Blogging and Internet Filters in Schools

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Success in today's global market requires students to attain numerous 21st-Century skills, including collaborative and communication skills, and knowledge of how to use technology to both locate and create information. The use of instructional blogging in the classroom is one way to help students develop such skills. The Children's Internet Protection Act, or CIPA, requires many public schools and libraries to use filtering software in order to fulfill funding restrictions, leaving many schools without access to blogging sites. Such filtering software is not only ineffective, but also violates the rights of Internet users and the principles of library media education. Communication between educators, administrators, students, and parents can help facilitate a compromise regarding the use of Internet filters in schools, and expand Internet access so that instructional blogging may occur.

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BLOGGING AND INTERNET FILTERS IN SCHOOLS

According to the American Library Association (ALA), the amount of money spent on "video games and other entertainment software" in the U.S. in 2004 was “more than nine times the amount spent on books... and other materials for school media centers.” When $7.3 billion is spent in one year on the purchase of electronic resources, it is obvious where consumer interests and priorities lie (AASL Advocacy Toolkit, 2010). It is up to library media specialists and other educators to somehow incorporate this overwhelming interest in technology into the curriculum. In Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (1998), the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) argue that students are functioning “in a world that has been radically altered by the ready availability of vast stores of information.
The responsibility of library media specialists has undergone a change to meet this challenge. An effective library media specialist must now strive to “promot[e] and reinforc[e] students’ interests and abilities” (3), in order to help foster a love of reading and learning in all students. Therefore, technology must become an integral part of instruction in today’s schools.

Classroom use of technology does more than merely motivate students. The incorporation of technology into curriculum is also necessary to the academic and practical development of all students. According to the AASL and AECT in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (1998), “Students must become skillful consumers and producers of information in a range of sources and formats to thrive personally and economically in the communication age” (2). If students are to succeed in today’s technologically driven, global market, it is essential for them to be able to use technology to both access and create information.

Along with information literacy, there are other 21st-Century skills that are required for success in today’s workforce. The AASL in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (2009) emphasizes the importance of “communication and collaboration skills” and “social and cross-cultural skills” in students’ academic development (9). A global market requires collaborative partnerships between persons from all over the world. Students therefore need instruction that allows them to perfect and apply technology and communication skills.

The use of Web logs, or blogs, in the classroom is one way to help students develop skills in both the use of technology and communication. Teachers can use classroom blogs to facilitate communication and collaboration between students and educators on curriculum-related topics. This instructional use of blogs helps students translate their own ideas, opinions, and past experiences and knowledge into words, while also requiring them to analyze and evaluate the ideas and opinions of others in their blog community. Blogging also allows them to use technology as a channel for self-expression and information access.

In a 2008 article in the online education journal, *THE Journal: Transforming Education through Technology*, Brock Dubbels (a high school engineering teacher), explained the importance of blog use in the classroom as a springboard for literacy skills. He emphasized how “difficult” nonfiction writing can be for students and explained that “blogs are great for transitioning from paragraphs to essays.” He also pointed out that student interest in “images, video, and music on the web” helps propel blogging in the classroom, and argued that blogging differs from “traditional writing” in that it is “more about exploration, discovery, creation, and the idea that students can do things that are immediately gratifying” (Sturgeon 2008, 2).

Although the use of blogs in the classroom is beneficial in the development of 21st-Century skills, many schools use Internet filters that censor
blog sites. This censorship of Internet sites is a direct result of the Children’s Internet Protection Act, or CIPA (enacted in 2000). “Safety policies and technology which blocks or filters certain materials from being accessed through the Internet” are a funding requirement for many institutions. Although the American Library Association filed suit in response to the act and a 2002 panel of judges ruled CIPA to be “facially invalid under the First Amendment,” a 2003 Supreme Court decision determined that the “First Amendment does not prohibit Congress from forcing public libraries . . . to use software filters” (AASL Libraries and Internet Toolkit 2003). Therefore, many institutions today are strong-armed into using Internet filters in order to receive necessary funding, and many classrooms are left without the benefits of instructional blogging.

The inability for schools to access blog sites has great impact on the learning process. Blog censorship robs classrooms of authentic writing and communication experiences. The AASL and AECT in Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (1998) pointed out the importance of authentic learning in the classroom, and emphasized that “promoting authentic learning demands . . . a new conception of the context of education” (2). When students feel as though they are reading and writing about real and relevant topics, and communicating through real and relevant formats, learning is enhanced. Denying students opportunities for authentic communication hinders the learning process.

Furthermore, blog censorship eliminates the social component found within a learning community. In Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs (2009), the AASL emphasized that “Learning has a social context” (13), meaning true learning is a process that involves social interaction. Limiting how a learning community collaborates significantly diminishes that social context. The end result is that educators, students, and administrators alike are affected by blog censorship, as students are put at a significant disadvantage when it comes to the development of 21st-Century communication and technology skills.

In addition to the impact that blog censorship has on instruction, the effects on a school’s library media center are especially significant. The very principles upon which the Library Media Specialist (LMS) profession is built are in contradiction to censorship. The ALA stated in its Libraries and the Internet Toolkit (2005) that “A major purpose of libraries is to empower their users by providing them with the information they want or need” (ALA and Filtering section). When access to information is denied, an LMS is not fulfilling the needs of students or teachers. The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association found in Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs (2009) echoed this statement by declaring that librarians must “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (54). Essentially, filtering software jeopardizes the very philosophy behind the profession of library media specialists.
Fortunately, the same individuals affected by blog censorship are the same individuals who have the capacity to locally influence Internet censorship. The voices of parents, students, educators, administrators, and library media specialists can collaboratively communicate the ineffectiveness of blog censorship to school district personnel, in the hopes of expanding information access. Phone calls, emails, and letters all can convey disapproval of blog censorship and locally bring change to school Internet usage. The ALA’s Libraries and the Internet Toolkit illustrates the ineffectiveness of Internet filters. “Research has shown filters block at least one out of five sites containing legal, useful information” and “failed to block an average of 20 percent of material defined as undesirable” (Fast Facts section 2003). The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) also supports the notion that filtering software is ineffective, and argued in Internet Filters in Schools and Libraries (2009) that harmless information is frequently blocked. Words including “magna cum laude,” “Titanic,” and “pussy willows” are just a few examples of such terms. The NCAC also pointed out that “overly broad categories” used in filtering software can “marginalize” individuals or groups, as in the example of “sex” leading to the blockage of all terms involving “homosexuality” (NCAC 2009).

There are also ethical violations that parents, teachers, students, administrators, and library media specialists should address when communicating with local school district personnel. The NCAC argued in Internet Filters in Schools and Libraries that Internet filters “create a . . . Digital Divide between the haves and have-nots,” since many students do not have Internet access at home and may only access online information through the school (NCAC 2009). Since equitable access is not maintained in this situation, a student’s right to information is violated.

If the impact that blog censorship has on learning and information access will not sway a school district, then maybe pragmatic considerations will. The NCAC also argued in Internet Filters in Schools and Libraries that it “costs needy school districts a lot of money and time to install filters and keep them updated” (2009). Certainly the bottom line is of importance to all school districts with budget cuts and the current economic climate already affecting the quality of instruction that schools are able to provide.

The likely outcome of such communication between parents, educators, students, administrators, and district personnel will be a compromise. The use of Internet filters in a school already suggests district concerns over “appropriate” information access, so a complete abandonment of filtering software seems unlikely. What can happen, however, is a filter being turned to “the least restrictive level in order to minimize the blocking of constitutionally protected speech” (ALA 2005). Districts can also allow teachers to request specific sites for use and conduct a review in which access to those sites is possibly granted. Both solutions, although not entirely free of censorship, will allow student use of and access to blogging sites.
Parent, educator, student, administrator, and library media advocates can help persuade district personnel to work within such a compromise by taking on the responsibility of appropriate blog use. The ALA recommends in its Libraries and the Internet Toolkit that parents and librarians “offer instruction for children . . . in how to use the Internet safely and effectively” (ALA 2005). Teachers can also support the ethical use of unblocked blog sites by frontloading their instruction with communication on Internet responsibility. In Julie Sturgeon’s article, Five Don’ts of Classroom Blogging (2008), Georgia State University information systems training specialist Anne Davis suggests that a code of ethics should be signed by both parents and students, and that violators of the blog ethics code should lose Internet access (1). Davis also stressed the importance of full teacher participation in the blogging process so that modeling and relationship-building may occur (4).

If school districts are willing to narrow the scope of filtering software to allow the use of blogs in the classroom, students will be able to develop the communication and technology skills required in today’s world. It is the right of each individual to have equal access to information, and to have freedom of expression. When school districts prevent students from using, accessing, or creating information, a violation of those rights has occurred. If library media specialists act as advocates of information literacy and work collaboratively with stakeholders, the use of classroom blogs can help foster students’ love for both reading and learning.

REFERENCES


