To that end, on my teacher blog for the speech class, I encouraged students to focus on writing three kinds of posts:

This is just a reminder post that I'm writing on behalf of those of you who wanted a reminder about the blogging requirement for this class. I'm requiring that you write a minimum of three posts a week. Each post should be a couple or more paragraphs long—nothing too scary, right?

You're free to write about whatever you wish that's relevant to our course, but here are the three categories of posts that we've discussed in class. Use these as a reminder of what you can and should write about when you're stuck:

1. **Research-related posts.** These are posts that share information that you're learning or questions that you're having as you research. These might be questions for the class, or for me, or thoughts about the sources that you're discovering. Remember to link to the sources that you talk about in these posts. If you're writing about an offline source, make sure to include enough information about that source so that we can find it to follow up.
2. **Speech-class content posts.** These are posts concerning the ideas and tips and content we're discussing in class. You might want to write about how you think you'll begin a speech, or the type of visual aid that you want to use (you'll be required to have at least one visual aid in your third and fourth speeches). You might write to express your frustration about what we're talking about, or questions that you have about how to present the information that you're learning.
3. **Classmate-related posts.** Sometimes, the writing on your classmates' blogs will get you thinking. Other times, you'll have questions about what they're up to. Feel free to write about their work on your own blog. Make sure to link to what you're writing about and to quote any relevant passages for your read-

ers. Also, you might want to drop a comment at your classmate's blog to let them know that you're continuing the "conversation" that they started.

We all got a little stuck as we learned how to navigate between our blogs and the blogs of others. I have since moved classes to a platform called Elgg, an open-source social networking engine that makes posting and navigation easier. Incidentally, we've called our site OldeSchoolSpace, putting us in direct competition with MySpace for my students' attention. We're losing. MySpace, with approximately 150 million users, still rears its head at our school, despite being "blocked" via our school's filtering software. But our little blogging community is beginning to hold its own.

The first time I tried to blog with my speech class, I was impressed with their initial steps—they were sharing their school work with a public audience and documenting their learning as they went along. While I was pleased that students began to tentatively share their ideas with the world, I felt that my instruction was not as thorough as it might have been. Students were writing the kinds of posts that I had suggested that they write, as well as beginning to comment meaningfully to their classmates, but something was missing. One of the powers of blogging is the ability to connect to the writing of others in tangible ways.

I hesitate to write too much about the technology here. But thinking about how the technology connects to the pedagogy is important. We can't learn how to write connectively, to get into blogging, without first learning how to make those connections. Technologically speaking, the types of connections that you can make in a blog are hyperlinks. Hyperlinks take you from page to page and can bring you back again. Linking is how you crystallize those connections, and I have not yet explicitly taught students how to do this. That's the real trick and one of the new technological literacies that we must be teaching students. Much as we want them to understand how hyperlinks work for them as readers, I want students to appreciate the value and power of hyperlinking as a composition tool.

Hyperlinking as Literacy Development

When teaching hyperlinking, it makes sense to try to name the different types of links that are possible in a blog post. Such a list is limiting, but articulating some

of my thinking about blogging and sharing it with students can be a useful way to approach the idea of hyperlink literacy. I see several different types of linking that I should be explicitly teaching and discussing:

1. **Connecting to locations.** The simplest of links. When we write, we might write about specific places, people, or events. Often, those events or places or people have Web sites. A basic form of connective writing, then, would include creating links to those places. I consider these expository links, as they illustrate and help explain information and concepts.

2. **Connecting to ideas.** This is a basic citation. Alan Levine, a blogger, educator, and director of Technology Resources and Member Services for the New Media Consortium, calls this type of link a *linktribution*. Any time you quote an idea or refer to a source, include a hyperlink that will take a reader back to that source. Take away the MLA format and replace it with a link, and you have created a powerful citation that students can easily create and use.

   One of my pet peeves about teaching blogging and hyperlinking is that so often, students and teachers alike will link to the parent page of a Web site rather than the page where they got their specific information. The best part about linking to specific information is that it's transparent. I can trust you as a writer if I can see that your links are accurate and that the quotes that you use are reproduced accurately.

3. **Connecting to self.** Sometimes the best ideas that we can find are ones that we had in the past. The advantage to keeping and archiving a blog is that you can travel back in time to visit with the old you. One way to connect with the old you is to quote yourself and respond. Can you imagine the reflective power of students' having access to an archive of their writing that stretches back through their entire school career? Students could build knowledge over time and return to it, rather than having that knowledge end up in a sock drawer or on the refrigerator.

4. **Connecting for attention.** When students are writing for specific audiences, they sometimes need to get the attention of the folks that they are writing for. One way to do so in an online environment is to include a link to a site, blog, wiki, or something that their intended audience might be keeping an eye on. When the audience searches for references to the link the writer uses, then that reader will discover the piece of writing. Many of the savvy bloggers that I know are aware of this, and they maintain an RSS feed (or several) of searches for specific links or terms that relate to them. For example, I use Technorati to provide me with an RSS feed of any reference to the URL of my blog. When someone writes about, and links back to, something that's been posted on my blog, I find out about it and can go check it out.

This list is certainly incomplete. Like most areas of my teaching, I've more to learn and understand. I am seeking, as honestly as I can, to teach *blogging,* the verb, and not just writing with *blogs,* the plural noun. I believe that an understanding of the literacy of the hyperlink is a good step in the direction of teaching the verb, not the noun. Once I began to use them, I began to think about hyperlinks, and more importantly, connections, in all aspects of my writing. It is easier to place a citation with a hyperlink than it is to write it using MLA style. Of course, it was not until I failed twice in my efforts that I reached this point in my thinking. I wonder how many times I will have to fail before I can successfully teach blogging.

Notes
1. Portions of this column originated in a blog post at http://www.budtheteacher.com.

Tiffany J. Hunt and Bud Hunt are the column editors for the *EJ* column "New Voices."