How do you motivate your students to become excited about writing? Do you wonder how to help them think more critically about literature, global issues, or multiple perspectives? Are you looking for an easy way to engage students in 21st century learning? If any of these questions have crossed your mind, introduce your students to a cultural exchange with blogs.

What is a blog?
Blog is short for web log, an easily editable web space that is often likened to a shared digital diary or journal. Bloggers (people who blog) create posts that highlight personal experiences, state opinions, or describe events. Posts can include text, photos, images, and video. Each entry is time stamped in reverse chronological order with the most recent post appearing first. Blogs can be individual or collaborative with either private or public settings for viewing and participation.

Why blog with your students?
Blogs provide a unique platform to open students’ writing up to authentic audiences beyond the teacher, classroom, and local community. Encourage our youngest students to compose comments on a blog! Blogs also support the development of higher order thinking and 21st century literacy skills. Students are introduced to multiple perspectives as they share their own thoughts and ideas about a given topic. Additionally, students who rarely contribute during class discussions are given a voice through the use of blogs.

What is the best way to use blogs?
The most exciting way to use blogs is to partner with classrooms in other parts of the world. This helps students develop cultural understanding and global awareness. For younger students, this type of cultural blog exchange can be set up as a class-to-class blog in which the teacher guides the students in a shared writing experience to develop each blog post. For older students, a student-to-student blog exchange provides an opportunity for your students to have their own “pen pal” that they can write to through the blog.

How do you get started?
First, if you’re new to blogs, join the new IRA social network, Engage, and check out the Teacher to Teacher Blogs (http://engage.reading.org/blogs/). In this blog community, you can read a variety of blog posts and leave comments. In doing so, you would be adding your voice to a literacy community while getting a feel for blogging! You might then start your own blog (if needed, elicit the help of a technology teacher, library media specialist, or tech-savvy student) to better understand the way blogs are organized and to become familiar with blog features.

Next, review the HOT Blogging Framework (Zawilinski, 2009), which helps scaffold students as they develop their blogging skills. Identify curricular areas that you would like to integrate into your students’ blogs. Aside from literacy skill development, blogs are a great way for students to acquire and expand content knowledge in a variety of subjects (e.g. geography, science, history, culture). Finally, don’t forget to provide your students with lessons on Internet safety, digital citizenship, and netiquette to ensure respectful social interactions.

Reference

Laurie A. Henry is an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky, lauriehenry@uky.edu. Lisa Zawilinski is a faculty member in the College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions at the University of Hartford, zawilinski@ hartford.edu.

Resource Links On Reading Today Online
If you would like to learn more about classroom blogs, visit Reading Today Online at www.reading.org/readingtoday to see the authors’ list of further reading and blog samples.