



## Is there a BLOG in your future?

### Information and Politics

RICHARD G. TOWNSEND, OISE, University of Toronto

**Editors' Note:** It is altogether fitting that the first electronic publication of the renowned *PEA Bulletin* should feature an article by one of our most esteemed (older?) members who writes on newest technology — the Internet weblog—whatever that may be.

Many in the Politics of Education Association (PEA) have home pages that offer "links" to their selected publications, course syllabi, resource materials, and statements of research interests. So far as is known, however, no one in PEA yet has an Internet weblog. That makes our membership different from those in certain other disciplines: e.g., accounting, adult learning, anthropology, art, chemistry, economics, law, library science, math, medicine, pharmacy, philosophy, physics, political science, policy studies, and sociology. For, even classicists can and do embrace technological innovations — including fields such as medieval studies.

This absence of blogs in the politics of education field is regrettable. For, despite their problems, blogs (from the term "weblog") can be powerful, dirt-cheap tools for communicating and reducing asymmetrically-held

information. As niches, blogs differ from such general-interest web magazines as "Arts & Letters Daily" (<http://www.aldaily.com>) out of New Zealand and "Woods S Lot" ([http://www.ncf.ca/~ek867/wood\\_s\\_lot.html](http://www.ncf.ca/~ek867/wood_s_lot.html)) from Canada. As Internet resources, blogs also differ from neutral abstracts such as ERIC'S virtual library (<http://ericir.syr.edu>), the Australians' online database of educational research documents (<http://cunningham.acer.edu.au/dbtw-wpd/sample/edresearch.htm>) and the Brits' education index of 300 journals (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/bei/bei.htm>). Nor do blogs resemble electronic networks where professors and students can exchange ideas and materials and host discussions (e.g., <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/>).

As well, blogs are not electronic journals where licensed access customarily is negotiated by university libraries. Also, do not look to blogs necessarily to extract defining paragraphs from articles about instructional design and community building (e.g., <http://www.elearningpost.com/>). These are not precisely databases either, such as social science gateways (e.g., <http://sosig.ac.uk/>),

K-12 kaleidoscopes or digest of school statistics on schools (e.g., <http://library.louisville.edu/governm/ent/>). Finally, given their personal "takes" on current events, blogs also differ from straight-forward leads akin to those available through Jimmy Kirkpatrick in Dallas (<http://www.educationnews.org/>). By 8 a.m. central time, Kirkpatrick assembles — remarkably, without editorial comment — 25 or so links to that day's newspaper articles, commentaries, and reports about schools.

#### CENTRAL IDEA

As opposed to such fairly static home pages, neutral abstracts and indexes, back-and-forth exchanges, full texts of journal articles, and terse compendiums, typically a blog consists of one individual's

**THE PEA BUSINESS  
MEETING WILL BE HELD  
ON TUESDAY, APRIL 22  
AT 6:15pm IN THE  
SHERATON HOTEL,  
COLORADO ROOM,  
LEVEL 2. See you there!**

reactions to a segment of the world's goings-on. Prompted by the more compelling of just-published articles on the global web, the blogger provides links to stories that he or she has just culled, often through an Internet-scanning "aggregator" or "filter," or through tips received from e-mail correspondents. If nothing else, bloggers have attitude and opinions, and so they attach endorsements, critiques, jibes, or digressions about those stories. By clicking to those sources, prudent readers can assure themselves that bloggers are credibly making their points in context. These immediate connections to sources give blogging a transparency that's special.

Not committed to holding readers to their own pages, bloggers expect to see their readers off to those other sources. They reason that if they do that well, the reader will return to sites that the bloggers host. Thus they view themselves as transferring "memes," Richard Dawkins' coinage for a societal equivalent to the gene, i.e., units of cultural information that are passed from one mind to another. By consequence, digital communities of interest tend to cluster around particular websites.

Generally, these commentators write daily. Some compose several times a day while a comparative few write semi-daily or once a week or so. Whichever, blogging requires substantial allocations of time, from writers as well as readers. A sometime commitment of bloggers is to reveal (relevant) aspects of themselves: part of blogs'

appeal arises from the persona that shines through.

## MECHANICS

This medium may not be mainstream, yet Internet-service companies such as AOL.com, Earthlink.com, and E-xact.com expect to extend blogging service to customers within 2003. Already, though, without knowing the language of hypertext, anyone having access to a computer with a web-browser can produce a blog. Since 1998, moreover, these annotated guides to the Net have grown: a conservative estimate is 500,000+. This explosion stems from blogging tools becoming simple for techno-peasants. U.S. firms like Movable Type, Greymatter, Manila, Radioland, Pitas, and now a division of Google furnish almost-free, automated web publishing, sometimes with server space. After logging on, composing, and pushing the "Publish" button, bloggers have their words uploaded onto websites which those bloggers have chosen or designed from available templates. By pressing the "Blog This" button while viewing others' web entries, hosts instantly gain writing spaces to type comments alongside entries being linked. Software then automatically formats and "posts" those comments. The date, even sometimes the hour, of each post is shown.

Readers encounter the words, pictures, videos, and audios of a blog much as one encounters e-mail, scrolling downward from the most recent to the oldest items. Past posts are archived, generally by

date, although some bloggers' posts can be summoned by categories plus chronologies. One learner blog that is bi-archival is <http://www.bradlauster.com/>. A graduate student in computer design, Lauster generously puts class notes online, reports on professional conferences he's attended, and notes 'sightings' of Net gurus he's spotted on streets of downtown Palo Alto. Regularly he invites readers to comment on his posts.

So, up to a point, blogs can resemble moderated online forums, wherein, for example, websites like <http://www.slate.com> and national newspapers like the "New York Times" welcome readers' comments on articles. Similarly, electronic bulletin boards encourage "threads" of rejoinders to a site's opening volley. Unlike forums and bulletin boards, however, bloggers have total editorial control over what appears on their sites. Hence bloggers don't have to circulate responses from readers which can be clever but also can verge on the puerile, unsavory, inaccurate, irresponsible, and downright rude. Small wonder, then, that a British political site invites feedback with the proviso that "You can be taken more seriously if you maintain a polite tone." As a deterrent to such "flaming," the more technologically advanced web-sites ask readers to systematically rank incoming messages, so the highest-rated and presumably most discerning reactions move automatically to the top of the scroll.

More usually, if they have salutes or corrections, fellow-bloggers make

their points on their own sites. Quickly monitored if they have a record of engaging and penetrating observations, bloggers thereby enjoy aspects of peer review, with responses from others who may be as well, or better, informed. Embarrassing as those interjections may be for some experts, democratically the process releases the readership's voices. Bloggers would claim that the opportunity to respond, almost in real time, to Jim's point about Hanne's buzz about Don's entry could make blogging into something of a seminar.

Judging too from the extensive self-referentiality among bloggers, particularly among journalists, a sense of fellowship can emerge from valuing each others' posts. Also in the loop of course are non-blogging readers who "lurk," silently looking over shoulders.

### HABERMAS AND POLITICAL CONTENT

To position themselves, bloggers have invoked a theme from Jergen Habermas: civil society in the 18th century was fueled by patrons reading and debating the substance of free newspapers in coffeehouses and salons. Starbucks is not the same. Habermas is quoted as envisaging civil society as colonized today by politicians and stars who mostly just present themselves, seldom taking highly visible parts in the kinds of exchanges that marked those generative meeting-places in the 1700s. An upshot is that we now have a society where rank-and-file citizens don't have much of a wide

chance to put forward their own ideas. Rather, through safe but tyrannical media, people commonly acclaim the antics of the real actors with high status. Animating the Net's populist ethic that everyone potentially has access to easy technology and to the same audience, bloggers depict their screens as modern-day echoes of Europe's old coffeehouses and salons. The public space becomes more inclusive, less the reserve of the celebrity few.

Against that backdrop, let me highlight a few bloggers with foci on education. Joanne Jacobs (<http://www.joannejacobs.com/>), the pragmatic California journalist now finishing a book about a charter school (*Ride the Carrot Salad: How Two Grumpy Optimists Started A School To Turn Slackers Into Students*), rightly tags herself as the mother of Ed-bloggers, the first school specialist in the Blogosphere. Sometimes her supports of vouchers, her pooh-poohings of the self-esteem movement and math without meaning, and her chastising of teacher unions are supplemented by jabs at Iran, the Green Mountain Boys, and other topics outside education, on the implicit assumption that a connection can be made to her ideas about schooling and its contexts.

Less given to blurts is one of Jacobs' favorite links, No. 2 Pencil (<http://www.homestead.com/swyger/files/no2pencil.html>). More of an insider to the school establishment, psychometrician Kimberly Swygert's comments often are more extended and nuanced than Jacobs'

forceful and salty provocations. Like other bloggers, Professor Swygert has a "blogroll" of sites that she regularly filters on home-schooling, school governance and school change, "untenured" perspectives on globalization, malfeasances on university campuses, and so forth.

On her site, Brigitte Eaton (<http://portal.eatonweb.com/>) daily updates a directory of blogs, a sub-directory of which mines over 225 sites for Educational Research. Her list is altogether helpful - it lists, for instance, Will Richardson's constructive appraisals of the pedagogical effects of student blogging (<http://www.weblogg-ed.com/>). Nonetheless, as might be expected for such a burgeoning field -- some blogs exploiting research on education are not listed.

Absent, for instance, are Chester Finn's thoughtful comments (<http://www.edexcellence.net/gadfly/index.html>) and siftings of evidence from Heartland Institute's <http://www.schoolreformers.com/>. Certain other sites in Eaton's sub-directory lack empirical or conceptual rigor.

My impression is that for most of last year or so, the majority of bloggers were political conservatives or libertarians. They claimed to represent the U.S.'s new ideological majority, thereby balancing the mainstream media's embrace of the left. Of late, however, more liberal and a couple of socialist-leaning bloggers appear to be arriving online.

### BUT IS IT ACADEMIC?

Blogging no longer attracts only professionals in information technology (they have pride of place as pioneer bloggers, like <http://www.textism.com/>).

Especially since 9/11, a number of journalists have clamored aboard (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com/> has a book club and over 300,000 individual visits a month; another is <http://www.mattwelch.com/>, where the ex-Prague-based reporter is especially insightful on eastern Europe). In addition, in the game are a few humorists (e.g., <http://www.lileks.com/bleats>), various photo essayists (e.g., <http://www.tonypierce.com/>), and thousands of diary-writers (e.g., one of the liveliest is <http://www.badlands.com/dailybrad/index.html>).

Innumerable hobbyists, cooks, Star Trekkies, and university students also have expressive blogs. Be that as it may, in this space the question must be faced: At bottom, is blogging becoming a pursuit for older members of the academy?

One serious issue is that an academic's ideas, introduced on a blog, might be stolen by others. Once posted and faithfully archived on the world wide web, however, an academic's theories and data can be considered as published. In a sense, those materials are better protected than if given away at a conference or over a cup of coffee. Thus as long as a blog preserves its archives and the Net-server remains online, a blog is a permanent record. All the same, there's no denying that almost any cyberspace record is nowhere as near as prestigious as making it into a classy refereed journal.

To a degree, the academic culture and the blog culture operate with parallel dynamics. The citation process for blogs is as explicit as in academic journals, even easier. For visitors' sakes, the blogger simply links to articles that he or she is spotlighting. Another similarity is that much as the researcher integrates information already "out there," blogging allows the researcher to connect dispersed data, to share the found information, and to contribute to discussions about findings.

Work practices in the two milieus, though, may jar. While developing articles, the scholar often may strive longer, maybe thinking harder and more proactively than the blogger does in reacting with flows of quick posts. Further, as researchers draft, revise, prove, agonize over, and finally, gradually and patiently conclude their investigations, they never show their original and quite unrefined notes. As well, their training and socialization may not have particularly prepared them to be as openly subjective as bloggers can be in compressing their reading, thinking, researching, and writing processes into one possibly hasty, non-substantiated, unrounded post. For their part, though, bloggers would say that their sites are works-in-progress, empowering readers to join into conversations where opinions are not necessarily once-and-for-all; early notes can be stimulating and fruitful. Academics, however, may well recoil at such rushes to print. Bloggers would rebut that their writings have an immediacy, honesty, and often-unedited quality that's real.

Clearly the most prolific and widely read blogger in the university community today is Glenn Reynolds, professor of law at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (<http://www.instapundit.com/>).

Called "the table setter for what gets talked about on talk radio and TV chat shows," Reynolds has inspired dozens of others to start their own critical-thinking blogs. Instead of writing solely about aspects of his specialty (the intersection of advanced technology and individual liberty), he opines on national security, war and peace, the recording industry, snipers, school uniforms, separatism in Canada, and much more. This rapid-fire, wide-ranging, and steady industriousness prompts questions. Is Reynolds short-changing his students, at least on occasion? Is he commenting sufficiently and inventively on their term papers? Is he training those students closely in niceties of legal research? Is he genuinely adding to his discipline's storehouse of knowledge for future generations?

Perhaps I shouldn't worry since Reynolds has a probing and fertile mind, and readers value his brief diagnoses and advance warnings. What's more, he reports that in his annual review, his Dean said that Reynolds in fact "exceeded all expectations." That Dean also likes Reynolds' celebrated blog which, after all, adds to his college's international visibility. Also to his credit, Reynolds usually keeps his citizen and expert musings apart, the latter at a separate blog ([www.glennreynolds.com](http://www.glennreynolds.com)) that is more given to think pieces.



Although a handful of diva bloggers may be paid a bit to speak at conferences, by and large, no obvious or large financial gains accrue from blogging. Home pages have "tip jars," but reportedly they don't bring in much. Once opportunity costs are taken into account, blogging turns out to be costly for its practitioners. Blogger-scholars, then, are not really motivated by the possibility of supplementing their university salaries. As some say, theirs is a labor of love.

For what it's worth, recently officials at Harvard, Stanford, and Yale, among other universities, have backed their interest in this medium. Staff have been hired and sessions convened to help academics enhance and connect their research and teaching via new blogs.

## GROUP BLOGS

Although the initial intent of blogger software was to enable personal weblogs, the same software is being increasingly tapped by groups. This division of labor for collaborative or institutional blogs thereby reduces the need for bloggers to chase after posts. Group blogs can be efficient too for readers who can tire of keeping up with a range of favorites. Businesses especially have been adapting this mechanism for conviviality, "fire-walling" their sites as private, Intra-net and not Internet. Those texts are closed to the public, open only to those with passwords.

The central thrust, however, is for blogs to remain public. Exemplars include news for computer nerds (<http://slashdot.org/>), two "aging amateurs" on art and politics (<http://www.2blowhard.com/>), critics of rhetoric in the media (<http://www.spin.sanity.com>), and the three siblings and a half-dozen of their professorial friends interested in legal principles, free speech, copyright law, surveillance, immigration, commodification, etc. (<http://volokh.blogspot.com/>).

Scholars at the University of Indiana run a headline service about legal news (<http://www.jurist.com>).

## The Future?

In the future, much as law students now are sharing case studies online, a doctoral cohort could have its own blogsite, with different candidates posting comments, mustering feedback, toasting each others' victories, and empathizing during each others' struggles. Perhaps the "Future of PEA Committee" could sponsor a blog for its members to share ideas about our special interest group. From the process, that committee could leave behind a feel for this organization better than any eventual report to the membership-at-large.

Overall for blogger and reader, the "trick" is sorting through screens of drivel to find smart and coherent bloggers with something keen to say. Many on the web may strike you as too full of angst, rants, folk journalism, youth culture, and much else that turns you off. I wager, however, that one or two blogs can catch you, and perhaps teach you,

with top-notch information, commentary, and bright links.

And should you have an interest in sharing your opinions with others, why not start your own individual or group blog? Practically all it takes is time, something mindful to say that's fresh and relevant, a willingness to credit others, a feel and passion for this new means of communication and knowledge management, and an zest for building on ideas of others.

**Richard G. Townsend** is a Professor Emeritus at OISE, University of Toronto, who taught last term at the University of British Columbia.

## NOMINATIONS FOR THE ROALD CAMPBELL AWARD

The Roald Campbell Award is given every three years by the Politics of Education Association to recognize an outstanding scholar whose research in the field of the politics of education has significantly influenced education policy and practice.

The Award will be announced and presented at the Business Meeting of the Politics of Education Association in San Diego in 2004. The deadline for nominations is January 31, 2004 and each nomination should include a letter from the nominator explaining the nature of the nominee's contributions to the field, three additional letters of support, and a curriculum vitae for the individual being nominated.

The recipient of the award will receive a cash prize of \$500 and an award certificate. All current members of the PEA are eligible for consideration for this award, and the Selection Committee consists of David Monk, John Rury, and Jerry Sroufe.

Nomination materials should be sent to **David Monk, 275 Chambers Building, Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16803**, before January 31, 2004.

**MESSAGE FROM THE  
PRESIDENT:**

**KENNETH WONG**

*VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY*

Greetings! This is an exciting time for our association on several fronts. First, we are launching our inaugural issue of an electronic *PEA Bulletin*. We owe this to two dedicated groups of PEA colleagues. At Fordham, Bruce Cooper and Lance Fusarelli have put together another outstanding issue that continues to strengthen our association's identity.

At Florida State University, Carolyn Herrington, Lora Cohen-Vogel, and their colleagues have generously offered to house the PEA Website so that we can broaden our communication more efficiently. Starting with this issue, the *PEA Bulletin* will be disseminated electronically via a LISTSERV that they developed. To ensure institutional stability, colleagues at FSU are committed to maintaining

the Website for at least four to five years.

Second, we are in the process of gathering signatures to submit a formal petition to AERA to create (or recreate) PEA as a Special Interest Group. All the members whom I talked with strongly endorse such a move. I am confident that our petition will be favorably reviewed by the AERA committee that oversees the SIGs.

Third, our special issue on the "politics of accountability" with the *Peabody Journal of Education* is moving along on schedule. Even on short notice, PEA researchers have responded favorably. Among the contributors are Doug and Ross Mitchell on class size reduction politics, Tom Timar on state educational governance reform in California, Dale Ballou on the accountability issues related to the national teacher certification board, Jerry Sroufe on the transition from OERI to the Institute of Education Science, Lora Cohen-Vogel on local governance and professionalism, Karen DeMoss on politics of school finance rulings, Kathy McDermott on accountability politics at the state level, Michael McClendon and Eric Ness on politics in higher education, Ken Wong and Francis Shen on mayoral takeover of schools, and John Fritz on new directions in UK reform.

We are also moving ahead with other PEA activities. The Roald Campbell Award Selection Committee (David Monk, John Rury and Jerry Sroufe) has reissued a call for nominations (see this *Bulletin*). To make sure that we

have a larger pool of candidates, we will give out the award at the 2004 AERA business meeting. Further, the committees on state research and urban research, which I appointed last fall, are expected to submit a draft of their recommendations. The latest yearbook on the politics of higher education, co-edited by Michael McClendon and Jim Hearn, is now published. The next yearbook, co-edited by Bonnie Johnson and Bill Boyd, is well underway.

I hope to see all of you at the PEA business meeting in Chicago. Please renew your membership so we can keep you posted on the many exciting initiatives. And please recruit your colleagues to join PEA.

With best wishes,

*Ken*

**MESSAGE FROM THE  
TREASURER:**

**LANCE D. FUSARELLI**

*FORHDAM UNIVERSITY*

Several members have sent in checks for 2003 membership dues. Due to challenges in transferring fiscal authority to the new Treasurer, these checks have yet to be cashed. The good news is that (1) I haven't lost them and (2) these checks will be deposited shortly. I will present a detailed report of our financial situation at the PEA business meeting at AERA. Thank you for your patience.

New or renewing members will find a membership form at the end of the *Bulletin*.

**NEW SECTION!!  
RECENT MEMBER  
PUBLICATIONS!**

The editors are interesting in touting the achievements of our wonderful PEA members. We hope this new section will serve as a useful tool for keeping our colleagues apprised of current research in the field. If you have recently published an article or book, please send the citation to Lance Fusarelli.

Bruce S. Cooper, Lance D. Fusarelli, & E. Vance Randall published *Better Policies, Better Schools* (Allyn & Bacon, 2003).

Betty Malen, Robert Croninger, Donna Muncey, & Donna Redmond-Jones published "Reconstituting Schools: 'Testing' the 'Theory of Action'" in the Summer 2002 issue of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

Catherine Marshall published "Teacher Unions and Gender Equity Policy for Education" in the November 2002 issue of *Educational Policy*.

Catherine Marshall and Jean Patterson published "Confounded Policies: Implementing Site-Based Management and Special Education Policy Reforms" in the July 2002 issue of *Educational Policy*.

Finally, several PEA members, including Jane Lindle, Hanne Mawhinney, Jay D. Scribner, Enrique Aleman, Brendan Maxcy, Bob Johnson, Gerardo Lopez, and Catherine Lugg contributed articles to the February 2003 special issue of *Educational Administration*

*Quarterly* that focused on the usefulness of scholarship in the politics of education to inform practice in educational leadership.

**NEW SECTION!!  
MEMBER MOVES & NEWS**

To foster the development of collegiality and well, basically to make PEA more fun, the editors would like to use this space for you to share significant happenings in your lives. If you have experienced a major promotion, moved to another university, gotten married (however defined), had a child (maybe quintuplets), or anything else you'd like to share with your somewhat demented colleagues, please send an email to [fusarelli@hotmail.com](mailto:fusarelli@hotmail.com) and I'll be sure to include the news in the next newsletter.

**PEA BULLETIN, EDITORS**

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We encourage authors to submit essays on topics of interest in school policy and politics to the co-editors.

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YOU MUST INCLUDE YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS IN ORDER TO RECEIVE THE *BULLETIN*.

Enclosed please find a check to PEA for \$25 for full, one-year membership

Send to **Lance D. Fusarelli, Treasurer, Fordham University Division of Educational Leadership, 113 W. 60<sup>th</sup> Street, Room #1119, New York, NY 10023**

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