

On your mark, get set, blog!

Introduction

This brief guide to blogging complements the article 'Teaching and learning with blogs', which is available online at <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/resources/weblogs/bloggingarticle0904.pdf> and further explores the possibilities of the 'blogosphere'.

What is a blog?

A blog is typically a website published by a single author where the content is organised in 'posts', entries that are arranged in reverse chronological order (most recent at the top). Posts can be categorised, archived, and commented on by visitors. Comments often link back to visitors' own websites or blogs, thus allowing dialogue and online communities to develop. Some blogs incorporate linked headlines from other sites, or provide their own list of linked headlines for publishing elsewhere (see [Blogs and RSS](#), below).

According to Rebecca Blood, author of 'The Weblog Handbook', there are three categories of blogs:

- 1) Blogs - resemble short form journals (often of a personal nature)
- 2) Notebooks - longer pieces of writing with focused content or opinions - can look like short essays
- 3) Filters - filter editors tend to gather links or snippets from other blogs or websites - like a newsletter - can still have opinion pieces.

The beauty of blogs is that they package a number of Internet communications technologies (ICTs), so bloggers can exploit these by using simple templates that require no user knowledge of HTML or javascript. There is also a range of free blogging software and online services – for example, [blogger.com](#), [TypePad](#), and [WordPress](#).

Potential uses for blogs in teaching and learning

Blogs can be used by teachers, students and VET staff in a variety of ways. An evolving list includes:

- Learning journals (for example, to encourage students to reflect on their learning).
- An interaction tool for online learning.
- A platform for collaborative writing and planning.
- Folios for published student work and projects.
- Class discussion (for example, photoblogs for literacy discussions).
- Progress reports providing for feedback and guidance.
- Journals of professional practice.
- The creation of communities of practice, including through dialogue between blogs.
- Support for teachers (for example, teachers using technology for flexible learning).
- Organisational feedback (for example, staff feedback on strategic direction).

Starting your own blog

There are a few issues to consider before you start your own blog:

1. Why do you want to start a blog? Is it the most effective way of meeting your teaching or learning goal?
2. Do you want to use an online blogging service, or software that you download? Online blogging and hosting services such as blogger.com and TypePad can be a good introduction before you move onto more sophisticated blogging applications such as Movable Type and WordPress. Consider the features that are most important and see how the various options weigh up. Some services and software offer additional features at a cost.
3. If you decide to use blogging software, make sure that the Internet Service Provider (ISP) hosting your blog meets the software requirements. WordPress, for example, provides a standard message you can e-mail to your ISP to check off the necessary requirements. Most ISPs will comply, but you might need to switch if yours doesn't.
4. Who will have access to your blog? Do you want all comers, or to limit access to a small community? While dialogue is very much in the spirit of blogs, limiting access might be as simple as limiting whom you tell the URL.

Blogs and RSS – syndicate your snippets!

'RSS' stands for Really Simple Syndication. That means you can take and publish syndicated material from other sites on your own blog (with permission), or provide your material to be syndicated to other blogs.

In both cases, the syndicated content, provided in an RSS file, is found via a little orange 'RSS' button. This file contains headlines and brief text with links back to its original source.

The theory is that, by incorporating RSS 'feeds' on your own site, you can gather and publish linked snippets of information relevant to your blog, drawing more visitors interested in that content. On the other hand, if your snippets are syndicated, you're likely to get more traffic coming to your site as people follow the snippets back to their original source – you! Online blogging services and software have features enabling these uses of RSS, making it easy to use syndicated material or to provide it.

You don't need a blog to benefit from RSS. By using a free newsreader such as Feedreader, or online services such as bloglines or rocketinfo, you can collect, or 'aggregate', all the feeds that interest you into a single window on your computer, thereby greatly simplifying your browsing by reducing the number of sites you actually need to visit. If you like the news item, you simply click the link back to the source. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework website <http://flexiblelearning.net.au> has a [page](#) explaining RSS and currently has two feeds covering news and case studies, it is located at <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/rss.htm>.

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References

This guide is based on and draws material from the following references, and on interviews and discussions with [Anne Bartlett-Bragg](#), [Michael Chalk](#), [Peter Heilbuth](#), and [Glenda McPherson](#).

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This guide can be found online at: <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/bloginggguide0904.pdf>

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An initiative within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2000-2004

Managed by the Flexible Learning Advisory Group on behalf of the Commonwealth, all States and Territories in conjunction with ANTA

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