

Writing for an Audience: Teaching ESL Writing through Blogs and Twitter

by Kruti Suba

Teachers can use blogs and Twitter in the ESL writing class to provide students not just with exposure to the larger academic world, but also to the huge motivational role it plays in a student's life.

Let's begin with understanding blogging and Twitter.

Blogs serve as a tool through which one (or a group of people) can showcase and share their writing, pictures, music, or any other interest online with the larger world. It has no word limit and its purpose is completely at the discretion of the blogger. In appearance, a blog more or less looks like a virtual newspaper. It has a header, a footer, a sidebar, and the main body for the content. It is up to the blogger to change the layout and design of the blog depending on its purpose.

Twitter is a global social networking website where likeminded (or conflicting) people get to know each other and share their views on topics of interest. It allows users only 140 characters to express themselves and uses #hashtags to allow participation in conversations and discussions. Using a hashtag gives your tweet a global visibility, thus widening your audience.

Benefits of Blogging in the ESL Classroom

Language Benefits

- It encourages students to view their own writing through a more critical lens, making it accessible for proofreading and spell check.
- It helps students learn a wide range of vocabulary and gives ample opportunity to use the expanded word power in writing.
- Most important, it teaches students how to have a meaningful written dialogue through comments.

Instructional Benefits

- Makes completing and submitting assignments on time a lot easier for the students and the teacher.
- Serves as an anthology of student writing/e-portfolio work, which can be used by both the teacher and the students to showcase their achievements.
- When students hand in their writing on paper to the teacher, it is only the teacher who can give his or her opinion on the writing. On a blog, however, students have ample opportunity for peer review. This gives them a chance to not only see what others did incorrectly but also what others did well and set goals for themselves on how they can improve as writers.
- Blogs can be used across grades and content area, which makes it easier for the ESL teacher to work with other teachers.
- Blogging is a great tool for collaborative and individual project work.
- Through blogging and commenting, students get ready to face the real world and prepare for college and/or a career.

Social Benefits

- Students learn a “self to world” context. They see themselves as a part of a larger learning community and not just as an isolated group of learners.
- When students write for a “real audience” and receive their comments, it serves as a great motivator and confidence-building factor in their lives, as well as providing standards and perspective.
- When students receive comments from different parts of the world, it helps expand their geographical and cultural knowledge.
- Blogging is also a great way to engage all the students by building a relationship of trust and respect between the students and the teacher. The students see that the teacher appreciates their work enough to share it with the whole world.
- Blogging also provides students with a voice and deepens their empathy and interest in others through commenting.

Twitter Communication

Twitter, on the other hand, is not used by the students but instead by the teacher to create a global communication with fellow educators and to bring traffic to the class blog.

Where do we begin?

1. Once you have decided to start a class blog, begin with reading as many class blogs as possible via Twitter. Teachers are continuously sharing their blogs with other teachers.
2. Collect good examples from all ages and subjects.
3. Experiment with different blog portals (such as WordPress, Blogger, Kidblog).
4. Decide the purpose of your class blog (my students and I used our blog to share stories from our creative writing class).
5. Once you have your purpose and know which portal best suits your needs, it's time to introduce the idea to your students.

Now, it's time to get into action!

1. Discuss with your students how you plan to use the blog.
2. Explain that it is going to be teamwork as well as individual work.
3. Think of a name and a tagline for your class blog.
4. Show the blog portal and explain how it is to be used.
5. Provide login details to students.
6. Fill up all the required details on the blog.
7. Personalize the theme/design.
8. Assign the first task.
9. Edit and proofread.
10. Publish!

Dos and Don'ts

- It is absolutely necessary to get permission from school authorities before you publish children's names and work online.
- Never post last names of students.
- Do not upload photos of children with their full names.
- If possible, maintain a blog that you can share with your students.
- Have fun themes for the blog.

- Let the children take the lead.

Class Blogs

<http://pomegranateswhatsyourstory.blogspot.in/>

<http://stjohnsblogs.co.uk/class9/about/>

<http://class5.htrblogs.net/>

Twitter Connections

<http://quadblogging.net/>

<http://comments4kids.blogspot.com/>

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