

# Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

## Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

### Teaching and learning with blogs

To keep pace with change in flexible learning, teachers need to assess on the run just how new technologies fit in with the broader picture. Partly by simplifying and packaging Internet communications technologies (ICTs), blogs, or “weblogs” reduce the complexity of this task and offer a tool that can be used flexibly in a variety of teaching and learning contexts.

So what are the basic features of the blog that make it more than just another (relatively) new technology? For a start, all blogs are websites. The “log” in blog refers to the dated entries that characterise the more than 3,000,000 weblogs now on the World Wide Web.

Typically published by a single author, a blog offers an individual perspective via the author’s “posts” on topics that can range from personal diary to political opinion. Within the blog, these are published in reverse chronological order – most recent at the top – and are often followed by links to comments by visitors. You might already be seeing some potential applications, but more of that later.

To help organise the information they contain, blogs also offer the increasingly powerful facility to categorise posts and comments and to link to other blogs. Over time, these features allow the collaborative development of a permanent learning resource.

### Surfing on the spot: bringing information together through RSS

In addition, blogs can be used to draw together content from a range of sites in the form of headlines through a facility known as RSS or “Really Simple Syndication”. An example is the increasing number of online news services that offer “feeds” that can be easily incorporated as summary text and links on another site, such as a blog. The blog might “take feeds” from a number of relevant sites, bringing together a rich offering of information on a particular topic.

In addition, the blog can also offer its own feed that can be used on other blogs, or which can be read in a news aggregator, a web service or software which gathers headlines together in a kind of highlights package within a single window, saving visitors from visiting multiple sites unless they wish to pursue an item of special interest. Two free online examples are [bloglines.com](http://bloglines.com) and [rocketinfo.com](http://rocketinfo.com).

### Not so simple? Read on!

This might sound frighteningly complex until it is revealed that the benefits of blogs can be achieved via templates and without the need to be a technology guru or even to know a single line of HTML or javascript.

Blogs can now be created either by (often free) online hosted services such as [blogger.com](http://blogger.com), or by easy-to-use (and again, often free) software such as [WordPress](http://WordPress), [Movable Type](http://Movable Type) or [TypePad](http://TypePad). Both ways of creating a blog offer a simple interface to publish your posts, allow comments, archive them, and to develop a range of other features, such as offering your own RSS feed.

### And so to teaching and learning

We now emerge from the technological underbelly to explore how all of this might relate to teaching and learning. So what are some of the uses for blogs emerging in flexible learning?

In the articles and interviews that have contributed to this feature (see [References](#)), just some of the potential uses of blogs include as [learning journals](#); field notes and journals of professional

practice; reports on progress that provide for feedback and guidance; publishing tools for student writing, research, projects, portfolios and (in some cases) assessment; [photoblogs for class literacy discussions](#); [organisational feedback](#); and [support](#) for teachers using flexible learning technologies.

[Anne Bartlett-Bragg](#) from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) says that blogs create a network of dialogue within learning communities that doesn't depend on the infrastructure and facilities normally associated with online discussion forums and bulletin boards. There are many blog-hosting services, and the facility for posts and comments is incorporated within the blogging system itself.

## Learning journals

According to Anne, the use of blogs as student learning journals deepens the learning experience through reflection and dialogue. This has been a key outcome of the last two and a half years, during which Anne has been using blogs in four e-learning subjects she teaches as part of the Bachelor of Arts in Organisational Development at UTS.

When Anne became intrigued by blogs – she is now undertaking a [PhD](#) on the subject – she saw them as an opportunity to “try something new with her students”. She says the students “thrived on ownership”, attributing the appeal of blogs in part to the publishing concept evoked by the titles of the blogging applications themselves – [Movable Type](#) for example.

In her Knowledge Tree article, [“Blogging to Learn”](#), Anne describes the five stages through which students establish their use of the technology, publish introspections on the subject they are studying, begin to reflect on their study in monologues, move to reflective dialogue with others, and finally create a “knowledge artefact” of their learning experiences.

More simply, there was a progression in the students' use of the blogs to reflect on their learning, which Anne says led them to say things they would never say in class, make broader connections – including to each other's blogs – and finally begin referencing their blogs in written assignments. The result was a movement from surface to deep learning, says Anne, noting that: “They created dialogue that would not otherwise have occurred”.

She says the “asynchronous” character of blogs contributed to this dialogue by encouraging reflection, in contrast with “synchronous” communications technologies such as live chat, which Anne has found ineffective in this regard because they allow little time for thought.

In her teaching, the blogs are not used for assessment; instead, they complement what happens in the classroom and inform the students' assessment tasks. Anne says that assessing the blogs, at least in her subjects, might undermine the purpose of blogging, though she suggests that assessment might be appropriate in journalism programs, for example.

Anne concludes that blogs “have huge potential for learning”, and that she can see how they might be used across other subjects in the Faculty of Education to encourage more reflective and deeper learning.

## Classroom blogging for literacy learning

[Michael Chalk](#), a Flexible Learning Leader in 2003, is the author of a Knowledge Tree article on [RSS blogging](#). He describes the blogging experience as like “dipping into a conversation”. It's a “latest entry approach” in which a once limited search capacity is starting to improve through the ability to categorise posts and comments under topics – making it easier to find information beyond that contained in the latest posts.

Michael agrees that part of the appeal of blogs lies in their packaging of ICT technologies, but contrasts the facility of posts and comments with threaded discussion boards. Where these provide a communal space in which people tailor their language for fear of violating etiquette, blogs provide a more personal space for the author/editor to express his or her opinions more strongly, he says.

He believes blogs have tremendous potential at the level of the classroom. For example, in the context of literacy learning, a photoblog could form the basis of sharing comments on pictures taken on an excursion. Here Michael says it needs to be considered whether the blog might restrict the ability of learners to discuss the pictures with their families at home, where they might not have access. Of course, as he notes, the blog discussion could be supported by printing the photos for discussion offline.

A central feature of blogs for Michael is their capacity for feedback. When asked how he sees this contributing to dialogue in teaching and learning, he points to the interaction between bloggers and the capacity to link back to your own site when you make a comment. "You can pick up an issue and move quite rapidly," he says.

## **Generating staff discussion through blogging**

[Peter Heilbuth](#), A Flexible Learning Leader in 2002, has used blogs to generate discussion among the staff at the 17 campuses of East Gippsland Institute of TAFE (EGIT). "If you want to hold meetings, it's a four-hour drive for staff in Mallacoota, so blogs were a good alternative," Peter says.

In 2003, the Institute used a blog developed for the intranet to get feedback from staff on the Institute's strategic direction. "It was incredibly simple," Peter says. The editor posted questions and staff could post their responses or comment on those of colleagues, with the option of remaining anonymous. The result was about 60 responses, which Peter says they wouldn't have got through meetings alone.

The Institute now uses a blog developed along similar lines to support teachers in their use of technology for flexible learning as part of the eMentor program. Face-to-face support groups are augmented by the blog, which provides a repository of solutions for issues such as using USB memory keys, or burning DVDs.

## **Future developments**

As blogs achieve critical mass and a larger technological footprint within flexible learning, we should not ignore other developments that also encourage online collaboration. One example is the WikiWikiWeb, which, according to [wikipedia](#), refers to the Hawaiian for 'super-fast', the speed at which information can be published online using a Wiki engine.

Wikis are typically websites in which individual pages can be created and edited by users via a web browser and, like blogs, this can be done without knowledge of HTML. Of the reported 1000 public Wiki communities now online, some are completely open, while others offer varying access to write and edit their pages. The content is searchable in varying degrees, and standards are evolving. Nevertheless, Wikis present yet another potential application for online collaboration in flexible learning.

As Michael Chalk notes, Wikis offer a "really different structure" to blogs, one that is a bit more like "brainstorming", in which "the date of entries is not the driving force".

*This article can be found online at:*

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/resources/weblogs/bloggingarticle0904.pdf>

## **Quick guide available**

For practical tips on blogging, see our brief online guide.

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guide/bloggingguide0904.pdf>

## References

Along with the interviews, the following references were the main sources for this article, and themselves contain links to information and further resources.

Bartlett-Bragg, A 2003, *Bloggng to Learn*,

[http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition04/pdf/Bloggng\\_to\\_Learn.pdf](http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition04/pdf/Bloggng_to_Learn.pdf)

Chalk, M 2004, *RSS Bloggng and What it Means for Flexible Teaching and Learning*,

[http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition05/html/cr\\_i\\_chalk.html](http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition05/html/cr_i_chalk.html)

RMIT Learning Networks 2002, *Weblogs*

<http://nw2002.flexiblelearning.net.au/WebX?233@201.NbJka9AGaMf.203@.f0c1765!enclosure=.f0c2f44>

Australian Flexible Learning Framework, *The Knowledge Tree: An e-Journal of Flexible Learning in VET* <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/index.html>

## Resources

For more information about Wikis:

**Wikipedia**, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

**Wikiverse**, <http://www.wikiverse.org/>

Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2004, *On your mark, get set, blog!*

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/bloggngguide0904.pdf>

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