Get pupils blogging with *Kidblog*

Over the past few years I had read various articles on the internet about other educators using the *Kidblog* platform (www.kidblog.org) to introduce their pupils to blogging by creating individual blogs for them. I didn't delve into it too much as I had been teaching younger pupils for the previous few years. However, when I returned to teaching sixth class, I decided to investigate this blogging platform and to see how I could use it to enhance the curriculum in the classroom. Having sought online advice from other teachers using the platform, I decided to take the plunge and set up a class account in late September 2012.

The benefits of using *Kidblog* are:
- It is used by educators around the world to enhance and compliment the curriculum.
- It is a safe and secure platform that is specifically geared towards schools.
- The teacher is able to control activity.
- It is a means to motivate pupils to learn, write, ask questions.
- It teaches pupils the rules of Digital citizenship and how to behave responsibly in an online community.

Pupils can publish posts and participate in academic discussions within a secure classroom blogging community. The teacher maintains complete control over student blogs and user accounts. The pupils' blogs can be private and viewable only by classmates and the teacher or they can be public. Schools/classes can connect with each other through *Kidblog*. Pupils can work on their blog at their own pace/level at home or at school. Pupils are able to comment on each other's blogs but comments can be moderated and approved by the teacher before they appear. T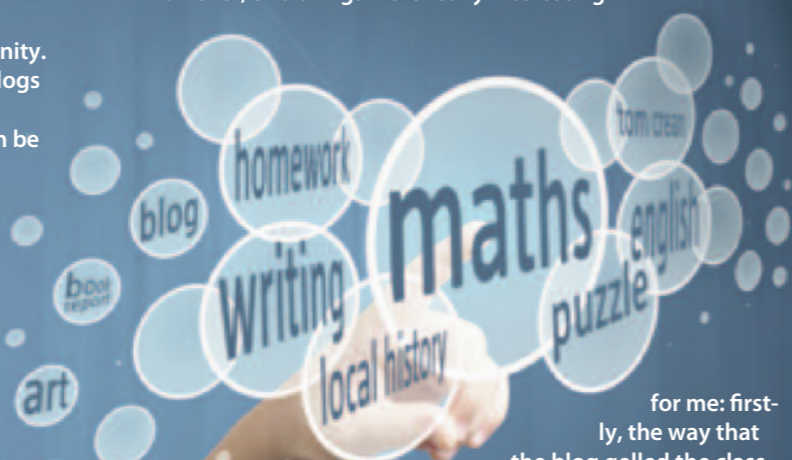he teacher can also post a private comment to the pupil about a piece of work. Through using this safe and secure blogging platform pupils can:
- Create classroom discussions.
- Learn digital citizenship.
- Practice writing skills.
- Create an e-portfolio.
- Reflect on learning.

Having taken the plunge and introduced my pupils to the whole concept of personal blogs I was totally unprepared for their reaction. Over the course of the first week, the pupils set out on a journey into the digital unknown with such enthusiasm and positivity. Although I gave lots of written assignments for homework to be done on the blog, there was also quite a lot of spontaneous written work appearing on pupils' blogs. Through encouragement, pupils wrote about their hobbies and interests, so I read about horses, dogs, planes, football, birds, animals, hurling, online games – the list was endless. *Kidblog* seemed to have given the pupils what the English curriculum intended – writing for a purpose with a real audience in mind.

However, two things were really interesting for me: firstly, the way that the blog gelled the class together – they were hugely positive and supportive to each other and commented on each other's posts and asked each other questions; secondly, the blog appeared to have served all ability levels within the class. Everybody worked at their own ability level and the others were supportive of that in their positive comments and encouragement.
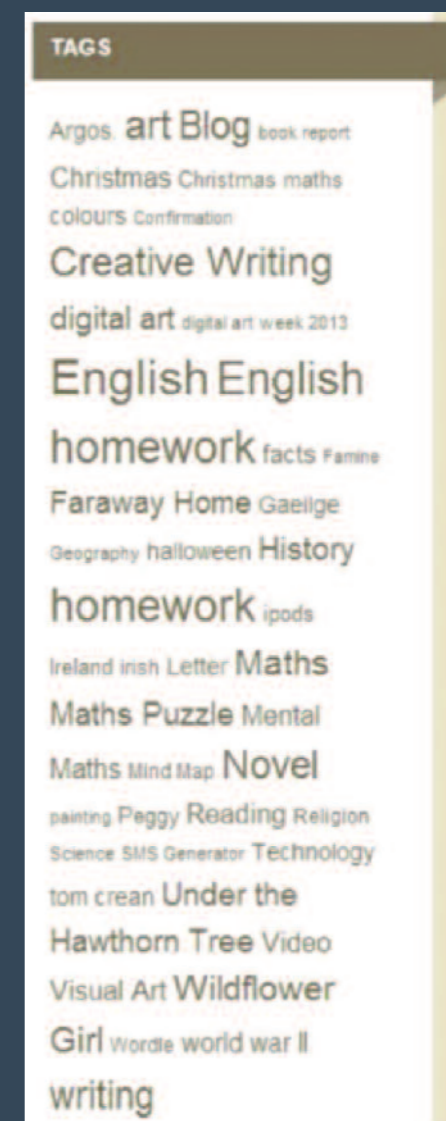
As a teacher, I was also looking for the positive educational benefits of this way of working and I was pleasantly surprised. I admired how the pupils developed their different genres of English writing as we progressed through the year.

I was really pleased with the way that they encouraged each other with their positive comments on each other's blog posts. As their teacher, I also learned so much about the individual pupils and their hobbies and interests and it gave me a great way to start a conversation with them in class, thereby developing their oral language skills as a consequence.

The tag graphic (centre page right) shows the range of topics that were written on the blog over the course of the school year. Some of the assignments that were completed on the blog include:
- Writing posts in response to the various class novels that we were reading.
- Writing what they had learned about what we studying in history.
- Taking photographs of their art work with iPods and uploading them to their blogs as a digital art portfolio.
- Writing about their own interests and hobbies.
- I gave them maths puzzles every night taken from the *7 Puzzle Blog* (7puzzleblog.com) – they didn't have to do them but many loved the challenge ("Keep them coming!" one pupil commented).
- They used the *Strip Design* app on iPods to create a simple comic strip using the Gaeilge phrase that we had been learning "Is breá liom a bheith ag …." and they uploaded this to their blogs. Some even wrote spontaneously 'as Gaeilge' how they had completed their 'leabhar grinn'.
- I used the *Hokusai* app to record their Gaeilge reading and uploaded it onto the blog as an MP3 to help them with léitheoireacht for homework.
- I used the *Show Me* app to record sample solutions to maths problems and uploaded them to the blog as a video to help with maths homework.
- I put links up to websites that I wanted the pupils to visit to practise a particular skill eg. Edware.ie to practise the counties of Ireland and SpellingCity.com for practising spellings.
- Pupils did project work where they researched a topic, wrote about it, sourced images to go with it and many of them were able to embed video to complement the project. Some even created their own video content using Animoto.com The results were truly multi-media projects.
- Pupils completed creative writing based on animated video material sourced from the Literacy Shed (www.literacyshed.com) as a stimulus for writing
- Pupils created digital mind maps using Bubbl.us and uploaded them onto their blog.
- Pupils created word clouds on various topics using *Wordle* (www.wordle.net) and *Tagxedo* (www.tagxedo.com) and uploaded them onto their blog.

From the evidence of activity on *Kidblog*, it proved to be hugely motivational. It seemed that pupils were excitedly doing blog work at home and delighting in the comments they were receiving. I tried to comment on most of the pupils' posts and they seemed to like that feedback which started a very different type of online conversation with their teacher. I also received very positive feedback from some parents who were amazed at the enthusiasm of the pupils for it. One parent remarked that she had never before seen her child so eager to do homework!

Such was the pupils' enthusiasm for working on their blogs at home, I even had to put a curfew on activity on it – 9pm became cut-off point with the threat of losing their account if they were on it after that time. I could see that some pupils were on the blog even before they came to school. Some pupils were even blogging on weekends, without prompting from the teacher. The blog activity was so hectic in the initial period, I was sure that the novelty would wear off at some stage and that enthusiasm would begin to wane. However, this did not happen and the blog continued to be a huge hit with my sixth class pupils for the rest of the year.

The real test of any classroom innovation is the opinion of the pupils. After about a week into this blogging project, one of the pupils spontaneously wrote the following blog post one night. I think it summed up the feeling of a lot of the pupils:

"We are now over a week on the blog. I think that everyone is enjoying themselves, especially me. I love it. It is really fun. I am learning so much about it and it is so fun reading everybody's information. And sharing my information with them as well. It is great. Learning on the blog is totally different it is such an experience to me. Every day I go on the blog and see what I can read and learn. On the blog we do a maths puzzle every day. Some of them are easy but some our hard and I can't understand them, but mostly every day I do them. We also do homework on the blog. It is soooooo cool."

Now that these pupils have left the school and moved on to secondary school, I hope that they have great memories of a year in blogging. Even though they are no longer pupils of the school, an archive copy of their work remains online for them to look back on the great work that they did throughout their final year in primary school.

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TAGS

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List of tags showing range of topics on the blog

> *It seemed to have given the pupils what the English curriculum intended – writing for a purpose with a real audience in mind*