

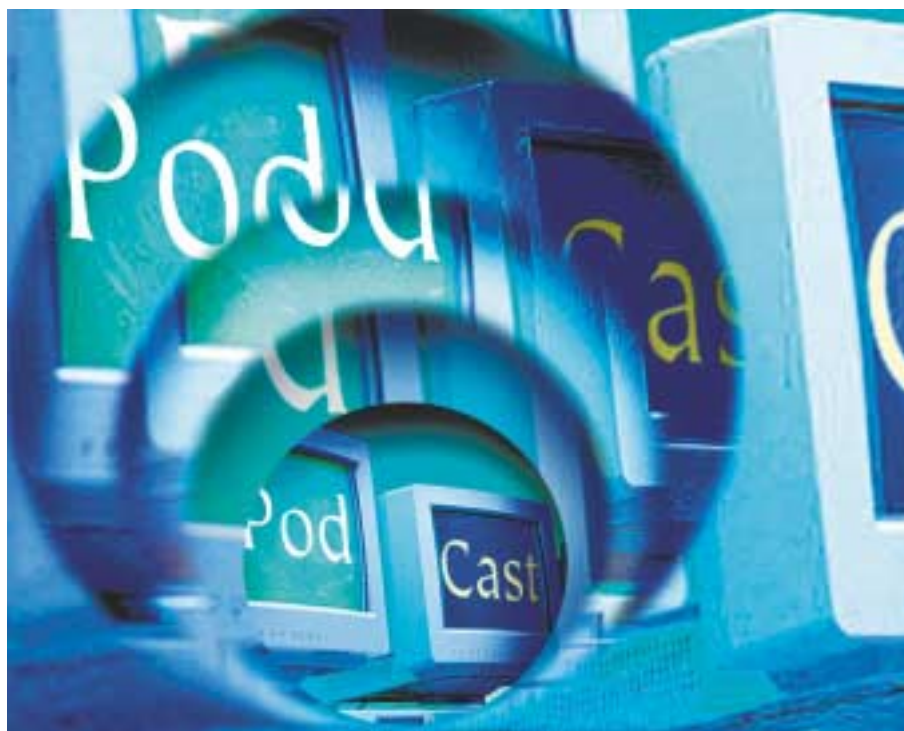
# MAKING HISTORY

## on blogs, wikis and podcasts

**GILLIAN PORTHOUSE** investigates online communication tools and their application to teaching history at Key Stage 2

Last Summer I set myself the challenge of mastering blogs, wikis and podcasts. Why? Because the Internet is increasingly becoming the way people communicate and I was intrigued by these Internet communication tools and wanted to incorporate them into the way I teach Year 6 history.

To give the whole venture a purpose I decided that I would need a focus, a sort of educational magnet. To make my journey meaningful the communication tools I was attempting to master, namely blogs, wikis and podcasts, needed to be deeply embedded in the educational aims and objectives that underpin the way I teach Year 6 history. I therefore decided to take up an idea I had been toying with for ages. I set up an historical enquiry called *Voices from the Past*, where grandparents, parents and even the pupils themselves could comment on their lives within a set decade. I sent out a letter to the whole parent body and in due time I had a set of volunteers. The first phase of the enquiry was to investigate life in the 1930s and being an evacuee.



## The Blog: *trading talents*

The first challenge for my Year 6 class was to create a set of questions for the volunteers taking part in the *Voices from the Past* historical enquiry. I decided to set up a class blog. Talk about jumping in at the deep end! The language and background concepts were all alien to me. Using *Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful web tools for classrooms* by Will Richardson was my salvation and it became my bible. After reading the chapters 'Weblogs: Pedagogy and Practice' and 'Weblogs: Get Started' I decided to set up a blog. I logged on to **www.Blogger.com** and my new e-literate life started: I set up a blog space for my Year 6 class called *trading talents*.

When I decided to set up the blog I had two main aims: firstly, I wanted to see its educational potential and relevance in my teaching of history and secondly, I wanted to use this blog to empower the pupils.

The blog was a new teaching space for me and if I was to understand the potential of the blog I would have to stand back from a lifetime of teaching 'routines' and allow the new teaching space to evolve in its own way. To make the venture successful I knew I had to change my perception of how I related to pupils. I had to change my working relationship with pupils, which I had spent a professional lifetime building up: change it into something unfamiliar and to be honest frightening. I was determined to find a way to listen to the pupils in a way I was yet to discover. I would have to re-establish a different communication style with the pupils. Reading *Constructing Childhood* by A. James and A. L. James (2004) was pivotal in the way my thinking began to change. I began to see how I could relate to the pupils on their own terms: not as pupil/teacher or even child/ adult but as equals in the pursuit of knowledge. This equality would not be achieved in the physical space of the school but the blog was going to be a starting point.

I was very conscious of all the bad press circulating about the social networking and blogs sites, such as bebos and myspace. Therefore, I knew I had to reassure the parents and make sure my safety guidelines were strong so that the parents would be happy that their children were safe using the blog. To achieve this I chose to keep the audience that could view the blog site limited to the pupils and members of staff at the school. This would provide the intimacy and familiarity of a classroom space, which was important because in the initial stages I wanted



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the blogging to be as secure as the classroom experience until we understood the online space we were working in. When that mastery had been achieved I would be confident to open up the experience to a wider audience.

When I wrote my first blog I was surprised at how difficult I found it. I reflected a great deal on what should be written on the blog and I finally understood my reluctance when I realised that the blog's conversational style would require my contributions to be informal.

There were a few teething problems logging on to the blog but the response was generally positive and in several cases very enthusiastic. The problems occurred when passwords were forgotten or the pupils had just got into a muddle following the instructions: even though I had demonstrated the process to the class in an ICT lesson.

The blogging was relaxed and conversational in style and the entries revealed a number of students' poor spelling and grammar, which I did

not make a big issue of because I did not wish to discourage anyone from contributing.

## The students' questions

The *trading talents* blogs were full of new insights on how the class thought and felt about the historical enquiry. It is obvious from the blog questions posted that the Year 6 students were fixated by World War Two. Slowly as the term progressed the questioning started to expand and cover a wider range of issues. The bloggers were fascinated by feelings: fear, joy, embarrassment, friendship and loss. It was not the actual events that were of interest but the feelings of the people involved in those events.

I realised that the questions represented the quiet voices of the emerging generation asking the quiet but fading voices of a past generation. The bloggers were trying to find a common link through feelings and the historical events were actually secondary in their minds. It was a significant point. Actual historical events are remembered in print and film but the social and emotional landscape of those events are forgotten when the voices that could describe them have vanished. What makes those memories stay? What helps it cling through the years is the emotional key that opens the past. The blog in a way represents a permanent record of conversations or discussions that in the normal course of events would be forgotten.

I also found that while the bloggers were happy to post questions only a few of them posted comments on other bloggers' suggestions. To encourage the students to provide each other

with more feedback I started to put comments on myself but felt that this was slightly artificial. I had originally wanted the blog site to be the place where all the online discussion would take place but I realised the debate about the editing and discussing of questions was not served best on the blog. I recognised that the blog, as useful as it was, had its limitations and it was at this point that I introduced the wiki site to my Year 6 class.

### The Wiki: Caedmon

The blog site, I realised, was not the ideal place to examine and discuss the questions that would be used in the interviews. I belong to Naace and in the process of a flurry of emails between members discussing blogs and wikis the website [www.wikispaces.com/](http://www.wikispaces.com/) was mentioned as being ideal to set up a free wiki space, so I set-up my own wiki space at [caedmon.wikispaces.com/](http://caedmon.wikispaces.com/) and put the questions that were going to be asked on a wiki page. My Year 6 students could then add or edit the questions on the wiki page at their leisure.

The wiki, similar to the blog, was unfamiliar territory for me and yet again I was feeling vulnerable and unsure. Piaget was right about the process of learning new concepts; it is uncomfortable to be outside your comfort zone. Following the pattern I had adopted with the mastering of the blog I played with the wiki site until I felt I could introduce it to my Year 6 class. I invited the Year 6



through their Gaggles accounts and in an ICT lesson demonstrated how the site worked. Needless to say the lesson was interesting. I had invited all the pupils to join the wiki but I had forgotten to press the send button, a hiccup I quickly resolved.

It was an exhilarating lesson because the whole class was totally engaged in putting information onto the wiki page. I discovered that a class editing the same page caused problems so I had to create a linked 'named home' page for each Year 6 to allow them to

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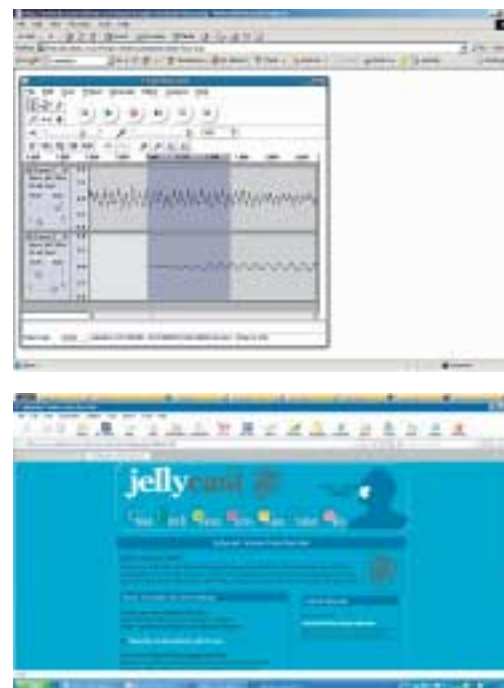
play with their own information. We all learnt a great deal during this lesson and we were all introduced to an authoring site that published work on the Internet, which was an empowering moment!

Using their 'home' link on the wiki I then set them the task of reviewing the questions they had developed on their blog: to add to or edit. I also set them the task of investigating the Jarrow March and I accepted their contributions as homework.

The thinking behind the wiki is that of a collaborative authoring tool and over the term my Year 6 group investigated more themes from the 1930s and in the process learnt how to edit their page, create links to new pages and hyperlink to interesting websites, such as the Wikipedia.

At the end of the term several girls were on the wiki every day building their

personal knowledge base of the 1930s and editing the pages of the other Year 6 contributors. As the administrator to both the wiki and blog I kept an eye on all contributions and I was impressed by the level of investigation carried out. My ultimate aim is to have the pupils contribute to Wikipedia. By creating their own knowledge through the *Voices from the Past* investigation the class will be empowered with the understanding that all knowledge is created



by authors and that all knowledge should therefore be scrutinised and not simply accepted at face value.

### The Podcast: Caedmon

The *Voices from the Past* interviews took place late in the term. I had to buy two new digital voice recorders because, to ensure the volunteers were relaxed, I needed discreet recording equipment to produce excellent recordings. The interviews were great fun and we all enjoyed asking the questions that had been discussed on the blog and edited on the wiki. These interviews were taped, downloaded and edited using the free sound editing software *Audacity*.

In an earlier stage of my recent research I had had a great deal of fun playing with the *Audacity* software and I had observed that children have a deep desire to communicate their thoughts and opinions with each other. I am therefore going to set up an Internet radio station to harness that need to be heard.

The introduction to *Audacity* was not without its problems but eventually all the pieces came into place and I was able to produce the podcasts, which I then converted into MP3 format. I decided to invest the princely sum of £10 to publish the *Voices from the Past* podcasts on the Jellycast podcast site, where I also intend to put the St. Hilda's Internet radio station.

Setting up the site was simple and by this point I was becoming very familiar with what is expected on these sites. Things did go slightly

wrong and I cursed the website designers but by now my frustration was short-lived and I still did my victory dance when all the pieces were in place. I was now less of an immigrant in this land and feeling more like a native.

Once the podcasts were complete I informed the pupils and volunteers that they could download their interviews and having listened to the podcasts the class have now started writing up their thoughts on the wiki.

### Working together: blogs, wikis and podcasts

This whole process needed to be drawn together so the Year 6 class could see how the communication tools were linked and how they fitted into the wider curriculum. To achieve this I discovered, through BT free online resources, a free website facility at [www.schools.ik.org/](http://www.schools.ik.org/) and I set-up a separate ICT website linked to the school's website at [www.caedmon.ik.org/](http://www.caedmon.ik.org/) I did this to create the type of nerve centre I created at Bloglines.

This proved to be an excellent move because by giving the Year 6 group their own page on this website they could draw all the threads of the investigation



together and the real fun could start. The web page put the websites and their function into context.

In the Summer I said that it was going to be a steep learning curve and it was. There were times when I wondered if I was just getting too old to change the teaching habits of a lifetime. Was all the effort worth it? Yes. I now feel empowered and I am ready to see what else my Year 6 class and I can do with these exciting communication tools. Teaching is such an adventure.

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#### Further information

For more details on any of the following, please visit the appropriate website:

- The Year 6 blog space, *trading talents*: [ghildaport.blogspot.com/](http://ghildaport.blogspot.com/)
- Blogger: [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)
- Bloglines: [www.bloglines.com/](http://www.bloglines.com/)
- Naace: [www.naace.org](http://www.naace.org)
- Caedmon: [caedmon.wikispaces.com/](http://caedmon.wikispaces.com/)
- Gaggle: [www.gaggle.net](http://www.gaggle.net)
- Wikipedia: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)
- Audacity: [audacity.sourceforge.net/](http://audacity.sourceforge.net/)
- Jellycast: [www.jellycast.com](http://www.jellycast.com)