

# EDUCATIONAL Blogging

By Stephen Downes

“I think it’s the most beautiful tool of the world and it allows us the most magic thing...”

—Florence Dassylva-Simard, fifth-grade student

The bell rings, and the halls of Institut St-Joseph in Quebec City echo the clatter of the fifth- and sixth-graders. Some take their chairs in the more traditional classroom on the lower floor. Others attend to their projects in the large, open activity room upstairs, pausing perhaps to study one of the chess games hanging on the wall before meeting in groups to plan the current project. A third group steps up a half flight of stairs into the small narrow room at the front of the building, one wall lined with pictures and plastercine models of imagined aliens, the other with a bank of Apple computers.

This last group of students, eight or so at a time, fire up their browsers and log into their cyberportfolios, a publication space that Principal Mario Asselin calls a “virtual extension of the classroom.”<sup>1</sup> This virtual space is composed of three

sets of *weblogs*, or *blogs*: a classroom Web space, where announcements are displayed and work of common interest is posted; a public, personal communication zone, where students post the results of their work or reflection; and a private personal space, reserved for students’ thoughts and teacher guidance.

Dominic Ouellet-Tremblay, a fifth-grade student at St-Joseph, writes: “The blogs give us a chance to communicate between us and motivate us to write more. When we publish on our blog, people from the entire world can respond by using the comments link. This way, they can ask questions or simply tell us what they like. We can then know if people like what we write and this indicate[s to] us what to do better. By reading these comments, we can know our weaknesses and our talents. Blogging is an opportunity to exchange our point of view with the rest of the world not just people in our immediate environment.”<sup>2</sup>

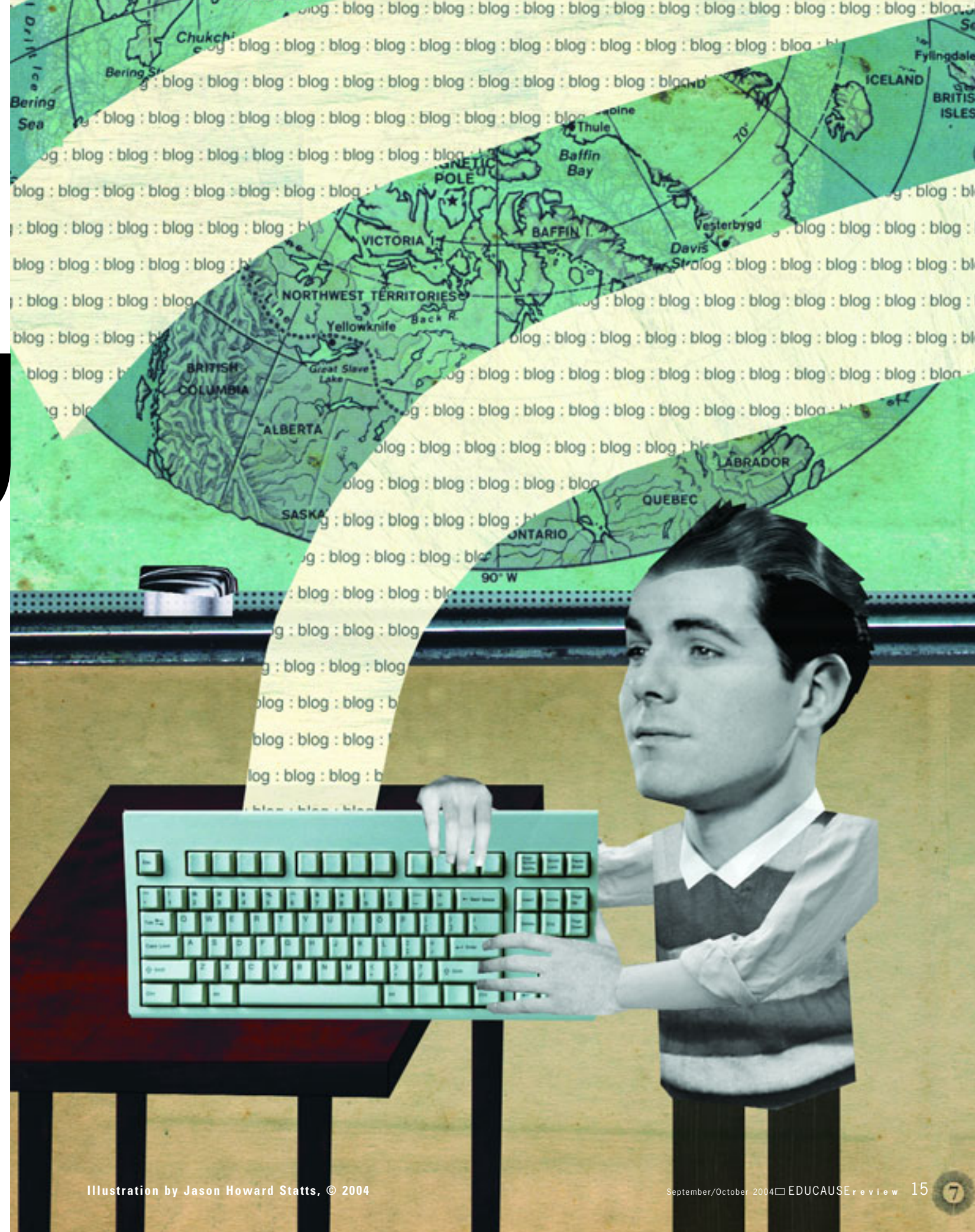
The students at St-Joseph are reflective of a trend that is sweeping the world

of online learning: the use of weblogs to support learning. And even though the world of fifth grade may seem remote to educators in the college and university system, these students, when they enter postsecondary education, may have had more experience writing online for an audience than writing with a pen and paper for a teacher. Such students will bring with them a new set of skills and attitudes.

Writes Asselin in his own blog, *Mario tout de go*: “The school administration’s objective with this weblog initiative was to offer students and teachers a support tool to promote reflective analysis and the emergence of a learning community that goes beyond the school walls.”<sup>3</sup> The blogs fit the bill perfectly. “I see more than 2,000 posts and nearly 3,000 comments,” says Asselin. “Because of that, I am able to name what they do and see where it comes from. I can also figure out the directions they are taking and how they do it.”<sup>4</sup>

Institut St-Joseph is an unassuming, yellow-brick school on a tree-lined road

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in the west side of Quebec City. The students inside may be early adopters, but they are far from alone in their use of blogs. The phenomenon known as blogging, or weblogging, is sweeping the Internet. A February 2004 report published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project noted that at least 3 million Americans have created blogs, with similar numbers being seen worldwide.<sup>5</sup> And schools have not been immune from this trend. While nobody can say for sure just how many students are blogging, inside the classroom or out, it seems clear that their numbers are equally impressive.

In his day job, Will Richardson is the supervisor of instructional technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. But online, Richardson is known as one of the leading proponents of blogging in education and the maintainer of the *Weblogg-Ed* Web site. "More and more teachers and schools are starting to experiment with the technology as a way to communicate with students and parents," he writes. Blogs are used to "archive and publish student work, learn with far-flung collaborators, and 'manage' the knowledge that members of the school community create."<sup>6</sup>

And the number of educational bloggers is growing daily. The Educational Bloggers Network, sponsored by the Bay Area Writing Project and Weblogger.com, is a community of some 120 teachers and educators involved in blogging. The following announcement on the site, by San Diego State University's Bernie Dodge, is typical: "It's that time of semester again. Tonight I introduced blogging to my class of pre-service English and foreign language teachers." The result: twenty-eight new student blogs.<sup>7</sup> This same pattern is being repeated in schools and universities across the United States and around the world.

In my own case, blogging evolved

from three major directions. First, the blog that began as Stephen's Web (<http://www.downes.ca>) and that eventually became *OLDaily* originated as a better means for me to store bookmarks. Second, the blog that became *NewsTrolls* originated as a series of posts by Pasty Drone. Called *Media Rant News Trolls*, these were posted on the old Hotwired Threads. When eight of us, including Pasty and myself, decided to leave the site in 1998, we adopted Pasty's format and name. And third, when I created *The Brandon Pages* site, about the city of Brandon, I created a blogging tool to announce new links and events.

Today, the weblog is frequently characterized (and criticized) as (only) a set of personal comments and observations. A look at the history of weblogging shows that this isn't the case. As Rebecca Blood observes: "The original weblogs were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays." Bookmarks, rants and raves, news, events: all were fodder for the weblogger. Weblogs (so named in 1997 by Jorn Barger in his *Robot Wisdom* Web site) began to be recognized as such in 1999 when Jesse James Garrett, the editor of *infosift*, began compiling a list of "other sites like his." Garrett sent this list to *CamWorld's* Cameron Barrett, who published it on his site. Soon after, Brigitte Eaton compiled a list of every weblog she knew about, creating the *Eatonweb Portal*.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that these early lists were incomplete; weblogging was springing up around the Web more quickly than anyone realized.

Many writers assert that blogs came into their own only after the events of September 11, 2001. As Charles Cooper writes, "If you were scouring the Internet for news and context during those first terrible hours, you could have done a lot worse than eavesdropping on the free-wheeling mini-universe of Web logs

chocoblock with first-hand info and spirited commentary about what was going on. . . . For my money, some of the best stuff was being served up in this most unlikely venue."<sup>9</sup>

I myself spent the two days following 9/11 updating *NewsTrolls*. Although we had covered and commented on the tech boom, world events, and a presidential election, the events of September 11 brought home to me the immediacy of blogging. We ran ongoing coverage, submitted via SMS to my e-mail, as one of our own made her way from the dust and debris of New York's financial district to her home on the west side. Blogging not only allowed us access to the event; it made us *part* of the event. And with that, the form had indeed finally come into its own.

Barger's original definition of a weblog reads as follows: "A weblog (sometimes called a blog or a newspaper or a filter) is a webpage where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) 'logs' all the other webpages she finds interesting. The format is normally to add the newest entry at the top of the page, so that repeat visitors can catch up by simply reading down the page until they reach a link they saw on their last visit."<sup>10</sup>

The personal journal, also widely popular in the late 1990s, actually developed independently of weblogs. Personal journals, or online diaries, were described by Simon Firth as "direct, personal, honest, almost painful to read and yet compelling too," but by the time Firth's article in *Salon* was written in July 1998, personal journals were on the verge of extinction. "Many of the biggest journal 'fans' began online journals themselves, and soon everyone ended up mostly writing about each other. Some of them got famous, others got resentful."<sup>11</sup>

The confusion between these two distinct forms is evident in the observations of commentators such as Catherine Seipp. "In general, 'blog' used to mean a personal online diary, typically

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concerned with boyfriend problems or techie news,” she writes. “But after September 11, a slew of new or refocused media junkie/political sites reshaped the entire Internet media landscape. Blog now refers to a Web journal that comments on the news—often by criticizing the media and usually in rudely clever tones—with links to stories that back up the commentary with evidence.”<sup>12</sup>

But this definition—which tries to characterize the blog by what it contains—seems to miss the point. Commenting on Seipp’s statement, Meg Hourihan takes a different approach: “Whether you’re a warblogger who works by day as a professional journalist or you’re a teenage high school student worried about your final exams, you do the same thing: you use your blog to link to your friends and rivals and comment on what they’re doing. Blog posts are short, informal, sometimes controversial, and sometimes deeply personal, no matter what topic they approach.”<sup>13</sup> The definitions of blogging offered by bloggers, as opposed to those offered by external commentators, follow this theme. Blogging is something defined by *format* and *process*, not by content.

A blog, therefore, is and has always been more than the online equivalent of a personal journal. Though consisting of regular (and often dated) updates, the blog adds to the form of the diary by incorporating the best features of hypertext: the capacity to link to new and useful resources. But a blog is also characterized by its reflection of a personal style, and this style may be reflected in either the writing or the selection of links passed along to readers. Blogs are, in their purest form, the core of what has come to be called *personal publishing*.

In the hands of teachers and students, blogs become something more again. The Web is by now a familiar piece of the educational landscape, and for those sites where personal publishing or chronolog-

ically ordered content would be useful, blogs have stepped to the fore. *Crooked Timber*’s Henry Farrell identifies five major uses for blogs in education.<sup>14</sup>

First, teachers use blogs to replace the standard class Web page. Instructors post class times and rules, assignment notifications, suggested readings, and exercises. Aside from the ordering of material by date, students would find nothing unusual in this use of the blog. The instructor, however, finds that the use of blogging software makes this previously odious chore much simpler.

Second, and often accompanying the first, instructors begin to link to Internet items that relate to their course. Mesa Community College’s Rick Effland, for example, maintains a blog to pass along links and comments about topics in archaeology.<sup>15</sup> Though Mesa’s archaeology Web pages have been around since 1995, blogging allows Effland to write what are in essence short essays directed specifically toward his students. Effland’s entries are not mere annotations of interesting links. They effectively model his approach and interest in archaeology for his students.

Third, blogs are used to organize in-class discussions. At the State University of New York at Buffalo, for example, Alexander Halavais added a blog to his media law class of about 180 students. Course credit was awarded for online discussion, with topics ranging from the First Amendment to libel to Irish law reform. As the course wound down with a discussion of nude bikers, Halavais questioned whether he would continue the blog the following year because of the workload, but students were enthusiastic in their comments.<sup>16</sup>

Mireille Guay, an instructor at St-Joseph, notes: “The conversation possible on the weblog is also an amazing tool to develop our community of learners. The students get to know each other better by visiting and reading blogs from

other students. They discover, in a non-threatening way, their similarities and differences. The student who usually talks very loud in the classroom and the student who is very timid have the same writing space to voice their opinion. It puts students in a situation of equity.”<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, some instructors are using blogs to organize class seminars and to provide summaries of readings. Used in this way, the blogs become “group blogs”—that is, individual blogs authored by a group of people. Farrell notes: “It becomes much easier for the professor and students to access the readings for a particular week—and if you make sure that people are organized about how they do it, the summaries will effectively file themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, fifth, students may be asked to write their own blogs as part of their course grade. Educational Technologist Lane Dunlop wrote about one class at Cornell College: “Each day the students read a chunk of a book and post two paragraphs of their thoughts on the reading.” In another class, French 304, students were given a similar exercise. Using a French-language blogging service called Monblogue, Molly, a business student, posted a few paragraphs every day.<sup>19</sup>

What makes blogs so attractive, in both the educational community and the Internet at large, is their ease of use. A blog owner can edit or update a new entry without worrying about page formats or HTML syntax. Sebastian Fiedler, a media pedagogy specialist at the University of Augsburg in Germany, has been monitoring the rise of blogs for a number of years. “Many lightweight, cost-efficient systems and tools have emerged in the personal Webpublishing realm,” he writes. “These tools offer a new and powerful toolkit for the support of collaborative and individual learning that adheres to the patterns of contemporary information-intensive work and learning outside of formal educational settings.”<sup>20</sup>

The blogging tool is, at its heart, a form with two fields: title and entry—and the title field is optional. Learning Media Consultant Jay Cross captures the concept with his Bloggar tool. “Blog software comes with a personal Website for those who don’t already have one. The software captures your words in dated entries, maintaining a chronological archive of prior entries. In the spirit of sharing inherent to Net culture, the software and the personal Websites are usually free.”<sup>21</sup> What needs to be kept in mind here is that with respect to blogging tools, anything other than the entry field is a bell or whistle. Since the essence of the blog is found in individual, dated entries, the essence of the blogging tool is the entry field.

Blogging software breaks down into two major categories: hosting services and installed applications.

*Hosting services.* A hosting service is a Web site that will give you access to everything you need in order to create a blog. It will offer a form for you to input your entries, some tools that allow you to create a

template for your blog, and access to some built-in accessories. Your blog is hosted on the hosting service (hence the name), and the URL will typically reflect the hosting service’s URL. In a way, blogging hosting services are very similar to the services that allowed people to host their own Web sites (services such as GeoCities or Angelfire) or their own discussions (services such as Yahoo! Groups or ezboard).

The best-known (and one of the earliest) hosting service is Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>), founded by Pyra Labs. When the company was bought by Google early in 2003, it reporting having about 1.1 million users.<sup>22</sup> The Blogger interface is not much more complicated than Jay Cross’s Bloggar: the large field at the top allows you to submit an entry, while instructions and some options are provided in the lower pane (after you post, the help disappears, and you can view and edit your previous posts).

Another major hosting service is LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com>), a

name that speaks to the side of blogging that began as an online diary. Far more so than any other service, LiveJournal attempts to foster a community of users, a strategy that used to be reflected in its terms of use: “LiveJournal relies on the community it creates to maintain an enjoyable journaling environment. In order to encourage healthy community growth, new free accounts must be sponsored by a present member of LiveJournal.” LiveJournal reports more than 3 million accounts, with about half that in active status.

Other major blog hosting services include GrokSoup, Salon Blogs, and TypePad. Major international hosting services include FarsiBlogs, for Iranian writers, and BlogsCN, for Chinese contributors.

*Installed Applications.* A remotely installed application is a piece of software that you obtain from the provider and install on your own Web site. These systems are similar to Web-based applications such as ColdFusion or Hypermail. Because of this, the number of users is much lower, but those who do use them

tend (arguably) to be more dedicated and more knowledgeable than those who use hosting services. Installed applications are also more suitable for institutional use, since access can be controlled.

Probably the best-known remotely installed application is Six Apart's Movable Type (<http://www.moveabletype.org>). As shown in the screenshot from the *Learning Circuits* blog back-end (figure 1), Movable Type offers numerous options for the blog author, including extended entries. Most school blogs use Movable Type. "We used this product because it is free for use by educational institutions such as schools," says the National Research Council's Todd Bingham, who with Sébastien Paquet has just completed work with Le Centre d'Apprentissage du Haut-Madawaska, an elementary school in northern New Brunswick, providing Weblogs to all its students and teachers. "In addition to its semi-open source nature, Movable Type is written in Perl and can be back-ended by a MySQL database system," Bingham adds. "Both of these

products are also open-source in nature. This allows us to customize some of the features, rather than having to write something from the ground up. We were also able to set up an additional security system using this interface by using Linux's default security features. A private blog, viewable only by the teacher and a singular student, can be set up this way. This allows the student and teacher to have a private means of feedback, as opposed to the public blog open to the public."<sup>23</sup>

In mid-May 2004, however, Six Apart changed its pricing strategy for Movable Type, dramatically increasing costs for sites with multiple blogs. This prompted

Figure 1. Movable Type



a storm of protest from a blogging community fearful of even greater licensing changes, as typified by Mark Pilgrim's



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remarks: “Movable Type is a dead end. In the long run, the utility of all non-Free software approaches zero. All non-Free software is a dead end.” And although Movable Type recanted, many bloggers moved to an open source blogging tool, WordPress (<http://wordpress.org/>).<sup>24</sup>

Another major installed application, and one of the earliest available, is UserLand’s Radio (<http://radio.userland.com>). This is an updated version of more comprehensive site-management tools such as Frontier and Manila. Instead of running on a Web server, Radio runs on the user’s desktop and displays through a Web browser; blog entries are then uploaded to a Web site. In addition, “Radio includes a powerful newsreader that allows you to subscribe to all of the sites you like. Radio will automatically go out onto the Web and find new updates to sites like the NYTimes, the BBC, and weblogs that you subscribe to every hour.”<sup>25</sup>

UserLand’s software was used to launch a high-profile blogging experiment, Weblogs at Harvard Law, which was created when UserLand’s founder, Dave Winer, became a Berkman Fellow. Arising from a conference in November 2002 called “What Is Harvard’s Digital Identity?” it was intended, at least in part, to establish “intellectual community” among “the University’ disparate schools and centers.”<sup>26</sup> Launched in February 2003, it allows anyone with a harvard.edu e-mail address to create a weblog, and a hundred or so staff and students have done so, including Philip Greenspun, John Palfrey, and an anonymous blogger known only as “The Redhead.”

Harvard’s experience illustrates one of the pitfalls of hosting such free-ranging media. Though the university administration had intended not to interfere with blog content—sometimes a challenge, since staff and students can be openly critical—it was forced to step in when Derek Slater, a student, posted internal memos from Diebold Election

Systems, an electronic voting-machine manufacturer, on his blog. The memos suggested that the machines faced numerous problems, and the company threatened legal action against Slater and Harvard University.<sup>27</sup>

Though the company retreated, the potential for conflict between a blog writer and an institution’s administration remains. In addition to posting copyrighted or protected information, students can get into trouble for libelous content. For example, a Valley High School student in Nevada was reprimanded for writing, “Kill Alaina!” (a classmate he found irritating) and for making a vulgar comment about a teacher. In another case, a student at St. Martin High School in Mississippi was suspended for three days after using her blog to call a teacher “perverted.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite the risks, teachers and students alike feel the benefits make blogging well worthwhile, if for no other reason than that blogs encourage students to write. As Rosalie Brochu, a student at St-Joseph, observes: “The impact of the blogs on my day to day life is that I write a lot more and a lot longer than the previous years. I also pay more attention when I write in my blog (especially my spelling) since I know anybody can read my posts.”<sup>29</sup>

In one sense, asking why anyone would write a weblog is like asking why anyone would write at all. But more specifically, the question is why anyone would write a weblog as opposed to, say, a book or a journal article. George Siemens, an instructor at Red River College in Winnipeg and a longtime advocate of educational blogging, offers a comprehensive list of motivating factors. In particular, he notes, weblogs break down barriers. They allow ideas to be based on merit, rather than origin, and ideas that are of quality filter across the Internet, “viral-like across the blogosphere.” Blogs allow readers to hear the day-to-day thoughts of presidential can-

didates, software company executives, and magazine writers, who all, in turn, hear opinions of people they would never otherwise hear.<sup>30</sup>

The students at Institut St-Joseph learned about the communicative power of blogs firsthand. “In the beginning, students anticipated the audience in a restricted circle,” notes Principal Asselin. “According to the comments about their work, they realized that a lot of people could react and be part of the conversation. Each student received more than ten comments related to their posts. They had not fully realized that the entire world could read them.”<sup>31</sup> Imagine the young students’ surprise when, some time after posting a review of a circus on their blog, someone from the circus read the review and wrote back!

But perhaps the most telling motivation for blogging was offered by Mark Pilgrim in his response to and elaboration on “The Weblog Manifesto”: “*Writers will write because they can’t not write*. Repeat that over and over to yourself until you get it. Do you know someone like that? Someone who does what they do, not for money or glory or love or God or country, but simply because it’s who they are and you can’t imagine them being any other way?”<sup>32</sup>

Pilgrim’s moving declaration should be read as a cautionary note. The warning is not about bosses who don’t want employees to write weblogs (though that danger exists), but this: *writing weblogs is not for everybody*. In particular, if you feel no empathy, no twinge of recognition, on reading Pilgrim’s words, then writing a weblog is probably not for you. This does not mean that you are not a part of the weblog world. It merely means that you participate in a different way.

And herein lies the dilemma for educators. What happens when a free-flowing medium such as blogging interacts with the more restrictive domains of the educational system? What

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happens when the necessary rules and boundaries of the system are imposed on students who are writing blogs, when grades are assigned in order to get students to write at all, and when posts are monitored to ensure that they don't say the wrong things?

After returning from a writing teachers' conference with sessions on blogging, Richard Long, a professor at St. Louis Community College, explained the issue this way: "I'm not convinced, however, the presenters who claimed to be blogging are actually blogging. They're using blogging software, their students use blogging software, but I'm not convinced that using the software is the same as blogging. For example, does posting writing prompts for students constitute blogging? Are students blogging when they use blogging software to write to those prompts?"<sup>33</sup>

After three years of experimentation with his *Weblogg-Ed* blog, Will Richardson also expressed his doubts: "By its very nature, assigned blogging in schools cannot be blogging. It's contrived. No matter how much we want to spout off about the wonders of audience and readership, students who are asked to blog are blogging for an audience of one, the teacher." When the semester ends, "students drop blogging like wet cement." Richardson wants to teach students to write with passion, but he notes: "I can't let them do it passionately due to the inherent censorship that a high school served Weblog carries with it."<sup>34</sup>

It seems clear that although blogging can and does have a significant and worthwhile educational impact, this impact does not come automatically and does not come without risks. As many writers have noted, writing a weblog appears in the first instance to be a form of publishing, but as time goes by, blogging resembles more and more a con-

versation. And for a conversation to be successful, it must be given a purpose and it must remain, for the most part, unconstrained.

One of the criticisms of blogs, and especially student blogs, is that the students write about nothing but trivia. Examples can be seen all over the Internet. And how many students, when facing the blogging screen, feel like "Matt," who writes: "Now each time I warily approach writing a blog entry, or start writing it, or actually write it, I end up thinking 'what is the point?'—and, after all, what is?" When given their own resources to draw on, bloggers, especially young bloggers, can become frustrated and may eventually report having "committed the ultimate blogging sin of losing interest in myself."<sup>35</sup>

As Richardson says, blogging as a genre of writing may have "great value in terms of developing all sorts of critical thinking skills, writing skills and information literacy among other things. We teach exposition and research and some other types of analytical writing already, I know. Blogging, however, offers students a chance to a) reflect on what they are writing and thinking as they write and think it, b) carry on writing about a topic over a sustained period of time, maybe a lifetime, and c) engage readers and audience in a sustained conversation that then leads to further writing and thinking."<sup>36</sup>

Good conversations begin with listening. Ken Smith, an English teacher at Indiana University, explains: "Maybe some folks write flat, empty posts or bad diary posts because they don't know any other genres (they just aren't readers, in one sense) *and* because [they] aren't responding to anything (that is, they aren't reading anything right now)." It's like arriving late to a party: the first act must be to listen, before venturing forth with an opinion. Smith suggests, "Instead of assigning students to go write, we should assign them to go read and then link to what in-

terests them and write about why it does and what it means."<sup>37</sup>

The jury is still out, but as Richardson suggests, "It's becoming more clear just what the importance of blogging might be." As Smith writes, "It is through quality linking . . . that one first comes in contact with the essential acts of blogging: close reading and interpretation. Blogging, at base, is writing down what you think when you read others. If you keep at it, others will eventually write down what they think when they read you, and you'll enter a new realm of blogging, a new realm of human connection."<sup>38</sup>

But it is more than merely assigning topics to blog about. As Jeremy Hiebert, a Web designer and graduate student in Canada, comments, "I've seen evidence of this in courses with required e-portfolio or reflective journal elements. . . . As soon as these activities are put into the context of school, focused on topics the students are unlikely to care about much, they automatically lose a level of authenticity and engagement. These disengaged students (non-writers and writers alike) won't get the main benefits of true reflective learning no matter how good the instruction and tools are."<sup>39</sup>

Despite obvious appearances, blogging isn't really about writing at all; that's just the end point of the process, the outcome that occurs more or less naturally if everything else has been done right. Blogging is about, first, reading. But more important, it is about reading what is of interest to you: your culture, your community, your ideas. And it is about engaging with the content and with the authors of what you have read—reflecting, criticizing, questioning, reacting. If a student has nothing to blog about, it is not because he or she has nothing to write about or has a boring life. It is because the student has not yet stretched out to the larger world, has not yet learned to meaningfully engage in a community. For blogging



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in education to be a success, this first must be embraced and encouraged.

From time to time, we read about the potential of online learning to bring learning into life, to engender workplace learning or lifelong learning. When Jay Cross and others say that 90 percent of our learning is informal, this is the sort of thing they mean: that the lessons we might expect to find in the classroom work their way, through alternative means, into our day-to-day activities.

Blogging can and should reverse this flow. The process of reading online, engaging a community, and reflecting it online is a process of bringing life into learning. As Richardson comments, "This [the blogging process] just seems to me to be closer to the way we learn outside of school, and I don't see those things happening anywhere in traditional education." And he asks: "Could blogging be the needle that sews together what is now a lot of learning in isolation with no real connection among the disciplines? I mean ultimately, aren't we trying to teach our kids how to learn, and isn't that [what] blogging is all about?"<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

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