

eSchool News and Discovery Education present the...

'Best of the Education Blog' Awards

Four winners honored for excellence in education blogging

An IT specialist who's not afraid to share his experience when his hard drive crashed, destroying all his data; a science teacher who challenges his students with frequent, short writing assignments designed to make them think critically; a higher-education administrator who mixes insights on education theory with sound, practical advice; and a researcher who speaks his mind on issues such as the No Child Left Behind Act: All share top honors in the first-ever "Best of the Education Blogs" Awards, produced by *eSchool News* and supported by **Discovery Education**.

Designed to honor the widespread emergence of blogs in the education field and recognize exceptional work of individual bloggers, the awards are being given in four categories: (1) Best Classroom Instruction Blog for Students; (2) Best Classroom Instruction Blog for Teachers; (3) Best K-12 Administration Blog; and (4) Best Education Theory Blog.

"Educational blogging is one of the fastest growing trends in education. Many blogs today are integrated into numerous schools' curricula, used to engage otherwise timid students, and developed to encourage collaboration among teachers, administrators, and education stakeholders," said *eSchool News* Publisher Gregg W. Downey. "We wanted to recognize this powerful, emerging technology and

showcase bloggers who are making a difference for educators and students around the world."

The award winners, selected by an independent panel of distinguished educators, consultants, and technology specialists (see box, below), were chosen from a field of nearly 160 nominated entries.

From these, *eSchool News* winnowed the total entries down to 32 semi-finalists, which were submitted to the official judging panel. The judges, in turn, selected the top winners, who will be recognized at an awards ceremony in conjunction with the Florida Educational Technology Conference in Orlando, March 23.

"Blogging is an interesting and exciting new medium for exchanging ideas and perspectives, and it's a gratifying honor to be recognized for contributing to it. I hope [my] blog continues to meet the high standards emblematic of an award like this," said Andrew Rotherham, co-founder and co-director of the independent research and analysis organization, Education Sector, whose blog "Eduwonk" won in the K-12 Administration category.

Besides Rotherham, the other first-place winners are:



- Tim Stahmer, instructional technology specialist for the Fairfax County, Va., Public Schools, whose blog "Assorted Stuff" won in the Classroom Instruction, Teachers category;

- Frank LaBanca, science teacher at Newton High School in Sandy Hook, Conn., whose blog "Applied Science Research" won in the Classroom Instruction, Students category; and
- Wesley Fryer, director of instructional support services and webmaster for the Texas Tech University College of Education, whose blog "Moving at the Speed of Creativity" won in the Education Theory category.

Additional bloggers recognized by the awards program include Darren Cannell, for "Teaching and Developing Online"; Bill MacKenty, for "MacKenty.org"; and David Warlick, for "Exactly Two Cents." More information about each of the four first-place winners and their blogs appears on page 44.

Basically a web journal, a blog allows any user to post his or her thoughts, links to favorite sites, and—in many cases—audio and visual media. At its heart, a blog is a personal diary for the internet age. Blogs can cover any range of topics—from

personal issues, to popular culture, to thoughts or advice on a given profession.

The advent of blogging represents an unparalleled opportunity for educators. The typical educator has minimal contact with his or her peers once the bell rings. In what often can be an isolated profession, blogs can break down barriers of time and space, encourage collaboration, and enhance professional growth and development. They also can be used in the classroom to help students develop writing skills or allow them to post video, audio, or other multimedia.

The Best of the Education Blog Awards program comes at a time when blogging has exploded in popularity in the education space.

"Blogging is a rapidly emerging method for educators to communicate quickly and easily among themselves, with students, and with education stakeholders," said Downey. "We've tracked the rising enthusiasm for blogging via our highly popular 'Ed-Tech Insider' blogging community. Now, with the Best of the Education Blog Awards program, made possible by Discovery Education, we're recognizing and rewarding achievement among education bloggers and encouraging best blogging practices among the hundreds of thousands of educators who rely on the *eSchool News* Network."

Criteria for the "Best of the Education Blog" Awards

Here are the hallmarks of excellence the judges considered as they assessed entries for the awards program:

- 1. Personality:** Is there a clear personality? Do you feel like you know the writer? Is there a feeling of intimacy that might be missing from mainstream media or other forms of communication?
- 2. Usefulness:** Is the information useful or enjoyable to read? Did it make you think, or laugh, or click? Are there handy links to other places?
- 3. Writing style:** Is the writing in the blog snappy, crisp, and engaging to read? Or is it long-winded, dull, convoluted, or sloppy? Worse, is it a sales pitch disguised as a blog? Or just news briefs or bullet-point items without any fresh perspective, analysis, or insight?
- 4. Usability and design:** Is the typeface easy to read? Can you find links to archives? Is the writing concise and easily skimmable? Are graphics limited to what's useful or fun?

- 5. Frequency:** Is the blog updated regularly, and with sufficient frequency? Or are there long, random periods of inactivity between posts?
- 6. Relevancy:** Does the blog stay on topic, and is it relevant to the category in which it is being judged? Or is it all over the map in terms of content?
- 7. Interactivity:** Does the blog incorporate video or audio in an engaging, interactive way? Does it offer a forum for readers to respond, or use other features to help develop a sense of community?
- 8. Fulfillment of purpose:** How well does the blog fulfill its intended mission?
- 9. Appropriateness:** Does the blogger use language and etiquette that is appropriate to a professional educational setting? (i.e., no inappropriate personal references, etc.)
- 10. Would you revisit:** Is it useful or engaging enough for you to visit it again someday? Or will you forget it the minute after you vote?

Judges (in alphabetical order):

- **Donna Baumbach**, Professor, University of Central Florida, College of Education
- **Steve Burt**, Content and Research Manager, Clarity Innovations Inc., and a contributor to eSN's Ed-Tech Insider blogs
- **Steve Dembo**, Online Community Manager for the Discovery Educator Network
- **Jackie Huba**, co-author of "Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force"
- **Tim Lauer**, Principal, Lewis Elementary School, and a contributor to eSN's Ed-Tech Insider blogs
- **Joseph Luft**, Principal, The Flushing Intl. High School
- **Ben McConnell**, co-author of "Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force"
- **Corey Murray**, Senior Editor, *eSchool News*
- **Tim Wilson**, Technology Integration Specialist, Hopkins School District, and a contributor to eSN's Ed-Tech Insider blogs

Best Classroom Instruction Blog for Teachers

“Assorted Stuff”

<http://www.assortedstuff.com>

Tim Stahmer
Instructional Technology Specialist
Fairfax County, Va., Public Schools

A long-running blog, Tim Stahmer’s “Assorted Stuff” offers just that—a laundry list of links to assorted resources for classroom teachers, as well as his own running commentary on a number of education-oriented topics and beyond. His regularly posted, fully searchable entries give educators information on what’s happening in school technology, math, and science (see “Science is for Someone Else,” Jan. 20) and somewhat iconoclastic opinions on education reform (see “Reform in the Wrong Direction,” Jan. 24).

In addition, Stahmer maintains well-researched, categorized banks of helpful links to many education resources. These include links to his other sites, “The Top 101 Websites for Teachers” and “The School Webmaster,” as well as links to the blogs of other educators, including “Class is in Session” and “Ms. Frizzle.” He also maintains links for education advocates, education in the news, ed-tech resources, and a growing list of third-party podcasts. Finally, Stahmer completes the site with personal photos and those of his friends, as well as links to unrelated sites that he finds interesting, such as *The Daily Show with John Stewart*.

Stahmer on lessons learned from his hard drive crashing, Jan. 31:

“Backups really are a good thing. Many people I know recite that sermon but don’t follow their own preaching. And if you own a Mac, invest in a copy of TechTool Pro. The software took a long time to work its magic, but it seems to have brought everything back from the dead.”

Example of judges’ comments:

“Featuring frequent updates and a wide range of relevant and useful links on the topic of classroom instruction, ‘Assorted Stuff’ is a worthy addition to any instructor’s toolkit.”—*Corey Murray, Senior Editor, eSchool News*



Best Classroom Instruction Blog for Students

“Applied Science Research”

<http://www.appliedscienceresearch.blogspot.com>

Frank LaBanca
Science Teacher
Newton High School
Sandy Hook, Conn.

Frank LaBanca’s blog for his Applied Science Research course is “designed to promote students’ understanding of concepts by exploring and sharing ideas with other students.” The site does just that. LaBanca posts several times a month and asks students to respond to thought-provoking, open-ended conceptual questions. He offers assignments and insights online, to which students are invited and often required to respond. Students are given access to their peers’ responses, which facilitates group discussion and collaborative learning. LaBanca’s choice of format also gives science students a venue that helps them develop better writing skills.

Archives date back one year, and links to the most recent post are listed by title on the right-hand side of the page for easy reference. Also of note: Aside from a link that leads back to his own larger science site, *Labanca.net*, the only other external link is to Google News, which is perhaps LaBanca’s own way of reminding his students that science does not happen in a bubble, but in the real, up-to-the-minute context of the outside world.

LaBanca’s assignment for Jan. 4:

“Please respond in 100 to 200 proofed, succinct words to the following question. Be sure to include factual information supported with personal insight gained from this course: Are science and creativity related?”

Example of judges’ comments:

“... [A] great example of how blogs are used to positively impact teaching and learning. ... [W]riting across the curriculum, across the blogosphere!”—*Donna Baumbach, Director, SUNLINK Project, University of Central Florida*



Best Education Theory Blog

“Moving at the Speed of Creativity”

<http://www.speedofcreativity.org>

Wesley Fryer
Director of Instructional Support Services
Texas Tech University, College of Education

Wesley Fryer’s prolific blog “Moving at the Speed of Creativity” features commentary and podcasts that focus on the need for teachers to embrace digital literacy, engage students in authentic learning tasks, and reform education to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. A quick scroll down the page offers information and links for further study on topics as disparate as Web 2.0 technologies; an editorial writing contest on the situation in Darfur, Sudan; and Nicholas Negroponte’s proposed \$100 laptop.

“Speed of Creativity” also features a great deal of information on leading-edge technologies, such as the latest blogging software. Fryer’s archives are aggregated by category, and users can find a great deal of helpful information on topics such as one-to-one computing (45 entries at press time), disruptive technologies (43), open-source code (35), podcasting (94), politics (40), and many others.

Fryer on free ideas and pedagogy, Feb. 6:

“If teachers are giving the same sorts of assignments they have always given to students for years, but those students now have a mind-blowingly diverse universe of information at their fingertips thanks to the internet, there is a major disconnect here that needs to be addressed. ... This discussion should be all about getting students to engage in authentic learning tasks and assessing them through activities they cannot fake or complete as ‘shallow-content-dippers.’”

Example of judges’ comments:

“I’m not sure how Wesley finds the time, but his blog is a constant stream of useful information ... mixed with his own insightful observations. I check his site daily.”—*Tim Wilson, Technology Integration Specialist, Hopkins (Minn.) ISD #270*



Best K-12 Administration Blog

“EduWonk”

<http://www.eduwonk.com>

Andrew Rotherham
Co-founder and Co-director
Education Sector, a nonprofit,
independent research and analysis
organization

Andrew Rotherham’s “EduWonk” offers education news, analysis, and commentary to readers concerned with developments in the K-12 “eduworl.” Rotherham’s posts give readers keen, sometimes pointed insights into K-12 education from a policy analyst’s perspective. His entries offer objectively critical thoughts on topics that often inspire a great deal of partisan ink and air—and all of his entries on the No Child Left Behind Act are filled with useful links to the sources to which he refers. Other topics that Rotherham addresses include education reform, competition in public schools, testing, teacher pay, school vouchers, the demographics of public schools, and, of course, blogging itself.

“Eduwonk” also gives its readers many useful links to additional resources, education blogs, policy and political blogs, noteworthy publications, and a number of organizations that focus on some aspect of public education. Rotherham’s archives date back to 2004, and the site is updated at least daily during the work week, if not multiple times.

Rotherham on politics and NCLB testing mandates, Jan. 31:

“The political breakdown here is obvious. To oversimplify only slightly: A lot of folks on the left don’t like any testing, and a lot of folks on the right like testing regardless of what it looks like. There is not much of a constituency in the political center yet for [high-]quality testing because of those dynamics.”

Example of judges’ comments:

“Whether you agree with this blogger or not, ... a dash of humor and loads of links make this ‘wonk’ special and not to be missed.”—*Donna Baumbach*

