

Blogging

Find out how to create blogs and how to use them in your teaching.

What is a blog?

Blogs are simply online diaries. They are logs (weblogs – hence the name) of thoughts, reflections, and events in the writer's life. A space for individuals to write whatever they choose, with an option for readers to comment on what they have read.

Blogs can be fascinating, or utterly tedious. They can be elegant or clunky, informed or bigoted. Often they are not checked for spelling or grammar. Some teachers loathe blogs for their poor or non-standard English; others love their authenticity and liveliness. But like them or loathe them, blogs are a fact of contemporary life. The 'blogosphere' is here to stay.

Creating a blog

Blogs have never been difficult to create, but over the last few months the process has become simpler and simpler. Go to Google, click on More (above the box where you type your search), then select Blogger. You are led through a three-step process of creating an account, naming your blog, and selecting a design – it takes all of five minutes. Thereafter, all you need to do is log in and start typing, and then, when you ready, click 'Publish' – the rest is automatic.

There are other blogging services, some (like Google's Blogger) completely free, others charging a small monthly fee. Typepad, for example, has significantly more features than Blogger – but it is not as user-friendly.

Using blogs

Years ago, I started getting my students to write with a word processor. It was fine, and had many advantages over writing by hand. Things got even better when we were able to publish onto a webpage – this was writing with a purpose, writing to reach an audience, even if that audience was far more restricted than the students realized. But web pages do take up a bit of time, what with formatting and linking the pages together. The great joy of blogging is that there is none of that. You can type into a little box, add the same sort of formatting as you would in Word, and it appears instantly on the web. No more linking problems – it is just one long page with the latest posting at the top.

You can use blogs to get students reflecting on their learning, for creative writing tasks or just to turn them on to the process of writing. There is a useful article on the kind of activities that might be undertaken at the BBC/British Council Teaching English website.

Reading other people's blogs, however, does not work too well in the classroom. They are often too personal, and are intended to be followed regularly over a period of time. Just dropping in on one is likely to elicit a response of 'What on earth is going on here?' They can, however, be a rich source of ideas (and authentic contemporary language) for the teacher.

Blogs are everywhere, these days. Warwick University alone has over 3,000 of them – the university actively promotes their use in an attempt to 'build a community'. Celebrities' blog, too: the Huffington Post has contributions from Norman Mailer, Gwyneth Paltrow and Diane Keating. Even Noam Chomsky has a blog – though he seems to have gone very quiet in 2005.

In the UK, The Guardian pioneered the use of blogs, starting way back in 2001. These days it runs four blogs: the Newsblog, the Gamesblog (for those interested in online gaming), and the Guideblog (a UK entertainment guide) and the Online blog (for technological developments. The Guardian Online has an extensive section on weblogs, with links, articles and a useful glossary. Have you ever come across 'permalinks'? Or 'fisking'?

Blogs in EFL

Strangely, there do not seem as yet to be many EFL blogs. Graham Stanley's Blog-EFL has been running for over two years, but is mainly devoted to technology. The Far East has spawned several popular blogs, most notably Japanlang.com, which is run by a group of long-term English and English-speaking academics in Japan, and EFL Geek, run by a Canadian blogger in Korea.

Free-ESL-Blogs.com hosts over 100 blogs from teachers and students around the world, listed in order of popularity. A few gems here, but a good deal of dross—many experiments and false starts. Maria Jordano, a well-known web head at the University of Seville, has an interesting listing of blogs relating to education and EFL.

The best way into blogging for Business English is probably through Cleve Miller's English 360. Those readers involved in staff development may be

interested in Teacher in Development, and active blog based in Mexico City. Not for those with poor eyesight, though – why do so many bloggers choose to write in white on a black screen?

Finding blogs with Google

With new blogs appearing at the rate of one every nine seconds, it can be difficult to locate material you might find interesting. Blogwise is a UK site which tries to find a way through the maze. It lists over 50,000 blogs, by country and by keyword, all submitted by their proud owners. All submissions are checked by a human editor – but there is still a good deal of junk, and blogs which were riveting a few months ago can suddenly become mundane or trivial or simply dry up all together. Best of the Blogs has better quality control – but is very US-centric and political. Another good starting point might be the Guardian's section on Weblogs we like in its Weblog guide.

An alternative is, of course, to use Google. Simple searches are not too helpful. For example:

Police blog will find you pages about blogs and the police, rather than the blogs themselves. But you can use the Google Directory. And Advanced Googlers may work out that since so many blogs are hosted on Blogspot.com, it is possible to search for words in the address of a site: site:blogspot.com in URL: crime

Finding good blogs is still hit or miss, however – nothing beats a personal recommendation.

Google Maps and Google Blog

Talking of Google, let me just put in a plug for the new Google Maps service. You get by far the best maps on the web, with the ability to scroll around the map (rather than have the screen refreshing all the time) and zoom in and out. You can switch between maps and satellite images, resolvable down to the level of individual houses, or, as of July, select the 'hybrid' option, which overlays the map onto the satellite photo.

As long as you are in www.google.co.uk (and not www.google.com), you can just click on more and then select Maps to get the British Isles. Wonderful stuff – I am just working on a classroom application for it!

And the folks at Google are not just mapping, they are blogging too, of course. How would I keep up-to-date without the Google Blog?

Google

www.google.co.uk

Typepad

www.typepad.com

Teaching English – Blogging for ELT

www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/resources/blogging.shtml

Blog-EFL

www.blog-efl.blogspot.com

Japanlang.com

www.japanlang.com/b2/

EFL Geek

www.eflgeek.com

Free-ESL-Blogs.com

www.free-esl-blogs.com

Maria Jordano

www.mariajordano.com/my_suggested_blogs/otherblogs.htm

English 360

www.english360.blogspot.com

Teacher in Development

www.teacherindevelopment.blogspot.com/

The Huffington Post

www.huffingtonpost.com/theblog/

Noam Chomsky: Turning the Tide

www.blog.zmag.org/ttt/

Guardian Online Weblogs

www.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/

Blogwise

www.blogwise.com

Best of the Blogs

www.bestoftheblogs.com/

Guardian Online Weblog Guide

www.guardian.co.uk/weblog/special/0,10627,744914,00.html

Google Maps

www.maps.google.co.uk

Google Blog

www.googleblog.blogspot.com/

Related title

ELT Journal

Source

<http://www.oup.com/elt/teachersclub/articles/blogging?cc=global>

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