1 The Read/ Write Web

Tim Berners-Lee had a grand vision for the Internet when he began development of the World Wide Web in 1989. "The original thing I wanted to do," Berners-Lee says, "was make it a collaborative medium, a place where we [could] all meet and read and write" (as cited in Carvin, 2005). At the time, the Internet was not much more than a network of computers that researchers and government officials used to share text and data; it was just a small blip on the radar screens of all but the most technologically savvy. But Berners-Lee saw the potential to construct a vast "web" of linked information, built by people from around the globe, creating the ability to share not just data but personal talents and experiences in new and powerful ways.

The first part of Berners-Lee's dream came to fruition in 1993, with the development of the Mosaic Web browser. Seemingly overnight, the Internet went from a text- and numbers-based research tool for the few to a colorful, graphic world of information for the masses. Even though content was limited in those early days, millions of people soon started going online to read or "surf" the Web for information and entertainment. And as access spread, connections became faster, and more and more Web designers and authors set up shop, the twentieth century ended with the Internet taking its place as an essential communications and research network connecting people around the globe.

But even with that initial period of immense and rapid growth, the original vision of being able to read *and* write to the Web was slow (in Internet terms, at least) to be realized. Writing to the Web required knowledge of the HTML codes that make Web pages work and of the protocols to get those pages up and running. To be sure, there were text-based newsgroups to share ideas and some sites like Amazon.com where readers could leave reviews and opinions. But for the most part, the ability to create content on the Web

was nowhere near as easy as consuming it, and even those who could create did so with little means for easy collaboration.

A NEW WORLD WIDE WEB

Today, however, this inability to create is no longer the case.

The past few years have seen the development of an explosion of easy Internet publishing tools that have done much to fulfill Berners-Lee's concept of a Read/Write Web. As early as 2003, a Pew Internet & American Life Project found that more than 53 million American adults, or 44 percent of adult Internet users, had used the Internet to publish their thoughts, respond to others, post pictures, share files, and otherwise contribute to the explosion of content available online (Lenhart, Fallows, & Horrigan, 2004). And in 2007, another Pew study showed that 64 percent of all teens who use the Internet could be considered "content creators" (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Today, in 2010, those numbers have no doubt increased significantly.

In early 2009, Technorati.com, one of many blog-tracking services, listed over 133 million blogs (short for Weblogs). Blogs are the first widely adopted easy publishing tool of the Read/Write Web, which people use to create personal journals of their lives, build resource sites with colleagues, or filter the news of the day for audiences large and small with no need to know how to code pages or transfer files. And there is no doubt that blogs have become an influential medium in all walks of life, from politics to personal passions. Today, we are beginning to create and share our thoughts and lives online as a natural part of our daily lives. The Read/Write Web has arrived.

And it's not just blogs. In the last few years, multimedia publishing by the masses has exploded. In early 2009, over 20 hours' worth of videos were being uploaded to YouTube.com each minute (that's right, I said minute), and YouTube.com is just one of dozens of popular video-publishing sites on the Web. Millions of photos, thousands of audio files, and countless other creations are now being added every day to the incredibly vast storehouse of information that the Web has become. As more people get more access to broadband connections and more powerful computers and even easier tools, this trend shows every sign of continuing to grow. We're in the midst of an explosion of technologies that will continue to remake the Web into the community-driven, participatory space Berners-Lee originally envisioned, changing our lives in many significant ways. These changes are already playing out in politics, journalism, and business. And from an educational standpoint, this new Read/Write Web promises to transform much of how we teach and learn as well.

For most, however, even now, over a decade into the Read/Write Web, the significance of these changes is still just starting to be realized. We are no

longer limited to being independent readers or consumers of information; as we'll see, we can also be collaborators in the creation of large storehouses of information. In the process, we can learn much about our world and ourselves. In almost every area of life, the Read/Write Web is changing our relationship to technology and rewriting the age-old paradigms of how things work. No doubt, these changes will take many more years to process. In fact, what author Dan Gillmor wrote a few years ago still holds true today: "The people who'll understand this best are probably just being born" (Gillmor, 2005).

EXTRAORDINARY CHANGES

Clay Shirky, the author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, writes that these new Web technologies are creating a "tectonic shift" in the world, not simply because of what they allow us to publish, but because of what happens after we publish. Simply put, when we share online, we create the potential for connections in ways that were simply not possible even a few years ago. And in the context of those connections, we can form groups around our various passions and interests, a capability that fundamentally changes almost everything.

> Anything that changes the way groups get things done will affect society as a whole. . . . For any given organization, the important questions are "When will the change happen?" and "What will change?" The only two answers we can rule out are never, and nothing. The ways in which any given institution will find its situation transformed will vary, but the various local changes are manifestations of a single deep source: newly capable groups are assembling, and they are working without the managerial imperative and outside the previous strictures that bounded their effectiveness. These changes will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together to accomplish something, which is to say everywhere. (Shirky, 2008, p. 3)

No question, the Read/Write Web holds transformational changes in store for teachers and students of all stripes. We will not be immune to these shifts. But, as is often the case, education has been slow to adapt to these new tools and potentials. In other areas of our lives, however, we can see some of these transformations happening right now, right in front of our eyes.

Take politics, for example. No question that one of the main reasons for the success of the Obama campaign in 2008 was its understanding of the potentials inherent in the group-forming ability we now have. On his MyBarackObama.com site, supporters formed over 27,000 groups, everything

from "Bartenders for Barack" (21 members) to "Ravelry Knitters for Obama" (343 members), and within those groups they raised money, held rallies, and got out the vote. Both his MySpace and Facebook pages had over 1 million "friends" and President Obama's Twitter feed currently has over 1.7 million followers. (We'll go over Twitter in detail in Chapter 6.) There is no debate any longer that politicians who aren't taking advantage of the connective tissue of these technologies are putting themselves at risk of irrelevance.

The ability to easily publish text, pictures, and video is also changing the face of journalism and media as we know it. There is no better example than the coverage of last year's uprising in Iran after the contested elections in June. Despite the best attempts of the government to crack down on traditional reporters in terms of getting news out of the country, tens of thousands of Iranian citizen journalists armed with cell phone and computers captured the attention of the world with their nonstop photos, videos, blog posts, and Tweets. While long-standing media outlets like the *New York Times* and National Public Radio did their best to filter, edit, and synthesize all of the information coming out of the protests, those of us interested in learning more could access the raw accounts on YouTube.com or on Flickr.com (a photo-sharing site), much of it being distributed through channels that didn't even exist a year or two ago. And, as with the heartbreaking Indian Ocean earthquake and resulting tsunami in 2004, and the horrible devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, one of the best places to get the latest information about what was occurring in Iran was at Wikipedia. In the first week of protests, the article on the "2009 Iranian Election Protests" was updated almost 2,000 times by hundreds of contributors who left over 145 citations at the bottom of the page. In essence, it became a clearinghouse of information based on the work of amateur researchers who published facts and photos and links as they found them. We're seeing a new model of journalism evolving right in front of us, one that is much more immediate and much more complex in terms of who to trust and what to believe. And that new model has been repeated over and over as big news stories hit on national or local levels.

In reality, the Read/Write Web has created millions of amateur reporters who now have their own digital printing presses. It's also created millions of amateur editors who are, in blogging parlance, ready to "fact-check your a**" whenever a major story breaks. And today, even the newspapers themselves are inviting their readers to participate, understanding what former reporter turned blogger Dan Gillmor knew early on: "If my readers know more than I do (which I know they do), I can include them in the process of making my journalism better" (as cited in Koman, 2005). In 2007, *USA TODAY* was among the first to make it possible for readers to comment on any story—adding opinions, asking further questions, or even correcting what

was written—and most other online newspapers have since followed suit. In essence, every article is a blog post. By including people in the process, this new Web creates all sorts of opportunities for participatory journalism, which, of course, creates all sorts of new definitions and descriptions of just what journalism is. Traditional media outlets such as *The Washington Post,* the BBC, and others, are scrambling to respond to this trend, creating interactive spaces for readers, buying on-the-spot news photos from people with camera phones, and running amateur video of news events. These are huge, transformative shifts to a model that has lasted for hundreds of years, and these changes show no signs of slowing.

More recently, businesses have begun exploring the use of Weblogs, wikis, and even Twitter for a variety purposes, from public relations to customer service to internal communications. When Microsoft began offering up Weblog space to some of its developers a few years ago, potential customers had an opportunity not only to read about the inner workings of the company, but they also had a chance to respond and participate. And IBM, one of the most successful companies in history, is transforming the way it connects and communicates. As of mid-2007, IBM was running over 20,000 internal wiki sites, 26,000 blogs, and over 400,000 of its full- and part-time employees were participating in "Blue Pages," IBM's own MySpace-type social networking system. This new transparency and opening up is now an expectation, especially in a world where users of particular products can connect and communicate their experiences with one another. In this world, we create our own advertisements, and businesses have to play by some very different rules. Now, hundreds of corporations including GM, Coca-Cola, Sun Microsystems, and Apple have blogs and wikis, and many CEOs are beginning to catch on to blogging as well.

No matter how you look at it, we are creating what author Douglas Rushkoff calls a "society of authorship" where every teacher and every student—every person with access—will have the ability to contribute ideas and experiences to the larger body of knowledge that is the Internet. And in doing so, Rushkoff says, we will be writing the human story, in real time, together—a vision that asks each of us to participate (Rushkoff, 2004).

In addition, this new Web is forcing us to reexamine many of the basic ways in which we live our lives. These technologies make more of our lives transparent to others in ways that many find unsettling. There is also a growing gap between how this digital generation defines privacy and the way most adults do. To our kids, making their lives come alive online is a part of the way they live. Communicating and collaborating with peers using instant or text messaging, Twitter or their MySpace, accounts allows them to be "always on" and always connected. That is their expectation, one that has changed greatly in just the past ten years. And the reality is that we are not

going to get any less plugged in or any less open in terms of how we live our lives. These shifts will only become more acute.

THE READ/WRITE WEB IN EDUCATION

For all these reasons and more, I think this is a hugely challenging time to be an educator. The world is changing around us, yet as a system, we have been very, very slow to react. Our students' realities in terms of the way they communicate and learn are very different from our own. By and large, they are "out there" using a wide variety of technologies that they are told they can't use when they come to school. They are building vast social networks with little or no guidance from adults. They are using much more complex and flexible digital information with hardly any instruction on how it differs from the paper world.

In the four years since the first printing of this book, tens of thousands of teachers and students have begun using some of these tools, but the vast majority of educators still have little or no context for these shifts. And, more importantly, very few people, educators or otherwise, have yet to experience the transformative potential of these new tools in terms of their own personal learning. Without question, our ability to easily publish content online and to connect to vast networks of passionate learners will force us to rethink the way we communicate with our constituents, the way we deliver our curriculum, and the expectations we have of our students. The Web also has the potential to radically change what we assume about teaching and learning, and it presents us with important questions to consider: What needs to change about our curriculum when our students have the ability to reach audiences far beyond our classroom walls? What changes must we make in our teaching as it becomes easier to bring primary sources to our students? How do we need to rethink our ideas of literacy when we must prepare our students to become not only readers and writers, but editors and collaborators and publishers as well? And, I think most importantly, how can we as learners begin to take advantage of the opportunities these tools present, so we may understand more clearly the pedagogies used in the classroom? At its heart, the implications of this new Web are all about learning first, teaching second.

On first blush, these new technologies may not seem well suited to a climate of standardized test scores and government accountability. Some see the constructionist, collaborative pedagogy of Weblogs, wikis, digital photo and video, and others as presenting a risk instead of a solution for a system whose students continue to struggle to stay apace of their international peers. In reality, however, these tools have considerable relevance to state and local core content curriculum standards, and there is much reason to believe their

implementation in schools will better prepare students for a slew of new literacies and competencies in their post-education lives.

SOCIAL LEARNING

Today's schools are faced with a difficult dilemma that pits a student body that has grown up immersed in technology against a teaching faculty that is less agile with the tools of the trade. The National Technology Plan released in January 2005 went so far as to admit that "today's students, of almost any age, are far ahead of their teachers in computer literacy. They prefer to access subject information on the Internet, where it is more abundant, more accessible, and more up-to-date" (National Educational Technology Plan, 2005). And a survey in 2008 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project estimated that over 65 percent of adolescents had a MySpace or a Facebook account, a number that far outpaces the use of such sites by educators. And even the youngest in our midst—kids in second, third, and fourth grade—are migrating to sites like Club Penguin and Webkinz, social networking sites with training wheels. There is no question that more and more of today's kids are entering our classrooms having had years of "screen time" and that in general, while they still may have a lot to learn about living in the digital world, they are by and large fearless in their use of technology.

Take, for example, 13-year-old Matthew Bischoff, who in 2004 became a "podcasting" sensation by creating "Escape From the World," a regular digital broadcast of technology-related news that he produced and posted to the Web from his bedroom (www.matthewbischoff.com). Or 18-year-old Sam Jackson, whose blog chronicling his college admissions process became a highly visited resource for thousands of high schoolers (www.samjackson.org/college). Or my 12-year-old daughter Tess, whose "Weather Recipes" book, which we scanned and uploaded to Flickr.com when she was eight, has been viewed almost 3,400 times as of this writing (only 50 or so by me, I swear: tinyurl.com/2nfw64/). All around us, kids are creating content in ways that most adults haven't yet tried.

Results of a Netday survey released in March 2005 assert that technology has become "an indispensable tool in the education of today's students." The survey showed that 81 percent of students in Grades 7–12 have e-mail accounts, 75 percent have at least one Instant Messenger (IM) screen name, and that 97 percent believe strongly that technology use is important in education. And, the fastest-growing age group for using the Internet is 2 to 5 year olds (NetDay News, 2005). According to author and technologist Marc Prensky, "this online life is a whole lot bigger than just the Internet. This online life has become an entire strategy for how to live, survive, and thrive in the twenty-first century where cyberspace is a part of everyday life" (Prensky, 2004).

This immersion in technology has neurological effects as well. William D. Winn, director of the Learning Center at the University of Washington, believes that years of computer use results in children who "think differently from us. They develop hypertext minds. They leap around. It's as though their cognitive structures were parallel, not sequential" (Prensky, 2001a). In other words, today's students may not be well suited to the more linear progression of learning that most educational systems employ. Most teachers in today's schools, meanwhile, were not surrounded by technology growing up. And the speed with which these technologies have been developed (remember, the Web browser is only 15 years old) means that it's a daunting task for many to catch up to their students.

The bad news is that the Read/Write Web threatens to make these differences between teachers and learners even more acute. Whereas students are open to the ways of new technologies, schools by and large are not. Howard Rheingold, author of *Smart Mobs,* says "The kind of questioning, collaborative, active, lateral rather than hierarchical pedagogy that participatory media both forces and enables is not the kind of change that takes place quickly or at all in public schools" (Rheingold, 2007, p. 2). All of this paints the picture of an educational system that is out of touch with the way its students learn.

The good news, however, is that the tools discussed in this book have just as much chance of closing this gap as widening it. The reason is because by their very nature, they are relatively easy for anyone to employ in the classroom. The sudden explosion in online content creation could not occur if technological barriers to entry were high, and these barriers will continue to come down as the tools themselves continue to evolve. Even more important is that most of the tools of the Read/Write Web are free and will most likely stay that way as open-source software alternatives continue to grow. That doesn't mean that it won't be work for many teachers to get up to speed with these new tools and teaching methods. But on the whole, we can be optimistic that once the potential of the Read/Write Web finds its way into schools, students and teachers will be launched on a path of discovery and learning like they have never experienced before.

LEARNERS AS TEACHERS

As you read this book, I have one request: Before you attempt to bring these technologies to your students, first be selfish about their use in your own learning practice. While there is no doubt my classes were in many ways profoundly changed by blogs ,wikis, and the like, the bigger truth is that the transformation in my own personal learning practice is what informed my work with students. It wasn't until I fully understood how these technologies could facilitate global connections and conversations around my own passions, and

how they could help me create powerful learning networks and communities, that I was able to see what needed to change in terms of my curriculum and my teaching.

Learning in this environment is about being able to construct, develop, sustain, and participate in global networks that render time and place less and less relevant. In fact, in a world where our students will hold between 12 and 14 jobs by the time they reach 38 years old, it's imperative we develop in them a kind of network literacy to guide them in this process.

That doesn't mean that every teacher needs to start a blog or create a wiki or a podcast. But it does mean that, as educators, we must tap into the potentials that these tools give us for learning. And that doesn't just mean learning about our craft or technology or our curriculum. It means learning about whatever we are passionate about. For me, that's figuring out how these shifts and how these tools change the nature of learning and what that implies for education. But it also means learning more about the Chicago Cubs, photography, and many other topics that hold my interest. For you, it can mean a whole array of different things.

The common thread, I believe, is that we make these connections in our own practice first so we can thoroughly understand the pedagogical implications for the classroom. Since the first edition of this book went to press in 2006, tens of thousands of teachers and students have begun to implement these technologies. But the reality is that the vast majority of educators have taken the work they had students do in the paper, analog world and simply digitized it. And I think that's because they haven't experienced the connections that come after the work is published and shared. Giving students a chance to share their work with a global audience is an important first step, but there is much more to it. It's the conversations, the links, and the networks that grow from them afterward that really show us the profound implications for lifelong learning.

So, as you read and consider these tools, I would urge you to ask yourselves the following questions:

- What are your passions?
- Who are your teachers? Are they all in physical space?
- How are you building your own learning networks using these tools?
- In this new environment, how are you modeling your learning for your students?

THE TOOLBOX

Just what are the technologies that are changing the way we teach and learn? It seems the number grows each day, but the teacher's toolbox that will be

covered in this book is made up of a mix of those that publish, those that manage information, and those that share content in new collaborative ways. This toolbox contains the following items:

1. *Weblogs.* Thousands of teachers and students have already incorporated Weblogs into their classrooms and into their practice. Blogs, as they are known, are easily created, easily updateable Web sites that allow an author (or authors) to publish instantly to the Internet from any Internet connection. They can also be interactive, allowing teachers and students to begin conversations or add to the information published there. Weblogs are the most widely adopted tool of the Read/Write Web so far.

2. *Wikis.* A wiki is a collaborative Web space where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published. In schools, teachers and students have begun using password-protected wikis to create their own textbooks and resource sites.

3. *Really Simple Syndication (RSS).* RSS is a technology that allows educators to subscribe to "feeds" of the content that is created on the Internet, whether it's written in a Weblog or in a more traditional space such as a newspaper or magazine. In other words, just as in traditional models of syndication, content comes to the reader instead of the reader retrieving the content. From a research and information management standpoint, RSS may be the new "killer app" (extremely useful application) for education.

4. *Aggregators.* An aggregator collects and organizes the content generated via the RSS feed.

5. *Social Bookmarking.* Bookmarking sites allow users to do more than just save the Web addresses of interesting content. They allow readers to save and archive entire pages, thus producing a form of a searchable, "personal Internet." In addition, social bookmarking sites like Diigo.com and Delicious.com allow teachers and students to build subject-specific resource lists that they can easily share when using RSS. This in turn creates a community of information gatherers who extend the reach of any one person.

6. *Online Photo Galleries.* Publishing digital photos to the Web not only means sharing pictures with family and friends, it means becoming a part of a community of photographers sharing ideas and experiences. And, as we'll see, it means adding another dimension to what teachers and students can do with digital images in the classroom.

7. *Audio/Video Casting.* New technologies make it easy to not only produce digital voice and video files, they also make it easy to publish and distribute them to wide Internet audiences. Students can now easily "write" in many different media, a fact that opens up all sorts of possibilities for the classroom. They can also begin to create live streaming TV online.

8. *Twitter.* While Twitter has become all the rage for movie stars and millions of ordinary folks, it has also quietly become one of the most powerful tools for connecting and sharing the great content and professional development opportunities that are available to educators today.

9. *Social Networking Sites.* More and more schools are beginning to use out-of-the-box social networking sites like Ning.com and, dare I say it, Facebook, to help teach their students the network literacies that are required to navigate these new connections.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it is a relevant sampling of the types of tools being developed and the nature of their impact.

In and of itself, the "old" read-only Web was a transformative technology. It changed the way we work, the way we learn, and the way we communicate. I would argue that historians might look back on the first ten years of the Web the same way we look back on the early days of the printing press, the steam engine, or the automobile. The Web has changed our lives.

This "new" Read/Write Web will change it even more. As the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, Carly Fiorina, said, the past 25 years in technology have been "the warm-up act." What we're entering is the "main event, and by main event I mean an era in which technology will truly transform every aspect of business, of government, of society, of life" (as cited in Friedman, 2005, p. 216). And, I would add, education.

This book will focus on the ways these technologies can help educators take full advantage of the potentials for personal learning with the new Web and show ways in which teachers can effectively bring these technologies to their students to enhance their learning and better prepare them for their post-education worlds. Throughout, we will discuss the pedagogies and literacies that surround successful implementation of the tools in the classroom.

KEEPING STUDENTS SAFE

Before launching headfirst into a discussion of the tools, it's important to take some time to talk about keeping our students safe on the Read/Write

Web. Obviously, this is about more than not publishing children's names and pictures on the Internet or permitting students to access obscene content online—acts that federal and state laws already regulate. Safety is now about responsibility, appropriateness, and common sense as well. If we ask our students to publish, even if we know they are publishing outside of the classroom (which they are), it's our obligation to teach them what is acceptable and safe and what isn't.

Like just about everything else in life, using the Web carries with it some risks. But again, like most other things, those risks can be greatly reduced by having the appropriate information in hand and by planning. Although cases of Internet predators are usually widely reported and are heart wrenching in nature, the actual numbers of Web-related abductions or seductions are very small. (See tinyurl.com/7fc819 for example.) That should not in any way minimize, however, our efforts to provide students with the knowledge they need to keep themselves safe.

Let's start with simply interacting with the Web. We all know that there is an overwhelming amount of inappropriate content on the Internet, be it pornography, bad language, or just bad taste. Schools and libraries are required by the Child Internet Protection Act (CIPA) to filter content that is accessible via the Internet. In addition, CIPA requires that schools monitor the online activities of minors and have a policy in place that addresses the "safety and security" of minors when online (FCC Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau, 2003). But as much as we may try to stop all forms of inappropriate content from being accessible from school, the reality is that some is not filtered.

It's not hard to imagine that along with more people being able to create and publish content to the Web will come more inappropriate content. Internet filters will become increasingly hard pressed to restrict such content. For example, there are thousands of obscure Weblogs that publish questionable content that falls outside the scope of the major filtering programs. I know—I've had the misfortune of running across some of them in my travels, and my students did as well. To deal with this, schools are faced with a couple of options. First, districts can choose to block some of the large Weblog hosting sites like Blogspot.com, Xanga.com, or MySpace.com. This eliminates millions of sites from student access and blocks not only the questionable sites but the large majority of perfectly appropriate sites that might be relevant to learning. I know of many bloggers, for instance, who write inspiringly and educationally about their work and their areas of expertise on their blogspot.com sites, sites that some schools have chosen to block.

The other alternative, of course, is to teach students the skills they need to navigate the darker sides of the Web safely and effectively. I remember back in the days before CIPA when our classroom access to the Web was

unfiltered. My students and I spent a good deal of time talking about how responsible use meant not just refraining from actively seeking out these inappropriate sites, but also reacting appropriately when they were happened upon. I'll never forget the day I was sitting in between two students as they were working on the Web when suddenly one of them let out an audible gasp. He had been researching tattoos, and when I turned to see what was on his screen, I gasped almost as loudly. (Use your imagination.) But my student reacted the way he should have; he quickly hit the back button on the browser and without making a big deal about it went about his work. Later, as a class, we talked about the incident and reinforced the proper reaction the student had. My students knew that they could not be kept totally safe from the ne'er-do-wells of the world, but they also knew they had a choice as to how they responded when faced with such a situation.

Teachers working with younger children obviously have more to be concerned about, and I would urge a great deal of planning and testing before going online. Create your own Web tours beforehand and limit the amount of freedom students have to surf. But even in the early grades, teaching appropriate use is critical. Kids are coming to the Web earlier and earlier, and it's obviously very important that we prepare them for life online. And we should take every opportunity to model appropriate use in our own practice, even with the youngest kids. They need to see us using the Web and leveraging the information there for our own learning, even if they are too young to fully understand the potential for themselves.

From a content-creation and publishing standpoint, there are other issues to deal with. The first, of course, is protecting the privacy of students. Let's start with personal information. Most states now have laws that require parents to decide how much personal information about their children may be published on the school Web site. Parents in my state, New Jersey, may opt to allow photos, full names, and even addresses to be published to the site. So, the first step for any teacher thinking about having students publish online is to make sure to get parental approval. The best way to do this is to send a letter home to parents clearly explaining your plans and asking permission for students to participate. That letter should include a description of the technology, how it will be used, what security measures have been put in place, what your expectations are for your students, and what the curricular goals are for its use. (See the example of a letter dealing with the use of blogs at the end of this chapter.) It would also be well advised to discuss your use of blogs with supervisors and administrators as well.

From a student standpoint, teachers have to be ready to discuss what should and should not be published online. Obviously, students should never reveal information about where they live, where they work, and anything

else that might identify them to potential predators. This, in fact, is one of the biggest issues with personal journal sites like MySpace and Facebook. Many adolescents who use these sites include full names, addresses, and provocative pictures of themselves—behavior that can only increase their chances of getting into trouble. In addition, students need to know that any content they create online will become a part of their Web portfolio. They need to ask themselves, "What if someone finds this piece five or ten years from now?"

One of the most difficult roads to navigate in the world of the Read/ Write Web is how to balance the safety of the child with the benefits that come with students taking ownership of the work they publish online. First, we need to decide who the audience is. Is it just a small peer group? The whole class? The entire Internet? As we'll see, there are ways to set the size and shape of the intended audience for what our students create. Then, we need to think about how clearly to identify who the student is. Complete anonymity is the safest route when publishing, no doubt, but it detracts from the personal achievement and ownership that a student feels in publishing her work. Using a full name can help in that regard, but it adds a layer of risk to the process. On the K–12 level at least, most teachers take the middle ground by having students use just first names when publishing. Some, however, do give the option of using a pseudonym for students who may have unique first names. Others opt for complete anonymity by assigning a number to each student to use. Either way, it's an important balance for teachers, students, and parents to negotiate.

Because most of these tools are collaborative and offer the potential to work with other students or mentors or primary sources outside of school, teachers need to think about ways to vet the people who are allowed into the process. With blogs, for instance, the ability for people to leave comments can be a very powerful and positive learning tool. If, however, there is unchecked access to commenting on a student site, it may open up the door to inappropriate or irrelevant feedback. Again, this is something my students and I would talk about. What happens if someone we don't know leaves a comment? What if the comment is distasteful? In my experience, the vast majority of instances in which outsiders commented on student work were positive. But teachers and districts need to find their own balance.

Today, despite the relative newness of these tools, thousands of teachers and students are using Weblogs, wikis, RSS, and the rest to enhance student learning in safe, productive, effective ways. No doubt, employing these tools is not as simple as exchanging paper in a closed classroom environment. But the learning opportunities that these tools offer makes it worth all of our whiles to create best practices in our own right.

SAMPLE BLOGGING LETTER FROM TINYURL.COM/636VH5

Dear Families:

From now to the end of the year, Ms. Tammy's class will be taking part in a pilot writing program designed to help them develop their writing and explore their interests by sharing their writing with a real audience. Students will be using personal Weblogs to post their writing to the Internet.

A Weblog, or blog as it is commonly called, is a special type of Web page that can be created and easily updated using a Web browser. Each new entry has its own date stamp. Each entry has a comments section where visitors to the blog may leave comments for the author.

How It Works

Each week Ms. Tammy will teach a writing lesson using the six-trait writing model. After the lesson, students will write an entry for their blog. They may choose the topic, but they need to make use of the skills taught in the lesson to help craft their writing. The emphasis is on the quality, not the quantity of what they write. When students are done polishing their writing, they have it reviewed by a teacher before it is published to the Web.

Students will have two extra computer sessions most weeks to provide them with the time needed to complete their weekly blogging assignment. Students may also work from home. All that is required is an Internet connection and a Web browser. Students are able to save their work as drafts before publishing it to their blog. Directions for working from home will be provided.

Having a real audience is one of the key components to this program. In addition to receiving comments from their classmates, Ms. Tammy's students will receive comments from other fourth- and fifth-grade classes who visit their blogs. We are arranging for students in other parts of the world to visit our blogs and comment on the writing. Parents are also invited to visit the blogs and respond to the writing. Potentially, anyone on the Internet could respond to our blogs, however, it is not likely that the world at large will stumble across them.

Security

This blogging project is designed to minimize risk to your child. The only personally identifying information included in the blog will be their first name. There will be no mention of our school name or our location. Students are allowed to post their interests and opinions, but not their age, e-mail address, photographs of themselves, or other sensitive information.

Assessment

The weekly blog assignments will be part of your child's language arts grade this term. As with other projects they have completed this year, students will receive a scoring rubric that explains the expectations for these assignments. The rubric will include a section for the comments they leave in other students' blogs.

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Resources

- Blogs created by fifth-grade students in the USA (tinyurl.com/31v436)
- BBC News article about blogging in a school in the UK (tinyurl.com/35g9q)

Permission

Before your child may start posting to their blog, we are asking for you and your child to discuss and sign the following form. Please return the form to Ms. Tammy.

Blogging Terms and Conditions

1. Students using blogs are expected to act safely by keeping personal information out of their posts. You agree not to post or give out your family name, password, username, e-mail address, home address, school name, city, country, or other information that could help someone locate or contact you in person. You may share your interests, ideas, and preferences.

2. Students using blogs agree not to share their username or password with anyone besides their teachers and parents. You agree to never log in as another student.

3. Students using blogs are expected to treat blog spaces as classroom spaces. Speech that is inappropriate for class is not appropriate for your blog. While we encourage you to engage in debate and conversation with other bloggers, we also expect that you will conduct yourself in a manner reflective of a representative of this school.

4. Student blogs are to be a forum for student expression. However, they are first and foremost a tool for learning, and as such will sometimes be constrained by the various requirements and rules of classroom teachers. Students are welcome to post on any school-appropriate subject.

5. Students blogs are to be a vehicle for sharing student writing with real audiences. Most visitors to your blog who leave comments will leave respectful, helpful messages. If you receive a comment that makes you feel uncomfortable or is not respectful, tell your teacher right away. Do not respond to the comment.

6. Students using blogs take good care of the computers by not downloading or installing any software without permission, and not clicking on ads or competitions.

7. Students who do not abide by these terms and conditions may lose their opportunity to take part in this project.

I have read and understood these blogging terms and conditions. I agree to uphold them.

Student's signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent's signature: _____ Date: _____

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