

A Librarian's Journey in Blogging

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Blogging can be a useful educational tool with numerous benefits for both the student and the educator. It allows for reflection, the cataloging of important data and events, and sharing information with others. A professional blog can also be used as a way to track and monitor educator and librarian professional development and act as a résumé. For students, research shows that blogging improves writing and self-confidence and connects them to other educators and students around the world.¹ I hope this chapter will inspire librarians and their peer educators to begin a professional blog as well as encourage their students to begin the process of blogging.

I started blogging in 2013 when I began my new position as school librarian at Glenthorne High School in south London, UK. I created a site using Blogger for the Glenthorne High School Library. The school did not have a qualified librarian before I started the post, and considering I hadn't worked in a school library before, I wanted to catalog my adventures in this new world. The problem was that I didn't really know how to blog effectively. I hadn't really written a blog or post before, and to be completely honest, I was intimidated by the whole process.

Glenthorne High School Library
<https://glenthornehrc.blogspot.com>

Blogging became a necessity when my manager asked for monthly reports on what was happening in the library. She was hoping for basic statistics, which I was, at the time, delivering in an email. I then provided monthly borrowing statistics along with which

books were most popular with the students. We also had a library count gate that told us how many students were visiting daily. I was able to tally these numbers up every month and send them to my administrator. All these statistics gave her the numbers, but not the story of what was happening in my library.

After a few failed attempts at creating a newsletter for the library, I finally landed on using Blogger as a primary form of communication with my manager and, eventually, the outside world. I chose Blogger as my format because I found it easy to use and share with others. I always included a lot of photos in my blog posts, and Blogger lets you add these and other features, such as outside links and clean templates, easily.

The blog quickly evolved into more than just statistics, though. In addition to providing basic monthly stats, I started capturing both the challenges and positive events that took place in the library. Blogging soon became the perfect way to tell my manager and other members of the senior leadership team at the school what I was doing in the library, what I was aiming to do in the future, and how I hoped to achieve these goals.

It was also an amazing way to connect with teachers and other staff at the school. Starting out in a large school can be intimidating, and librarians are typically an isolated group in the school. Creating a blog and highlighting all the cool, interesting things we were doing while also showcasing student work and events made the blog an extremely valuable tool. I would send the blog link out to teachers every three months as a reminder, and the response was always very positive.

Sending a link to my blog to parents via email and promoting it during events such as prospective

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parents evening and parent council were also effective ways to introduce myself to them and the students alike. I asked our IT team to integrate the blog into the school's virtual learning environment (VLE). Now, when students log in to the VLE to download and complete their homework, they can also click on the library blog button and see what's been going on and what events are upcoming.

I'm happy to see that Blogger is still listed by many sites, such as TechRadar and ThemeIsle, as one of the top blogging platforms to use. Blogger allows users to customize their blog to a certain extent by choosing from a variety of themes and customizing the main header. I did this by branding the blog with the name of the library and including an attractive photo of the library below. It's simple and to the point.

This doesn't mean that Blogger is the only route to take. There are plenty of user-friendly, attractive-looking platforms out there that you might find easier to use. One of the most popular blogging platforms is WordPress, which "now 'powers' over a fifth of the internet."² WordPress is very easy to use and extremely popular with bloggers and with companies hoping to create an identifiable brand.

There's also Tumblr, Live Journal, Medium, Squarespace, and countless others. I suggest taking a few for a test drive and finding what works best for you.

I also use Weebly for a YA book review blog; it's very easy to use, and users can customize it with images and different styles to fit their needs. I personally wouldn't use Weebly for more in-depth discussion, as I do on Blogger, but for adding a flashy image of a book and writing three or four paragraphs about it, it's perfect. Like Blogger, Weebly also allows users to integrate ads and have a Twitter feed running live along the side if that's something of interest. Weebly's interface is primarily drag and drop, which makes it perfect for people like me who can sometimes be intimidated by new technology.

Benefits of Blogging

There are many benefits to blogging, both professional and personal. On a professional basis, it allows you to create and manage your identity. My blog is now the hub for everything I do professionally. Every post I create is tagged with labels, a practice I highly recommend if you are starting your own blog. It's very helpful when it comes to searching for relevant blog posts you have written in the past. For example, if I want to find out what professional development courses I took or conferences I spoke at over the course of a year, I simply access my blog and click on the "professional development" tag that I created for each post reflecting on these events. The search results will display

every blog post with that tag, and I can easily access the information I need.

Tagging can also be valuable for reporting. Since I have tagged all of my blog posts that contain borrowing stats with related labels, if my manager or another member of the senior leadership team at school asks for any stats, I can have them ready in a matter of seconds. Collecting statistics from the first month of my first post in 2013 was a great decision as it has allowed me to see how far the library has progressed and where we need to go in the future.

I regularly use tabs on my blog to help other librarians or educators to access information that I think could be beneficial. Within these tabs, I have collated all my information literacy and library lesson plans, links to my YA book review site, the monthly library newsletter that I publish, and more.

Tags are also useful to keep information literacy tips at the ready. I created a series of infographics highlighting ways to avoid plagiarism, note-taking skills, copyright information, and website evaluation a few years ago. I include them in the tabs to ensure that other educators can access them quickly and provide feedback if need be.

I also created several reading lists that are easily accessible via my blog. Reading lists are often requested by our English team to use in their classroom, and I try hard to keep them up-to-date and relevant. Having them on my blog means that teachers can access them at their convenience and provide me with quick feedback if they think anything needs to be altered or updated.

Using a blog, I have my entire professional career at my fingertips. Having a blog with your name on it will also send people in the right direction if they search for you. This will help other professionals learn about your work and hopefully share your good practices.

Blogging will teach you many things. On the face of it, you will learn basic technical skills that are required to publish your work online. By blogging and sharing your work, you will also connect yourself to other bloggers in your field. By reading, sharing, and understanding other people's perspectives, you'll become much more informed and involved in your library and education community.

Through blogging, I haven't simply added new followers to my social media channels. I have developed true friendships and positive professional relationships that have made me a better librarian. If you stick with blogging long enough, you will develop a devoted group of followers for idea exchange. One of the most surreal and exciting moments for an introverted librarian blogger such as myself is attending a conference and having other librarians approach me to say they really enjoyed reading my blog. It's a feeling that never gets old and is an amazing way to

develop connections that will benefit everyone.

I know for a fact that becoming a blogger and sharing the blog through social media has resulted in being asked to speak at library conferences and events. If you are consistent, positive, yet honest, you will develop a following that will want to hear what you have to say. Speaking at events and conferences will connect you to experts from around the world and help highlight the great work you do to even more like-minded professionals.

Your blog can act as your résumé in many respects. It is a professional portfolio that you can showcase if you find yourself seeking employment in a new location or sector. Using it as a base for everything you do professionally will only create positive outcomes.

Reasons Students Should Blog

There are several benefits to having your students blog. Whether this is in the classroom or library on a regular basis, it doesn't really matter. Blogging will exercise the creative muscle that can be softened with more formal approaches to education. Blogging allows students a huge amount of creative freedom that can be used to develop their own voice and perspective, which will become essential when they enter the workforce. It also allows them to respond to constructive criticism, and if allowed to develop their own theme and style, they will learn new technical skills.

I've already touched upon the importance of regular writing when it comes to improving our professional work. We know this works for adults who are full-time authors. Imagine how effective it would be for students who start to write and blog regularly at a young age. It will help teach them routine and the importance of committing to a project. It also develops that professional portfolio I mentioned earlier, something that, if they stick with it, they can refer back to and reflect on at an early age. At Glenthorne High School, I ask students in years 7 and 8 (grades 6 and 7) to blog their book reviews, which I then convert into a magazine shared as a PDF document.

Student blogging isn't just about them speaking their minds, it's about improving their self-confidence. Writing is known to help young people become self-aware and to aid in the understanding of personal experiences, writes educator Kathleen Morris.³ Having students write regularly about their work, successes, failures, and challenges will help improve not only their self-worth but also their communication skills.

Having students blog and comment on each other's posts on a regular basis, when monitored by a teacher, will improve spelling and grammar, to name just one benefit. Kathleen Morris, who has her students blog daily, says that her students' literacy and engagement levels dramatically increased.⁴ Reluctant

writers wrote with a purpose in mind, and students used their blogs to communicate with each other.

Parents can also access and view their children's blogs, which creates an instant connection with what's happening in the library or classroom to the family at home. Encourage parents to get their children to blog at home to keep the writing and reflecting activities happening.

Blogging is an opportunity to teach students about creating a positive digital footprint. I feel that we engage in a lot of scare tactics when it comes to teaching students about being online and their digital footprint. There are reasons to be ultra-cautious; however, it's also important to ensure students are engaging positively in the online world because blogging is a way for them to start their digital footprint in a controlled, positive way.

Getting students engaged in blogging also allows them to see things from other people's perspectives. If you have students reflecting on a lesson, news, or a social topic, they will see that not everyone shares the same opinion and how important it is to be considerate of others' views. This can help generate civilized debate and discussion to carry forward on a daily basis.

Blogging can be used to connect students to other classrooms around the world. Having different classes comment on other students' posts is the perfect way to electronically introduce them to new places and cultures. Our students' adventures in blogging have led to Mystery Skypes and several other collaborations with other groups of students around the world. Mystery Skypes are a fantastic way for students to learn and create global partnerships. Students Skype with another group, and the classes are unaware of each other's geographic location. Using a series of yes-or-no questions and using atlases and iPads with Google Earth, students must try to pinpoint the other class's location.

We have read the same book together and discussed it on Padlet; we have shared recommended reads via Flipgrid. We've gone low-tech and shared postcards with each other, recommending books and discussing our favorite first lines of literature. Blogging has been the launchpad for all these activities and many more.

Promotion

I promote my blog in different ways. The primary way is social media such as Twitter and Instagram, with Twitter being the preferred format for me. I created a link to my blog on my Twitter profile to ensure it's the first point of contact people see when they access my Twitter profile. I also always have a pinned tweet that will lead them to a certain event I'm promoting through the blog.

To properly publicize it, I post at least once a week, sometimes more than that if I feel the need. At the end of each month I do another post to showcase the highlights and the most popular books. To showcase the top ten books of the month, I do a running countdown on Twitter on or near the last day of every month. Each tweet counts down the top ten books, tagging the author and publisher if applicable, and including a link to the blog. This is a great way to bring new people to the blog and promote what I do.

I send a reminder link for the blog out to teachers every few months. I do this routinely no matter what's going on, but I also send it out in between those times if we have a special event approaching. For example, we ran a weeklong series of events in the library under the theme "Harry Potter vs. Hunger Games," where students competed in various literary events to see which series was more popular. To promote this event, I made an animated video using an online video program, Powtoon. I then embedded the video into my blog and sent a link out to all homeroom teachers in the school.

Activities like these bring positive attention to a blog and allow the user to create a wider audience. Having the blog link on an email signature, creating bookmarks with the blog address and other social media handles printed on them, and making postcards that highlight the library's services that can be placed in staff pigeonholes are ways that I've promoted the blog within the school.

What to Blog About?

When I first started blogging, I didn't really know what to write. I felt self-conscious mainly because I thought I was doing nothing but patting myself on the back. This feeling soon dissipated, however, after I realized that nobody was going to do this for me. In addition, librarians (especially in the UK) are having to prove their worth more and more as budgets are slashed dramatically. There's absolutely nothing wrong with patting ourselves on the back and sharing it with the world.

I started blogging about author visits, clubs I had started, student artwork, and library stats. It evolved into a lot more than that, though. I started reflecting on challenges I've faced, how I've approached behavior issues in the library, how I've struggled with the negative perception of comics and graphic novels,

and a lot more. These are the posts that have generated the biggest responses, and I have really benefited from sharing these experiences with the larger education community.

I also collect data from previous posts and write another post serving as a guide on that topic. For example, I found that I had been posting weekly on what our manga/anime club had been doing—what successes and challenges I had with it, and even blogging about my complete failures when they happened. This resulted in a post that served as a guide on starting your own manga/anime club, where the pitfalls were, how to draw people in, how to keep them there, and what manga to purchase for your high school library. Sharing this post led to several other librarians to share their own stories about starting their own manga/anime clubs, and we were able to spread that information in various social media formats to others who may have been considering starting their own.

My advice would be to simply start writing. Show off some of your favorite library programs—tell people what worked, what didn't, and what you'd do differently in the future. Share a basic craft program, for instance Zines, in detail because what might seem second nature to you might be completely new to someone else. I am inspired and incorporate other librarians' ideas often (always giving them credit, of course), and 99 percent of the time I will find that great idea on someone's blog.

Blogging has, without a doubt, changed my career for the better. It has connected me to my profession in a way I never expected; it has led to several new professional opportunities; it has established my place in the school that I work; and it has allowed me to reflect on my professional life in a thoughtful and effective way. My hope is that others will enjoy the same experience if they are inspired to start their own blog after reading this.

Notes

1. Kathleen Morris, "Why Teachers and Students Should Blog: 18 Benefits of Educational Blogging," Kathleen Morris website, March 14, 2018, <http://www.kathleenamorris.com/2018/03/14/benefits-blogging>.
2. Diana Soare, "18 Best Blogging Platforms of 2018," Drsoft.com, December 12, 2017, <https://drsoft.com/2017/12/12/18-best-blogging-platforms-of-2018>.
3. Morris, "Why Teachers and Students Should Blog."
4. Morris, "Why Teachers and Students Should Blog."