Elgg and Blogging in primary education

Miles Berry, January 2006

One of the things I find most exciting about ICT is its potential for collaboration and communication. Our usual start to Year 6 ICT lessons, of designing a personal homepage, never really did this justice, as my pupils spent so long collecting together clip art and photos, that the medium took over from the message, and whilst they were reasonably pleased with the results, the content was static, and no-one else visited their pages.

This year, I decided to tackle things rather differently and jumped on the blogging band wagon. The notion of an online journal, shared with the rest of the class was an immediately appealing one to my pupils – they grasped the concept very quickly and could see far more value in sharing their on-going thoughts and experiences with their class mates than the snapshot of their hobbies and interests which the old-style homepage provided.

The first challenge was to find the right tool for the job. I wanted something:

- To facilitate pupils' reflections on the breadth of their learning,
- To promote independent learning and learner voice,
- That's fairly easy to use,
- Has (at least the potential for) an elegant, non-cluttered look and feel that users can customize for themselves, without having to worry to much about design, at least initially,
- With fine grained access control, so that I can choose which blogs are open to which users, eg to prevent access to pupils' blogs from non-registered users, also perhaps so that pupils can choose which of their entries are available for others to read,
- Open source, ideally running under LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP), so that we could host it ourselves.

My search eventually led me to Elgg (see elgg.net), which is open-source blogging software for education, but far more besides. Elgg, developed by a team led by Dave Tosh and Ben Werdmuller is about providing the software tools for a customizable, social, 'learning landscape', and so includes personal profile, weblogging, e-portfolio and social networking tools, all packaged together as an integrated piece of open source software. The real strength of Elgg over other blogging tools is the integration of social network technology, which builds on the support for personalized learning and learner voice which blogging can promote, to allow learners to connect with others, forming online learning communities. At St Ives we believe that education is at heart a social activity, rather than a solitary pursuit, and that sharing knowledge, ideas and problems is the key to learning, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and development. Now, we already have in place a Moodle virtual learning environment (see moodle.org), but the courses created there are very much in the control of the teachers, with pupil contributions being restricted to pre-defined activites. Elgg complements this beautifully, since here the learner is at the centre and is given control and ownership, and, at least in our approach to its use, all learning and experience is valued, not just that associated with particular online courses. Before readers get too excited, I should admit that Elgg is still in development, and the current version is only an alpha release. Whilst installation wasn't quite as stress free as for Moodle, my pupils have been quite excited about the idea of working on alpha-release code, and like the idea of being able to contribute to Elgg's development by spotting bugs or suggesting features.

So, how have we used it? We started the term's ICT lessons away from Elgg, by looking at html coding, and authoring a simple web-page by writing the tags by hand using notepad. I'd recommend this to anyone, as it's a great introduction to the technology underlying the web, produces a real "Wow!" effect when they see the code transformed into output, and concentrates the mind on using format effects only where necessary. As Elgg doesn't yet have an integrated html editor,

it also gave the pupils some control over formatting, and would allow them to include hyperlinks in their blog.

The first lesson on Elgg itself was spent putting together their online profiles. Elgg allows the site admin to customize the profile headings and display options, which can provide an easy way to put together an online CV, or outline record of achievement. Used in this way, linking information on this page to explanatory entries in the blog or e-portfolio allows these achievements to be backed up by evidence. Our use focussed more on documenting likes, dislikes, achievements and ambitions, and fitted in closely with the PSRE programme for the term.

Charlotte	
Edit this profile | Page help |	
Who am I? ::	I am called Charlotte I have two brothers a mum a dad and a really really sweet dog named millie.
Interests ::	Designing, drama and P.E, horse riding, looking after my dog and sailing
Likes ::	dogs, drama, family, going on holidays playing with my dog millie, horses, movies, P.E, parties, pasta, shopping
Dislikes ::	spiders and brussel sprouts meat
Special responsibilites ::	games captain and year 1 helper Netball Captain
Sporting achievements ::	Netball A Rouders A Hockey A Tennis A AtherleticsA
Musical achievements ::	I have done grade 2 piano and in the chior
Dramatic achievements ::	speech and drama
Other achievements ::	clear round in horseriding and In meritious did a dingy course
What do you want to do when you grow up? ::	I would like to be a fashion desingner or an actress or profeshional horse rider or something to do with dogs
What school do you want to go to? ::	the royal or churches
Favourite author ::	Micheal Morgapergo
Favourite film ::	freaky friday confessions of teenage drama queen shreck 2school of rock
Favourite music ::	mcfly
Main Skills ::	design, horseriding

They also had great fun designing their 'avatar' or icon which would accompany their blog posts, using the Creative Commons set over at stortroopers.com.

Charlotte Grace alexandra

Emma Ellie Chyna

Katharine Isabella phoebe

The blogging itself went very well indeed. Right from the start, I emphasised that this was their space, to write about the things that mattered to them, with the option of keeping it private or sharing entries with the rest of the class (we'd decided against opening up access to the rest of the world, because of child protection concerns). Things worked best, for the majority at least, when they were given a theme to write about, such as "First impressions of Year 6", a book review, an evaluation of a unit of work, etc, but these were only ever suggestions, and some of the most interesting entries were from those who used the blog to explore ideas of their own, or talk about experiences out of school. Here are a couple of the early ones:

"Yesterday's Drama Workshop was really fun.Chris was a really good actor and it was lovely to watch him in action.He put so much facial expression and movement in that it was very difficult to get bored, because each time he saw someone looking bored he made you all jump. It's impossible to name my favourite scene because it was all so good.He stayed all day doing all the different classes at different times.Year 3 after break,year 4 after lunch and year 5 and 6 at the end of the day.When we had the session in the afternoon we started of by picking what sort of person we where, choosing a number beteen 1 and 5.I was two so I was quite poor and shy.But some people where 5,being very rich and proud and some people where 1 being very poor and shy.We then made a scene up.I was with Jemima,Olivia,Agnes and Louise.Jemima and me

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were shoplifters and so we worked on that.All together it was a truly enjoyable day."

"The first couple of weeks being in year 6 have been brilliant.It's great to be back with my friends after the holidays.THe practice common entrance papers wern't as bad as I thought and I was very pleased with my mark.

I am really enjoying my responsibilities being house captain and science monitor.Although we havn't had a house assembely yet,green house are having fun with designing competitions,looking after the other house members and planning the house assembly.

Today we are playing in a netball tournament at Barrow Hills.It's only a fun tournament,but i'm still determined to win.I'm playing at goal attack,but as it's a versitility tournament we change positions every half time.If we win this,we will have won all the tournaments that we have ever played.

These blogs are really fun and I will allways try to keep it up to date."

I was particularly pleased that they'd taken on the idea that there's more to blogging than simply recounting events, and that some degree of reflection or analysis was called for here. I've also been pleased that a good number of the pupils have used Elgg outside of ICT lessons, mainly from home, to keep a record of things they've done both inside and outside school. A number of them have also used it as a way of highlighting particular issues to do with their school work – such as worries over entrance exams (which fall in January), concerns over particular topics, or indeed recording successes.

"I havn't done any papers yet as I am saving them for later in the holidays. So far I have done all of the English punctuation worksheets, a

few chapters of MEP and some of the mini tests for science(the ones in the purple book),also the test on the meanings.I have stopped until the 27th now so that I can have Christmas Eve, Christmas day and Boxing day off. I'm not finding it as difficult as I thought to find time to revise , but now that I am in the New Forest, it is very easy to get distracted by dog walking, bike rides, shopping ect. I have had to force myself to stay inside for at least an hour each day to do a bit of each subject."

It was also great to see the enthusiasm they'd shown for commenting on one another's blog entries, with one girl in particular making an effort to respond to everyone else's posts. Of course, many of these comments were of the 'me too' nature, but even these helped the pupils realize that there was an audience interested in what they were writing.

Elgg makes it easy for my pupils to store their work online, in a secure environment, so they can get to files and folders from home or school. Because of Elgg's social model of learning, whilst they can make files private, or shared just with their teacher or their group, Elgg encourages them to share their work with the rest of the community, with all the opportunities for collaborative learning, voice, and writing for an audience that this implies.
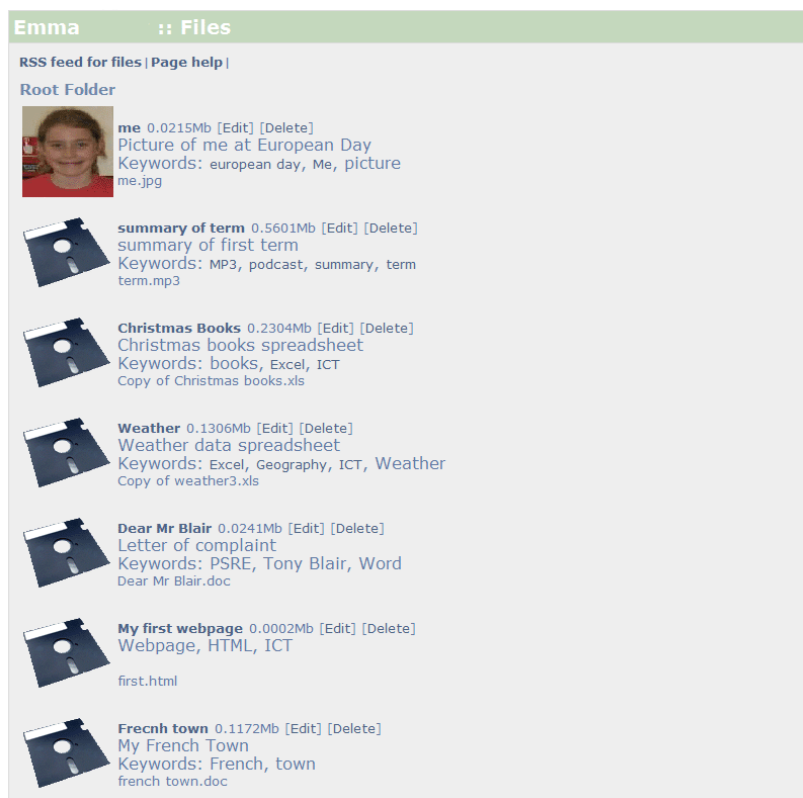
Image files can be embedded straight into blog posts, to help illustrate entries, and make better use of the vast number of digital photos we store on the fileserver.

We've also experimented with rudimentary podcasting, using the open source program Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net) to record and edit audio, such as Speech and Drama pieces, and then uploading these to share via Elgg. To be fair, a crowded computer room doesn't make for an ideal recording studio, but I can see huge potential for this for our more auditory learners. We've also explored Elgg's customizable themes, but getting to grips with this is, at the moment, a little bit too ambitious for Year 6; that said, my pupils have welcomed the opportunity to experiment.

As users add files and posts into Elgg, they add keyword tags; the system then suggests other posts or files with the same or similar tags, connecting learners with other with shared interests. This could go a long way to meeting Ruth Kelly's ambitions for personal learning spaces, which "will be more than simply a storage place - a digital space that is personalised, that remembers what the

learner is interested in and suggests relevant web sites, or alerts them to courses and learning opportunities that fit their needs."

There are tools for setting up lists of 'friends', whose blogs you'll follow, and then using a Friend of a Friend (FOAF) system to locate other blogs that you might be interested in. Similarly it's possible for users to create their own, shared community blogs, which would allow those with a shared hobby or studying a particular course to share their experiences and insights more effectively. We haven't made much use of these ourselves, but it's easy to imagine them working very well in a larger Elgg installation, shared between more than one school, such as at LA or RBC level. The Elgg developers themselves are interested in exploring Elgg's use to support inter-school collaboration or twinning.

Although we use Elgg quite happily alongside Moodle, it's possible to imagine doing lots of e-learning via Elgg rather than a more conventional VLE, with teachers using their blog and e-portfolio, or a shared class blog, to post lesson notes and resource links, or to initiate discussions, and pupils responding either via comments or through their own blog. There's a team in New Zealand working on Elgg-Moodle integration which will, I believe, provide direct links between moodle activities and a learner's Elgg space. In the meantime, there's support for live RSS feeds from Moodle forums, or elsewhere.

Well, where next? We plan to carry on using Elgg over the course of the year, as it's such a good way of promoting learner autonomy and voice, and I hope my

pupils will want to keep their blogs and e-portfolios going when they move on to their next schools. Rather than opening up access to their blogs, I'd like to include some of the posts anonymously on the school website, to give the pupils that sense of writing for a wider audience. I'd be very excited to see my colleagues, and my pupils' parents, setting up their own blogs, with Elgg facilitating an extended learning community around the school. I'd love to explore some sort of collaboration with other schools, and building links between my pupils' learning and that of other pupils, but we haven't really got our heads round how to deal with child protection in a wider context – anonymity would be worth exploring, but ownership has been important for us; perhaps Shibboleth federated authentication will allay some of our concerns. Integration with Moodle will be interesting to follow, and I hope both projects will continue their development side by side.

I'm sure that software like Elgg has a huge amount to offer to schools, because it acknowledges the crucial social dimension of education, and makes the computers a tool for communicating knowledge, experiences and problems between people, rather than merely serving up pre-packaged content; in short, it's personalized learning with the person at the centre.