

HOW TO HAVE A SUCCESSFUL CLASSROOM BLOG IN 7 EASY STEPS

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Preface

Are you thinking about creating a blog for your classroom? Many teachers have successfully used this type of technology to connect students and encourage interaction. Before you get started it's important to understand a few basics so it is successful. If students are frustrated they will be less likely to welcome this teaching tool and your effort may be wasted.

This guide will walk you through seven easy steps to organizing and successfully implementing a classroom blog.

It is also essential that you check with your school administration to determine if there are any guidelines or acceptable use policies that need to be in place before you present the blog to your students. Most schools also require parental permission before students are allowed to post on unrestricted media sites.

Step 1: Organize the Blog by Topic

After you have the main components for the blog setup, be sure to organize the blog by topic. Blogs have an archive feature, but if you are planning on using it for an extended period of time you will want to create sections or categories so everyone can easily find desired content. This type of filing system can help everyone find the topic or information desired without having to look through all of the posts.

General Classroom Information

You probably walk through the general classroom information and schedule at the beginning of the school year. Create a blog section for this basic information so students and parents can quickly locate the information. Students will check back often to see what is upcoming and you can also post updates to the information.

Weekly Assignments

Create a post each week for the assignments. Include all the details you would include in a handout and post a link to any files and resources. Encourage students to post questions on the blog post as they come up.

Resources

Include a list of resources for your students and organize them by sub-topics, such as online databases, writing tips, research tips, etc. Post more resources as you find them and allow students to post links to helpful websites.

Fun Stuff

Including this section is important because sharing fun, non-class related material will help students connect and learn more about one another. This helps break down the walls that are built when students judge one another based on appearance. The blog can provide a way for students to see past the physical appearance and into the intellectual and actual self of their classmates. Keep the content clean and post to this section frequently.

Other Tips

These four sections are just to get you started. Look at other classroom blogs online and find examples that are similar to your topic. You don't need a new section for every possible topic; just include enough sections to keep the content organized. The more you use your blog, the more organized it will become and you will learn which sections and types of content work best for your classroom.

Step 2: Prepare the Blog

Get your blog off to a great start by completing all initial setup tasks, following school requirements, and posting content to all sections in your blog before you present it to your students. The more content you have, the easier it will be for students to see the purpose and become familiar with where content is located.

What to Post

- Post the curriculum and other important documents that students will need to reference often.
- Post homework assignments. This includes handouts, resources and questions that come up in class.
- Post any document that you would normally print. Stop printing handouts!

Test the Blog

After you setup the content, be sure to click through the blog and test all the links. If links are supposed to open in a new tab then double check that they are working properly. Make sure there are no dead links and that all pages that should be active are published. You will most likely have a few adjustments to make and it's best to wrap up all the small "to-do's" on the blog before you present it to students.

Step 3: Introduce the Blog to Students

Don't assume that students will know how to use a blog just because they can locate websites effectively online. There are always ground rules that should be discussed before letting your students take over the blog.

Ground Rules

- **Comments:** Show examples of how to properly comment on a post. Discuss the importance of remaining respectful and talk about content that is inappropriate. Everyone in the classroom should be respected and feel valued online.
- **Images:** Talk about how to find images and source them properly. Discuss images that should not be posted on the blog and how an image can add clarity and value to content.
- **Videos:** Walk through how to find videos to post, how to add links or embed them and how videos can be used to enhance your message.
- **Deadlines:** Discuss when required posts and comments are due and that you can see the exact time when a comment or post is published.
- **The blog is not Email:** Let your students know that if they have content that can be discussed in the classroom or an assignment to publish it needs to be posted on the blog. Personal matters

should not be posted on the blog, but discussed in person or through personal email.

- **Content is Public:** Even though a classroom blog is regarded as safe, the content is still public and school administrators will be reviewing all content posted. If a student is uncertain on whether a post is appropriate have him or her talk with you first.

This is not an exhaustive list and other basic rules will come up and should be discussed.

Create a blog tutorial

Don't try to hold your students hands as they learn how to use the blog. You may be surprised by how quickly the students adapt to the format and begin interacting. However, it may prove helpful to create a brief tutorial covering the basic instructions regarding navigation, how to post comments and posting material from other sources. This tutorial can and should be included among the documents and handouts you post to the blog at the beginning of the class. The tutorial can provide help for students who are struggling so they are not embarrassed by having to ask for help in front of the whole class. Tactfully use student mistakes as lessons for the classroom to learn from.

Step 4: Commit to the Blog

In order for your blog to be successful, you need to commit to keeping the blog going and posting regularly. If you aren't committed, then you can't expect your students to stay engaged and use the blog to its full potential.

Use the Blog the Entire School Year or Term

It's important to use the blog long-term. The longer you use it the easier it will become and the more content you will have to reference later. Get into a routine of when you will post, whether it is every day or once per week and determine when posts will be published. Consistency is key.

Post Content Daily

Plan on posting content every day. While this is not necessary, it does make the habit of posting easier and encourages students to check the blog for updates daily. Posting content becomes easier when you sit down and think about the type of content to post. Add updates to assignments, questions that arise in class, links to new resources, encouraging images and funny questions to keep the blog fresh.

Talk About the Blog in Class

Praise students who are using the blog properly and are engaged in discussions within the posts. Discuss blog comments and posts in class as a way to reinforce the importance of interacting and to show

that you are paying attention to what they are doing online. The more you mention the blog the more you build interest and remind them that it is an important learning tool.

Step 5: Recruit Commenters

You have set up the blog and introduced it to the class, but no one seems to be following directions! There are many reasons for this and students may feel that their only effort should be while they are in the classroom. Sometimes you need an outside perspective, so ask other teachers and older students who have gone through the class to post comments as guests.

Why This Works

If a student feels they have an audience, they will begin paying closer attention and putting forth more effort. Introduce who the guests will be and let the class know that these guests are interested in what they are saying.

Don't Require too Much Work of the Volunteers

If needed, schedule multiple volunteers who will rotate every few weeks or up to a month. There is no need to demand that a guest commenter post every day or have to commit for the entire school year. It's great if a volunteer has the time and wants to dedicate more effort, but don't assume everyone will want to.

Have the Guest Commenter Stop By

Invite the guest commenter to join the class on occasion and show your appreciation for their input. This will provide an example for students and show that even though they cannot see each other

online, what they say is important. The stronger connection the students can build with the guest commenter, the more effective it will be.

Invite Community Members to Get Involved

There are many people within any community who are willing to dedicate their time to help mold students. Encourage people to comment on certain sections and review the work of students. Community involvement with the classroom blog can also open opportunities for mentoring both online and in the real world. Discuss this approach with the school administration before you implement this plan.

Step 6: Encourage Interaction

In order for your blog to be successful you need to encourage interaction. Market the blog heavily in class and list the link and login instructions on all handouts at the beginning of the school year or term. Just mentioning the blog once will not give students the impression that it is a resource they need to depend on. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Require Students to Post

If you require students to post in order to receive credit, they will understand the importance and learn how to use the blog. Offer extra credit for students who complete additional steps in an assignment that is only posted online. Assign deadlines to posts and close the commenting feature after the deadline so students don't try to slide in. Losing credit once will show them you are serious.

Respond to Students through the Blog

Encourage students to ask questions and post them to the blog. Check the blog frequently so you don't miss content posted by students and respond to them through the blog. Chances are if one student has a question, others probably have the same question too. Students who may be hesitant to share in the classroom may find blog posts to be a safe place to ask their questions and even to demonstrate their ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Post Student Achievement on the Blog

When a student achieves a goal, grade or excels in an extracurricular activity, announce the achievement on the blog! This will help you build a relationship with each student and encourage others to want to excel too. The blog is a great learning tool, but can also be utilized to connect with students and show how proud you are of their success. Consider using the student achievement section of the blog as a place where students can post examples of their work and achievements. Older students may find this area of the blog a great place to display their portfolios and get feedback from their peers and community commenters.

Add a Calendar Widget

Create a calendar and keep it updated so students and parents (when applicable) can stay informed. Add other widgets as well to make the blog the go-to resource and increase its importance among students. Include events happening outside of the classroom, but don't try to include all events.

Step 7: Post Fresh Content

If the material on the blog is not updated frequently (as mentioned in step 4) students will lose interest and stop visiting it except when they need to post assignments. Keep their interest by keeping the information fresh and new.

Relate Posts To Discussions In The Classroom

Keep the blog relevant. Blog posts related to classroom discussions can enhance learning by providing a permanent copy of what was talked about in class. This allows students to review the information presented as needed and also provides a forum for discussion on class topics long after the school day has ended. Posts related to classroom discussions can greatly expand the amount of time you have to present the material to your students and the time they have to ask questions about it.

Post Encouraging Messages

Not every part of the blog needs to be directly related to classroom discussion. Set aside a section to post encouraging messages because a little encouragement can go a long way. Use the blog to congratulate students for work done well and to provide support when students are having difficulty with class material. Many students thrive with praise and posting encouragement can demonstrate that someone is listening to and watching out for them.

Post Clean Humour

Humour can be a great tool to engage students. The number of sources for humorous pictures and videos online is tremendous and people of all ages love to laugh. Funny posts go viral when shared through social media platforms. By incorporating humour, students will see that the class blog is not all business and that you do have a sense of humour. Humorous posts may also encourage students to check the blog frequently to see what you come up with next.

Encourage Students To Post Content From Other Resources

Encourage students to find and post content from other resources to the classroom blog. This allows students to develop a sense of what is and is not acceptable material to share. This freedom can teach trust, build confidence, and encourage students to look for new ideas. Allowing students to post from outside sources demonstrates that you trust them to make good decisions and follow the rules. Providing a way for students to express themselves can also help keep students engaged, interested and interacting with the blog.

Conclusion

While it may appear that the classroom blog is designed to teach students about technology and ways to share ideas, its primary goal is to teach digital citizenship, responsibility, respect and interpersonal communication skills students will need for the rest of their lives.

Put forth the time to prepare the blog so it is populated and working properly when you introduce it to students. Commit to posting and maintaining the blog long term so students will realize that it is an important learning tool.

Recruit volunteer commenters to provide an audience to students and encourage interaction between students and commenters. Plan to post fresh content every day and rotate between humor, encouragement, discussion questions and updates to assignments.

Having a successful blog is not difficult, but it does require time. The more consistent you are, the better it will be received by students.