Student Bloggers Connect with Peers

Multimedia projects about place-based education link classrooms with communities near and far.

by Momo Chang

In 2004, Dave Boardman, an English teacher from a small town in Maine, met a San Francisco social studies teacher named Joel Arquillos through the National Writing Project and realized they both wanted to use technology to encourage their students to think and write about their communities.

Over several phone conversations and email messages -- the teachers met in person only after the project launched -- they crafted a two-year-long project that linked their disparate classrooms through a private blog. Their goal: connect their students digitally through writing assignments that relate to their lives and hometowns.

Boardman and Arquillos's project involving virtual pen pals is one example of the ways teachers are combining place-based learning, project learning, and blogging to connect classrooms, provide an authentic audience for student writing, and prompt students to explore the world outside of the schoolhouse door.

"We discovered, and I think our students discovered, that they had much more in common than they thought," says Boardman. The blog, he adds, became a "digital hallway" where kids would start conversations and continue them virtually.

Boardman and Arquillos encouraged their students to blog about their day-to-day lives, and their posts often reflected the differences that come from living in an urban area as opposed to a small town. For example, the San Francisco students, who attended the Galileo Academy of Science and Technology, wrote about the challenges they experienced growing up as immigrants in a new city. The Maine students, from Winthrop High School and Messalonskee High School -- Boardman switched schools mid project -- lived in small towns and wrote about going deer hunting after school.

The students read each other's blogs during class, and, despite their differences, the teens from both coasts came to realize that they had more in common with each other than they had initially thought. Many students from both California and Maine wrote poetry, for example, and almost everyone, it seemed, was a fan of singer-songwriter Usher.
"The project opened up the classroom to the outside world," concludes Arquillos, who is now executive director of the Los Angeles youth tutoring, writing, and publishing program 826LA, part of the 826 National organization.

**Spreading the News to Students and Parents**

In addition to energizing English and social studies curricula, Miami Beach Senior High School teacher Andy Weiss says that place-based student blogging can be a useful tool in journalism classes. Last year, Weiss started a blog for his journalism classes as a way to preserve student work and facilitate the editing process. He says it has since become an indispensable tool for producing the school newspaper, the *Beachcomber*.

Beginning journalism students now post stories in progress to their personal blogs (which are all linked to the paper's main blog), and Miriam Kolker, the *Beachcomber's* editor in chief, says this process makes it easier to track the student reporters' progress. She also says that, for quicker communication, she frequently leaves comments for the writers via the blog.

Beginning journalism student Madison Sanders adds that reading other students' work in progress helps her with her own writing. "It's easy for us to compare our work with other people's and to just get an idea of what we have to do to meet publication standards," she adds.

Once the students complete their articles, advanced journalism students edit them and choose which ones will end up in the monthly print edition of the newspaper.

But the journalism blog also benefits the school by facilitating communication, Weiss says. It allows students to write and publish stories more frequently and to supplement their articles with multimedia content. "They have the authority to knock on any member of the administration's door, record them, and publish the story," he says.

The blog has also boosted parent involvement. Weiss notes that parents check the main blog for news on the school community. And, perhaps to his students' chagrin, Weiss also posts homework assignments on his blog, which parents can easily access through the main blog. He says parents have discovered that they can then check the comments section to see whether their child has completed an assignment.

**A Springboard for Critical Thinking**

Some teachers say place-based blogging projects can also promote critical thinking while developing student literacy. Through the WHY's Up! blog, students at Life Academy High School of Health and Bioscience, in Oakland, California, wrote blog entries about the more than half-dozen neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area they visited as part of a three-week project. Students traveled by bus, train, and ferry to visit places as diverse as nearby Oakland's upper-middle-class Rockridge District and San Francisco's gay-friendly Castro District.
"I wanted students to reevaluate what they see everyday and question what's around them," says former Life Academy humanities teacher Clifford Lee, who launched the project with his colleague, special education teacher Brooke Fitzgerald.

Students interviewed strangers on the street and in shops, asking them what it was like to live in the neighborhood. They also took photographs to document their trips. One group of students wrote about the food in each neighborhood, snapping photos of plates of crepes, kimchi, and pizza, while another group explored the socioeconomic differences of the neighborhoods through the types of cars parked on the streets.

Fitzgerald says the project's primary goal was to use neighborhood visits as a springboard for critical thinking. In a visit to San Francisco's Chinatown, for example, her Latino students told her they felt discriminated against because many of the Chinese Americans they approached in the area declined to be interviewed. But when the same group visited Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood -- a predominantly Latino area where many of the students live -- they were surprised to discover that many strangers there weren't very willing to be interviewed either.

Fitzgerald and Lee, now a PhD candidate in urban schooling at the University of California at Los Angeles, pushed their students to analyze what had happened. "It made us question whether or not we were assuming things," reflects Daniela Mendoza, now a freshman at UCLA. "A lot of people in Chinatown didn't speak English. At first, you think they're not talking to you because you're a teenager or because of discrimination. Then we started to think, 'Maybe it's because they are immigrants and are scared to talk to strangers.'"

The teachers say they hoped the project would also help students -- and the general public -- see their communities in a new and more complex way. "We wanted people from all over the world to look at these different neighborhoods in the Bay Area and also to see that our kids could do writing of a high caliber," Fitzgerald explains.

Indeed, in the blog's comments section, visitors frequently praise the young writers for their professionalism, and when students visited Oakland's Fruitvale District in May, they ventured into the local firehouse. The three firemen they interviewed were so impressed by the students, they decided that they would start awarding an annual scholarship ($500 each this year, and perhaps more in future years) to two college-bound seniors.

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