Becta Schools

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Writing for an audience using blogs

Summary

This case study is part of a project between Becta and the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) to explore ways of using ICT in English topics that are hard to teach. The project led to the publication, Making hard topics easier to teach with ICT, which contains 18 case studies.

Mark Ellis teaches at Newent Community School, a large comprehensive. He used blogging as a tool with Year 10 pupils to help them learn to write for an audience. He combined this new technology with a traditional favourite of the English classroom—the work experience report.

Organisational information

Name: Mark Ellis
Job title: Visual Learning Co-ordinator
Organisation: Newent Community School
Address: Watery Lane, Newent, Gloucestershire, GL18 1QF
Maturity of project: the project took place between March and July, 2008.

Most students at Newent Community School are from a White British background, with small numbers from other ethnic heritages. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is lower than average, and the proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is broadly average. On entry in Year 7, the school loses some able students to grammar schools in the area. The school has arts and science specialist status.

Project overview

What were the aims and objectives of the project?

The project aimed to use Web 2.0 technology to provide a sense of 'real audiences and contexts for writing and speaking beyond the classroom,' as outlined in the new curriculum. The specific task was to engage Year 10 pupils in writing about their work experience week.

How to do the activity

Mark suggests five steps in getting a student group started with blogging.

1. **Find a blog provider:** Edublogs is a good starting point. Also, local authorities may have their own learning platform through which blogs can be hosted. It is particularly important to discuss the idea of using this technology with the senior leadership team. They should be enrolled on the blog and have full access to it.
2. **Have the right security and permissions:** Set up the blog's security settings to ensure that only registered users can comment. Theoretically anyone surfing the web can read a blog, but they won't be able to comment unless they are members of Edublogs. Know your school's policy on inappropriate internet use and make

sure that students protect their log-in names and passwords.

3. **Enrol the students with the blog provider:** All their usernames should be something that strangers won't be able to recognise, although teachers and peers will. They should use their school email address to register and make sure that they email the teacher with their usernames. This way, the teacher will be able to recognise which student is making a post or a comment.

4. **Set the task and the conventions:** Decide ahead of time what the conventions of written English will be. Mark insisted that his students use 'normal' written English standards for school work; he also pitched the task as being for magazine/colour supplement publication. They read articles in preparation, looking at the techniques used by authors to engage interest and structure the narrative.

5. **Stand back** and let them get on with it while monitoring from a safe distance. Let the results speak for themselves.

Barriers and enablers

Enablers

Making sure that all security and safety measures have been followed will ensure that students can benefit from the sense of audience and the feedback that blogs can offer.

Encouraging students to point out technical errors in others' writing—without producing the smart that a public rebuke might cause—is a challenge. Mark put students into groups with the specific task of commenting on and revising the technicalities of work within the group. This seems to have reduced the sting a bit. Also, the advice to students that 'what goes around, comes around' is easily understood. There has been no bitterness or bad feeling so far with this approach.

There are many legitimate concerns about the safety of young people using the internet. It is useful to anticipate that your group may receive an inappropriate post. However, since students have to log in to post text, the teacher will know who wrote what. Students need to guard the confidentiality of their passwords and log-in names. This is also a great opportunity to talk to them about the increasingly hot topic of identity theft.

Barriers

The teacher has to learn to let go. Resisting the temptation to correct students' contributions is an opportunity to encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. Mark observed students changing and improving their posts in the light of comments from other students.

Senior managers can play an essential role. They should always be informed of a project such as this; moreover, they can contribute as members of the audience, offering comments.

Impact, outcomes and sustainability

Impact on learners

Mark found that students' sense of audience became markedly improved by using the blog. Their opening sentences below demonstrate the well-considered strategies they used, knowing that they were writing for an audience.

"Yes I must admit I was there stood outside the doors of the assembly rooms hopping from foot to foot. But I finally plucked up the courage and faced my fears of dealing with new people in a new environment."

"Well the end of work experience for me will be over in less than a couple of hours. But to be frank this hasn't been work experience for me. It's been life experience. I'm coming back from this placement a different person. I know it sounds corny, but it's true."

Transferability and portability

This project is easy to replicate, as long as the steps that Mark has highlighted are followed.

Lessons learnt

An alternative way of using the blog would be to invite students to post their accounts of work experience regularly onto the blog. For instance, a preliminary post and a reflective post after the event could be interesting.

Voice of the learner

Here are some comments that students made on their peers' texts:

"I like the build up to the little boy booming (good use of booming much better than shouting) heroin at the end of paragraph one."

"Yes. This needs a bit more work but what you've done here is good. The build up to the ending is quite effective, and really funny; the random things children come out with is certainly something you can use for humour's sake."

Conclusion

The public forum provided by the blog has helped students learn to write with a sense of audience.

Students respond with a sense of obligation to the reader both as posters of text and as commentators on text. If teachers observe proper safety and security measures, blogs can be an effective tool for engaging students and improving their writing skills.

Links and addenda

Wiki spaces

Edublogs

Work experience blogs

NATE: Making hard topics easier to teach with ICT (all the case studies from the project).

Watch the Teachers' TV site for videos of selected case studies from this project coming soon.

Links:

- Wiki spaces [http://www.wikispaces.com]
- Edublogs [http://edublogs.org]
- Work experience blogs [http://newentenglish.edublogs.org]
- case studies [http://www.nate.org.uk/index.php?page=43]
- Teachers' TV [http://www.teachers.tv]

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http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?
section=cu&catcode=ss_cu_ac_eng_03&rid=16349&pagenum=1&NextStart=1&print=1