

Scaffolding for Struggling Students

Reading and Writing with Blogs



The Secret Life of Bees
We're Making the Reader Study Guide!

Chapter 11&12 Themes

Throughout chapters 11&12 you find many themes that effect the plot of the novel in a large way. They help show what the characters are going through and the struggles they face, the daily struggle we all face in life.

One theme present in a large portion of the novel is the struggle for equal rights. There are many difficulties that Rosaleen, the three sisters, Zach and other blacks in the 60's face because of their color. Blacks were still looked at as the lesser minority, slaves to the white population (even after the Civil Rights Act), facing racism ever time they stepped out their door.

Another theme is love. Lily yearns to be loved in the story, not yet sure just where she belongs. She is not loved at her own house, so she heads to Tiburon to see if she can fill the empty gap. In Tiburon she meets the three sisters and Zach, four people who open Lily's eyes and show her people do care about her.

Then one of the main morals that is brought up over and over again is grief. Lily has a hard time dealing with her emotions and dosen't know how to handle them. She dosen't want to face the fact that she may have killed her mother and come to face the hardships of life. But, as a twelve year old girl who has never had much support, she needs guidance and advice from someone who will be there for her. Lily begins to see that she has these type of people now present in her life and begins to make the transformation from a child to a young adult.

Finally, as you read through the book other themes pop out at you more than others, some more significant than the rest, that help you to understand Lily and what she is going through.

Posted by ChrissyT on 11/25/02: 3:53:29 PM from the Themes dept.

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The Secret Life of Bees at Amazon.com:

Posted by Shawn H on 9/27/02: 10:45:56 AM from the Links dept.

Class blog on *The Secret Life of Bees*.

By Sara Kajder
and Glen Bull

Subject: Language arts

Audience: Teachers, teacher educators, technology coordinators, library media specialists

Grade Level: K–12 (Ages 5–18)

Technology: Internet/Web

Standards: NETS+S 3, 5 (<http://www.iste.org/standards>)

We began discussing Weblogs, or blogs, in last month's column. We are narrowing our focus this month, targeting student readers and writers who typically do not find success in our classrooms.

Background on Blogs

In its basic form, a blog is an online personal journal. You can set up your own blog in less than five minutes at

sites such as Blogger. (*Editor's note:* Find this and other Resources on p. 35.) Both free and easy to use, blogs have become very popular.

At last count, several hundred thousand diarists were actively posting blogs about almost every conceivable topic. Blogs can provide teachers and student writers with an engaging, rich writing space that requires no technical knowledge of HTML, while offering access to an instant publishing press.

A blog can become much more than an online diary and has countless instructional applications. For example, Will Richardson uses a blog as the foundation for discussion of *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd in his American literature class at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. Find an ongoing conversation about educational uses of blogs on Will's Web site.

Blogs are a relatively new phenomenon—they began to find widespread popularity at the beginning of this decade. Therefore, it is a time of opportunity, offering a chance to explore instructional uses and adaptations.

Struggling Readers and Writers

Our classrooms are filled with students who struggle with reading and writing. They haven't found ways to engage with text. They seldom read for pleasure and only write required assignments. They are the readers who can read the words on the page, but who cannot say what those words mean once their eyes lift from the screen or paper. These students rarely see themselves in the texts provided in school. They are not engaged by the writing prompts offered in classes and rarely have an authentic writing experience.

This is a widespread problem. In a recent Carnegie Foundation study, de Lion reported that more than half of the ninth graders in the 35 largest cities in the United States are reading at or below a sixth-grade level. The challenge is not just to ensure that these students will become fluent readers. Many students are coached to minimal levels of proficiency, but fail to ever pick up a book after graduating from high school. The ultimate goal is not a one-time test score, but meaningful use in daily life.

Technology obviously is not the sole answer ... this is a much larger problem that must be addressed from many perspectives. Poetry slams, for example, emerged from the same roots as other uniquely American art forms such as the blues, and they provide models of living language beyond the confines of schools. A poetry slam is an active gathering of writers who come together to compose, perform, write, and listen. Their participation is not compelled by a homework assignment. Instead, it emerges from an authentic desire to interact and communicate. (Find out more at e-poets: An Incomplete History of Slam.)

Blogs, like poetry slams, are a popular cultural phenomenon developed outside of schools. Both offer opportunities for authentic expression in the external world. The myriad blogs on today's Internet offer models of writing for authentic self-expression. Best practice in writing instruction has taught teachers that the presence of an audience can increase engagement with and depth of writing. As we discussed in last month's column, the depth of writing students exhibit when blogging appears to further verify that this is the case.

Six Instructional Characteristics of a Blog

Blogs provide a space for writing that is two parts online journal and one part class discussion tool. They provide a forum, inviting commentary and discussion in addition to a long list of writing skills (e.g., concise language, strong voice, idea play). Blog characteristics particularly relevant to instruction include:

- 1. Economy.** Blogs demand precision. The well-developed blog post requires no scrolling. It is a brief, targeted set of words that communicate an intended idea. Student writers have to get to the point from the start of the post.
- 2. Archiving.** Each posting is dated and archived by week or day, depending on how the user preferences are set. This allows readers (and student writers) to explore how ideas unfold and connect over time.
- 3. Feedback.** The comments featured on a blog encourage peer review and sharing. Instead of opening select passages for periodic (and often teacher selected and driven) feedback, the blogs initiate a process of interactive communication beginning with the initial post. Here, student writers receive immediate response, making the writing relevant, responsive, and real. In commenting, students analyze for ambiguity and are challenged to read for a writer's purpose.
- 4. Multimedia.** Blogs allow writers to post images and even record sound files. Blogs open student writers to multiple means of communication.
- 5. Immediacy.** As soon as students publish a blog posting, their entry appears on the Web. This generates an immediate sense of accomplishment,

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and it permits the feedback and response loop to begin immediately.

6. Active Participation. Practical constraints of time and space prevent students from sharing ideas as they occur in classroom discussions. Blogs provide a communication tool in which each student *can* participate in that learning community, posting, connecting, seeing, reading, thinking, and responding in a contagious rhythm that leads to greater participation within the thinking space of the classroom.

Used appropriately, electronic writing spaces can enhance motivation and teach real-world skills. With a new teaching tool in the arsenal, the next task becomes how to best employ it to support reading and writing in the classroom. Here, we offer multiple classroom strategies and ideas in this article and invite you to sample, test, and reinvent these tasks. Each strategy has been developed with best practice in mind.

Ten Instructional Activities

Teachers are savvy at adaptation. We know how to take an instructional method or tool and rework it to fit our unique instructional spaces and

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needs. Our instructional use of blogs requires this kind of rethinking and re-seeing. The following 10 instructional activities involving reinvention and adaptation of blogs for the classroom are built on standards-based, effective classroom practice. Find prototypes and classroom examples at the Center for Technology and Teacher Education's blogging activities page.

Literary Activities

1. Character Journals. This strategy challenges student writers to write as a fictional character. Posts require students to sound and think like that character, allowing space to complete a lower-stakes activity that explores voice and synthesizes higher-order understanding of what is happening in that reading.

2. Character Roundtable. This is a team-blog extension of the character journal. Here, multiple students make posts as multiple characters about a larger guiding question or theme. For example, one such "gathering" or conversation might involve Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald), Willie Loman (*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller), and Walter Younger (*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry) discussing the American dream.

3. Open Minds. Using paper, this strategy requires that students draw the outline of an empty head that is then filled with images representing what the character would think or know at a given time in a selected reading. Brought into the blog, student entries could post both multiple images and reflective writing.

4. Think-Aloud Postings. Content postings reflect student analysis and response to assigned readings. This captures the same types of content

that a student would orally express when conducting a traditional read aloud.

5. Literature Circle Group Responses. Traditional literature circle "reports" are completed on handouts or worksheets. By posting to a blog, student participants would not only be placing information and ideas into the greater class community for consideration, but they would also be provided with a reflective space that works beyond the constraints of the hand-out responses.

Revision and Grammar Activities

6. Nutshelling. This strategy challenges students to examine a paragraph and extract a line that holds the most meaning or presents an interesting starting place. In working with blogs, students review previous entries, select a rich line, and paste it into the body of a new post. They then begin their writing from there. This "nutshell" serves as the prompt for additional reflection and elaboration.

7. Devil's Advocate Writing. In working with argument, blogs can house an interactive, multi-participant dialogue that pushes the reasoning within posts. In some ways, this might function as a precise, online debate. In another use, it might be a testing ground for the ideas students develop more fully in later writing. The fusion of the two allows students to locate the flaws in their argument, add depth to their original writing, and strengthen their reasoning.

8. Exploding Sentences. As Gloria Heard explains in *The Revision Toolbox*, this strategy challenges students to revise sentences. In working with blogs, students "explode" sentences from earlier posts by slowing them down, adding rich, descriptive detail.

Reinvented Blogs

9. Photoblogs. A photoblog is a blog that incorporates images. Print text is fused with visual imagery as students annotate and write captions leading the reader through the blog and the narrative conveyed by the images. (Read more about photoblogs at Photoblogs.org: Frequently Asked Questions.)

10. Storyblogs. With a creative writing focus, a class-constructed storyblog allows for writing and grammar instruction. With a nonfiction focus, the storyblog becomes a class-written essay. This provides not only a model of how writers work but also a lower-stakes entry point for students to write.

Blogs in the Classroom

Blogs provide a multi-genre, multimedia writing space that can engage visually minded students and draw them into a different interaction with print text. Students at all levels learn to write by writing. Blog postings meld images, sound, and printed text, providing different entry points as well as richer communication. In *You Gotta Be the Book*, Jeffrey Wilhelm writes: "representation stabilizes thought that can be shared, tested, negotiated and revised continually." Student journals have traditionally incorporated images and sketches. Blogs offer this capability as well as sound, motion, and an expanding list of new possibilities that engage struggling readers and writers in unique ways.

The precision and economy of each posting encourages student writers to work with smaller chunks of text. Emphasis is on exploration of the writing process and the language used. On the simplest level, this directly supports student textual and cognitive confidence. It builds the stamina needed to continue reading difficult texts. It provides a space for readers to talk about the reading process while they are in

ing best practice. It is simultaneously a glimpse of the possibilities and an invitation for you to examine, invent, reinvent, and ultimately join in the conversation.

We hope you put the blog through its paces and extend and enhance these initial starting points. We would enjoy hearing about your uses and will report on ideas you share. Subsequent columns will explore classroom implementation through the eyes of teachers and students.

Resources

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

Center for Technology and Teacher

Education's blogging activities page:

<http://www.teacherlink.org/content/blog>
deLion, A. G. (2002). *The urban high school's challenge: Ensuring literacy for every child*.

New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

e-poets: An Incomplete History of Slam:

<http://www.e-poets.net/library/slam>

Heard, G. (2003). *The revision toolbox*.

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Photoblogs.org: Frequently Asked Questions:

<http://www.photoblogs.org/faq>

The Secret Life of Bees discussion page:

<http://weblogs.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/bees/>

A Thousand Words Photography:

<http://a.thousandwords.nu/photos/>

Will Richardson's Blog: <http://www>.

Weblogg-ed.com



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A Thousand Words Photography: A photoblog listed among Photoblog.org's Top 100.

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its hold, rather than requiring them to reconstruct meaning away from a text.

Perhaps the most significant instructional potential of blogs is student engagement. One of our greatest challenges as teachers is to lead students to synthesize and apply understanding in a variety of contexts and situations. As A. H. Dyson said in her 2002 *Review of Research in Education* article "Transforming Transfer," we need to lead students at all levels to see how "new material enters into and transforms old relational rhythms, and old material reverberates in the new." The limited space demands that students "pack" their writing and demonstrate how to think when working as a reader or as a writer. The scaffolding provided through the immediate ar-

chiving allows for us to support and examine close work with text that progressively increases in difficulty throughout interactions and across a span of time.

Next Steps

Whether used as a journal space or within the context of "reinvented" classroom study, blogs provide a different kind of writing space that plays by a different set of rules. By providing struggling readers and writers with creative and unique entrances into work with print and visual texts, blogs provide new options and new possibilities. Because this is a new writing space, a new area for classroom investigation, the list discussed in this column is just a start at defin-



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