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Let's blog around the clock

Blogs rock, say students as teachers tap online tools to teach everything from fractions to science concepts drawn from the likes of Hitler and Sauron. Aaron Tan reports

BEATTY Secondary student Tan Pei Qi got to know her friends and teacher a little better during an online pilot reading programme.

Like others in her Secondary 3 Chinese language class, she had to critique Chinese newspaper articles and other literary works and post them on her own blog at blogger.com, a popular online diary site.

Classmates also visited one another's e-journals to comment on the critiques posted.

'It was very interesting because I could find out what my friends were thinking about. We also got to know our teacher better as he also posted comments on the blogs,' the 15-year-old said.

Her Chinese language teacher, Mr Tan Yuh Huann, 29, was the brainchild behind the reading programme which won the Hewlett-Packard INIT Gold Award during the EdTech Awards 2004 last month.

The awards recognise the efforts of students and teachers for their creative use of IT in teaching and learning.

Said Mr Tan: 'I came up with this idea of using blogs for a reading programme after a few students asked me to visit their blogs. This also allows me to know my students better by participating in their blogs.'

He also sold the idea to his wife, Madam Teo Eng Hui, 27, a Chinese language teacher at Nan Chiau High School. And she got it going with two classes of Sec 1 students, shortly after Mr Tan implemented it in June this year.

Peer reviews have led to spiffier writing, Mr Tan said.

'They don't want to look bad, so they will take the effort to write better. Others can also improve by seeing how the better students write,' he added.

Students like Pei Qi said the programme is beneficial as they have improved their Chinese vocabulary and hanyu pinyin - students use the phonetic transcription system of alphabets to enter Chinese characters into their blogs.

To jazz up their online diaries, some students included their own images, design templates and frills like mouse-over effects.

Other teachers like Madam Rahima Abdul Rahman, 38, from Pasir Ris Secondary, have also tapped on online tools to aid learning.

Meaningful lessons

Her Fellowship Project, which also won the HP-INIT Gold Award, requires groups of students to link scientific concepts and historical events to the popular Lord of the Rings movie.

The students then posted such connections on MSN Groups, an online collaboration website, again for

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Mr Tan with four of his Secondary 3 students who have been blogging in Chinese.

peer reviews.

For example, some likened Adolf Hitler to Sauron, the evil one in the movie. Both were desperate to conquer the world, taking divergent routes - Hitler used propaganda to get German support, while Sauron created Orcs to conquer Middle Earth, said a group project.

Eventually, the students came up with snazzy presentation slides after they had strengthened the connections, thanks to their peers' inputs.

'When the students make the connections between the movie and their subjects, learning becomes more meaningful for them, rather than just throwing up formulas,' said Madam Rahima.

Going by students' responses, it seems to be working well.

Said Leonard Lum, 17, a Sec 5 student: 'It's easier to relate to what we've studied, and reinforce what we learnt in school.'

The EdTech awards also recognised teachers like Mrs Cynthia Seeto for their innovative use of Microsoft products to support active learning.

Mrs Seeto, an educator for the last 25 years, teaches mathematics at Geylang Methodist Primary school. Her first foray into IT came after the government's first IT Masterplan in 1997, when she used educational CD-ROMs to reinforce mathematical concepts.

Today, she taps on Microsoft Excel's advanced features to give interactive insights into concepts like fractions.

For instance, students can simply click on an area in an Excel spreadsheet to see how fractions can be represented in different ways such as pie charts, blocks or containers.

While IT is a good way to engage students, the pedagogy behind it is more important, said Mrs Seeto.

'Before you set out to adopt IT, you have to understand what difficulties the students face, and how to make use of IT to achieve specific learning outcomes.'

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