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Panelists: Blogs are changing education Winners of the first-ever 'Best of the Education Blog' Awards discuss blogging's impact on teaching and learning

By Dennis Pierce, Managing Editor, eSchool News

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Blogging, and the easy access to--and exchange of--ideas that it has spawned, is having a "transformative" effect on education, according to the winners of the first-ever eSchool News "Best of the Education Blog" Awards.

Sponsored by Discovery Education, the awards are intended to celebrate excellence in education blogging. They come at a time when blogging has exploded in popularity, giving educators and students an unprecedented opportunity for easy self-expression and reflection that anyone can access--and to which anyone can respond.

Recipients of the "Best of the Education Blog" Awards were honored in a ceremony held in conjunction with the Florida Educational Technology Conference in Orlando March 23, where they talked about the significance of blogging in education during a panel discussion.

Though each of the four winning bloggers writes for a different audience and purpose, all agreed: The impact of blogging on teaching and learning can be profound.

"Kids are getting excited and engaged in literacy through blogging, commenting, and sharing ideas" online, said Wesley Fryer, director of instructional support services for the Texas Tech University College of Education. Fryer's blog, "Moving at the Speed of Creativity," which mixes insights on education theory with sound, practical advice for educators, won in the category "Best Education Theory Blog."

There is an excitement that comes from writing for a real, authentic audience instead of a circular file seen only by the teacher, Fryer said, adding that this thrill can be a huge motivator for students.

Frank LaBanca, a science teacher at Newtown High School in Connecticut, is using a class blog called "Applied Science Research" to challenge his students with frequent, short writing assignments designed to make them think critically. LaBanca, whose blog won in the category "Best Classroom Instruction Blog for Students," said the blog enables him to have a high-level, asynchronous conversation with his students that extends the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

"Our students are tech-savvy, and we need to make sure we take advantage of this," he said.

Like the other winners, both Fryer and LaBanca noted that today's digital tools make blogging extremely easy, especially when compared with the effort it used to take to upload files online via the File Transfer Protocol or build a web page using Hypertext Markup Language.

Sharing ideas with the world today is "so easy," Fryer said. "Now, it doesn't take anything but a web browser to engage in these conversations."

Sparking conversations and getting education leaders to think critically is the intent of "EduWonk," the winner in the category "Best K-12 Administration Blog."

Sara Mead, a co-contributor to EduWonk along with Andrew Rotherham, said the two created the blog to push education policy debate into the blogosphere, capitalizing on the interest in political blogging that already existed but wasn't focused enough on education policy.

With all of the issues and controversies taking place in public education today, "there is no shortage of stuff to write about," said Mead, who works for Education Sector, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

There also is no shortage of material to read in the blogosphere. Bill MacKenty, computer science teacher at Edgartown Elementary School on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, said he subscribes to about 450 education blogs through Really Simple Syndication feeds. Though he doesn't read them all, he said he can skim through new blog entries as they are posted in order to stay informed.

Easy access to such a wide variety of information "has been transformative" from a professional development perspective, said MacKenty, whose blog "MacKenty.org" won in the category "Best Instructional Blog for Teachers."

MacKenty also praised what he called the "purity" of blogs as a communication tool, saying, "It's not about...who you are, or the color of your skin--it's about what you have to say. There's something utterly beautiful and noble about that."

But blogging isn't free from its share of issues. Blogs have been viewed with some skepticism in the mainstream media for the credibility of their information, which isn't subject to the same rigors of publishing and editing that traditional media are.

Award recipients said blog readers can avoid any problems with credibility by using multiple sources for their information, which is a good habit for students to learn--and educators to practice--anyway.

Also, there is the fear by many educators that students will misuse blogs--as in posting information that is too personal on sites such as MySpace.com--making it easy for online predators to find them. This has led many administrators to ban the use of blogs in their schools.

But that's a shortsighted strategy that overreacts to the problem, panelists said. As a good illustration of this line of reasoning, Fryer said he recently read a tongue-in-cheek essay by someone calling for schools to ban the use of pencils, because students might poke themselves (or each other) in the eye. His point: You shouldn't ban the use of an instructional tool such as blogs, simply because it might be dangerous if misused; instead, you should teach students about the proper--and safe--use of the tool and then enforce the rules.

So, what makes a good blog? The quality of its ideas is important, panelists said, and so is the personality of the blog and its writer. It's important for this personality to come through, so that "you really feel like you're having a human interaction," said Mead.

LaBanca said one key to the success of his blog is that he poses good, thought-provoking questions, written in a way that must elicit a deeper, more reflective response than a simple answer. This helps drive the conversation forward, he said.

Award winners wrapped up the panel discussion by giving their advice on how educators who are new to blogging can get started.

Read a lot of blogs to get a sense of what they're like and the types of functions they can serve, MacKenty said, and then figure out what you want to blog about--find your "sphere." Also, panelists said, if educators and school leaders could move beyond focusing on the term "blog" to better understand the concept behind the technology, it might help spur the more widespread use of blogs in schools. It's not about the technology, they explained; it's really about communication and the sharing of ideas, which has always existed--this is just a new form of doing it.

LaBanca's advice? "Just do it," he said. "This technology is so easy to use and so accessible--even if you're technophobic, it's something you can do."

Additional bloggers recognized by the awards program include Tim Stahmer, for "Assorted Stuff"; Darren Cannell, for "Teaching and Developing Online"; and David Warlick, for "Exactly Two Cents." For more information about each of the winners and their blogs, see http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/pdf/best_of_the_ed_blogs.pdf.

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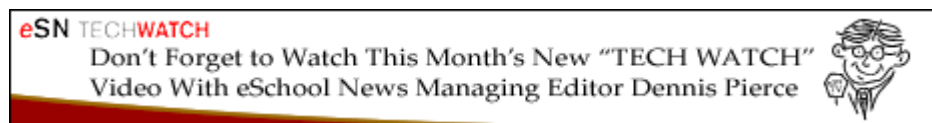
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