Setting up individual Student Blogs (primary school)

Collection of ideas and strategies following my experiences with NZ schools in 2013&14, ***by Monika Kern*** *@BeLchick1*

Why - How - What:

Every school has a different vision for learning in their setting. A number of the schools I have worked with want their students to experience an authentic audience for their work, or create an eportfolio for their collected digital learning objects (DLOs). One way to go about this is by setting up individual student blogs. If the school is a GAFE school, and if they are open to student agency, students experiencing 'real life' tools, then Blogger might be a good platform for them. What the students publish on their blogs will result out of the vision and the way it is set up. Digital Citizenship and Quality Commenting are all part of teaching students to be effective bloggers.

Setting up Blogger blogs in general:

If you are new to Blogger, use Allanah King's Bling for your Blog to learn how to navigate it.

Age:

It is my understanding that you need to be 13+ to administer a blogger blog (although I can't put my hands on information that confirms this right now). Following recommendations of experienced Googlers, my schools have set up blogs for students and invited them to be authors. Every student still has their own GAFE account, though (e.g. monikak@xyz.school.nz)

Blog Administration:

My schools have created one account in their GAFE domain in charge of blog administration, e.g. blogadmin@xyz.school.nz. This allows the ownership of blogs independent from any actual person who might be leaving the school, the blogs remain owned by the school until they get handed over (when the student leaves).

Template:

When setting up student accounts, my schools have chosen to use the same template for all students. Note: As authors students are unable to make any changes to the layout.

Creating a Blog Template

You can use an existing template or create a blog template from any live blog. However, in the case of my schools setting up their students blogs, we created our own template which is the same for every single student blog - create this at blogger.com, signed in with your blogadmin@xyz.school.nz account.

Using your blogadmin account, create a template blog on blogger (e.g. use a URL like xstemplate.blogspot.co.nz). Keep it simple (you can spend hours on this!). Here is one example I have made.

Gadgets:

I like to have the following gadgets: Blog archive (by default), the visitor count (Google gadget), an image (e.g. school logo, class photo or similar - external content uploaded by you or from a URL), as well as a visitor map (external content embedded via HTML - I like using maploco.com). I prefer to remove About Me (by default) as this shows all the authors and admin, so not that relevant for a student blog I think personally. However, none of the external content (images or HTML code) transfer when you set up the student blogs from this template, you will have to add this content to every individual blog (instructions for this later on)! Another handy little gadget is "Recent Comments", which you create via HTML / Java:

```
<script style=text/javascript src="http://helplogger.googlecode.com/svn/trunk/recent comments widget.js"></script>
<script style=text/javascript>
        var a_rc = 5;
        var m_rc = false;
        var n_rc = true;
        var o_rc = 100;
</script>
<script
src=http://your-blog-name.blogspot.com/feeds/comments/default?alt=json-in-script&callback=showrecentcomments>
</script><div style="font-size: 10px; float: right;">Get this <a
href="http://helplogger.blogspot.com/2012/03/recent-comments-widget-for-blogger.html" rel="nofollow" >Recent
Comments Widget</a></div>
<style type="text/css">
.rcw-comments a {
        text-transform: capitalize;
}

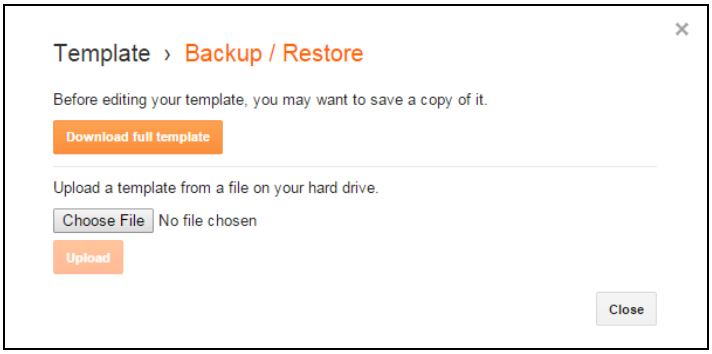
.rcw-comments {
        border-bottom: 1px dotted;
        padding-top: 7px!important;
        padding-bottom: 7px!important;
}
</style>
```

Replace http://your-blog-name.blogspot.com with the URL of your blog.

Once you are happy with the layout, go to Template on your Blogger Dashboard:



In the top right hand corner, go to Backup/Restore. In the new window, select Download Full Template:



Rename the file to something memorable and move it to a location where you can easily find it. I moved mine to Google Drive, you can find the file here. I think it is a good idea to add the link to the template to a sheet 'Blog Template' in a spreadsheet so I have all info in one place.
Please note: If you choose to make changes to your blog template after that, you will have to download it again to apply it to the student blogs.

The setting up process:

In your spreadsheet create a sheet with the following information:

Teacher Name, Teacher email, Class or Year Level, First Name, Last Name, Email address, blog address.

There are various formulae out there for creating generic yet unique URLs, I like using

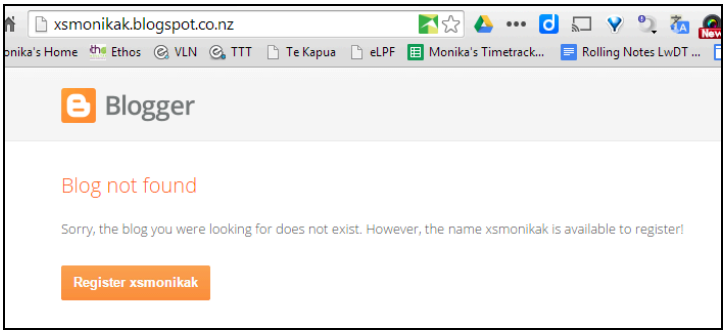
=LOWER(CONCATENATE("http://XS",B1,LEFT(C1,1),".blogspot.co.nz",))

thus creating a URL for students at Xyz School of XS(theirfirstname)(firstletteroftheirlastname).blogspot.co.nz

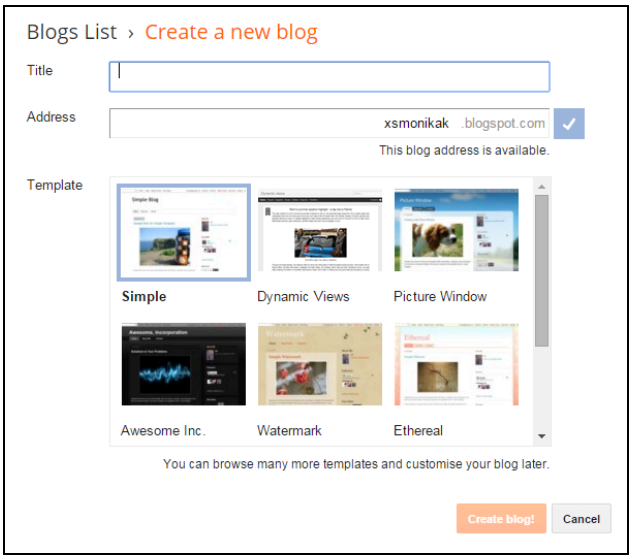
Populate the spreadsheet with the required information. If your formula is applied to the whole blog address column, the formula will automatically create a unique URL for every child.

Creating the actual blogs:

Click on each of the URLs the formula has created for each individual child one by one. If no one else has claimed this URL yet, you can claim it now by clicking on Register.



You get to see a new window:



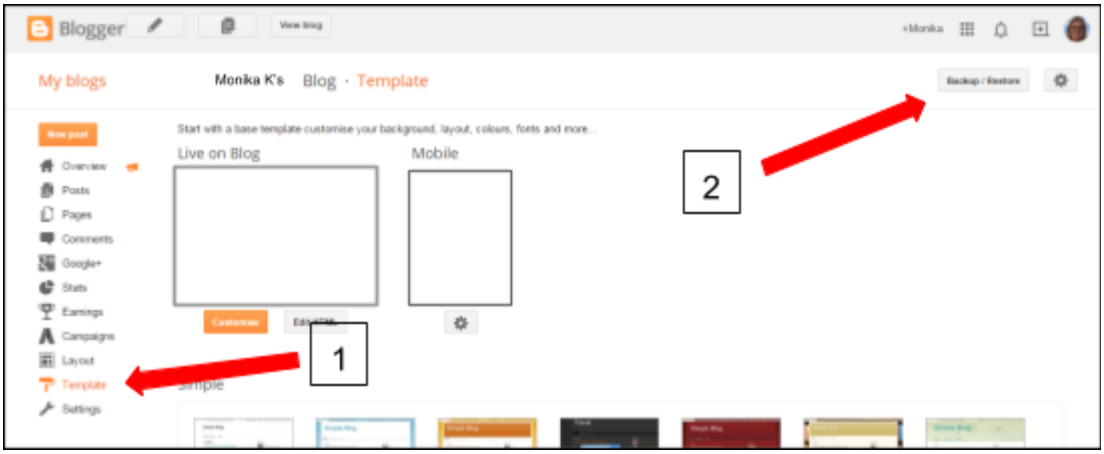
You need to do this for every single student, and I have added a ‘Blog done’ column to my spreadsheet to not lose my place.
Enter the name for the blog, e.g. Monika K’s Blog (remember to follow good DC by not giving the full names), then click Create blog! [Note: Sometimes we found we had to click into the URL field before the Create blog button would turn orange and work]

Potential problems:

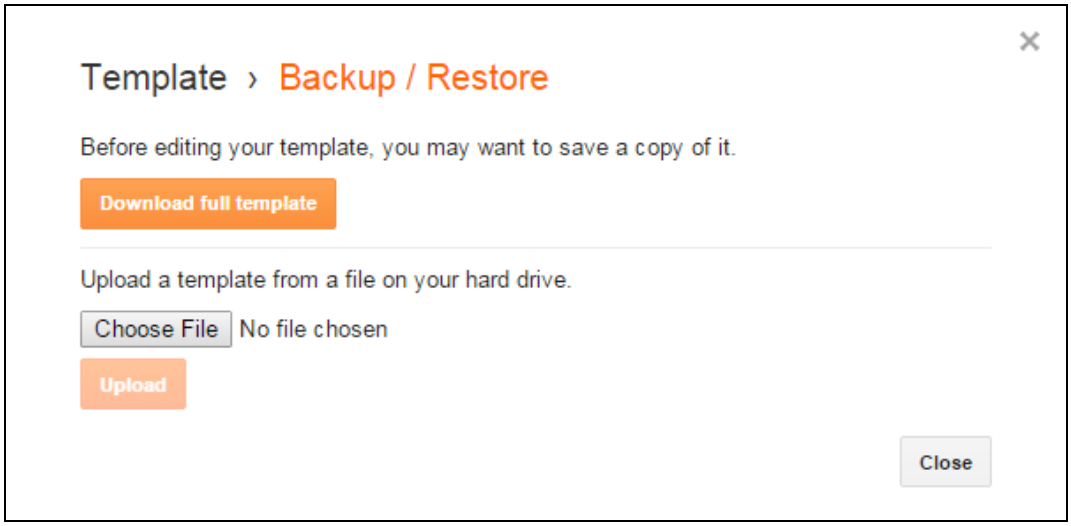
- You have two John S at your school - remove the formula from this cell and manually change the URL in the spreadsheet.
- This URL has been claimed by someone else before - if it is a single instance, manually change the URL as above. If it applies to multiple blogs, think about changing your formula (e.g. change XS to XyzS or similar).

Uploading the template to a student blog
(This has to be done for every single student blog).

As Blogadmin, you will now have a (possibly large) number of student blogs under My Blogs in your Blogger Dashboard. Select the first one, Go to Template (1) and find the Backup / Restore button top right-hand corner (2):



In the new window, choose your template file and upload the template to the blog.

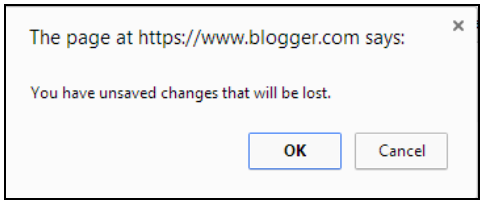


Your skeleton will be there, but you will still need to add the external content to your gadgets again, so I have added a third sheet to my spreadsheet with links to the image and HTML codes (find explanations for how to do this further on). [Note: We only just recently realised that we need a separate html code for maploco for each of our student blogs…]

Blog Settings

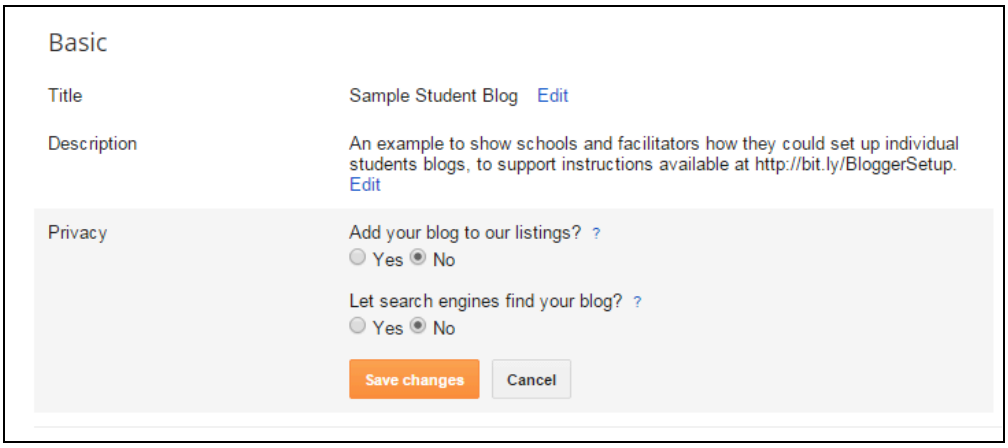
(This has to be done for every single student blog).

Blogger tries to make it easy for us to save our changes; if you attempt to navigate away from a page without saving your changes, you will see this message:

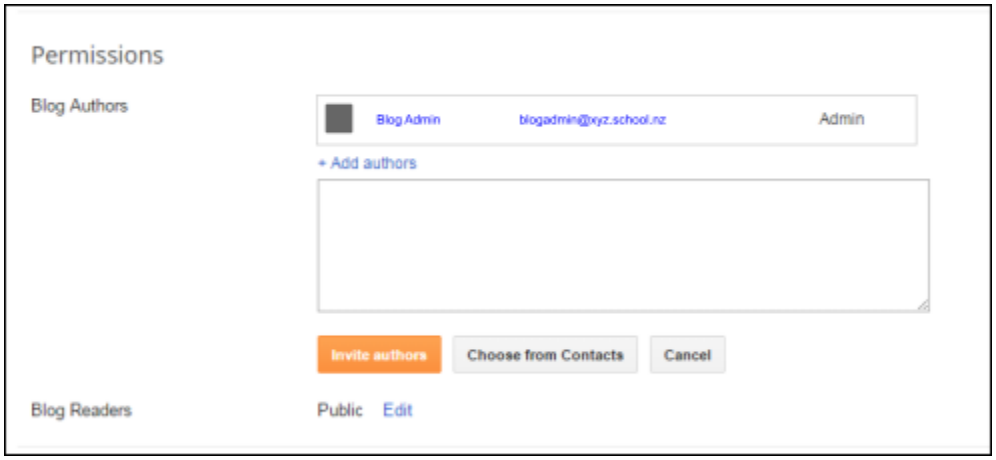


Basic:

- Check that title and description are correct (see Other Information on the Spreadsheet)
- Make blog unlisted on Blogger and invisible to Search Engines



Under Permissions, invite the student and the teacher to this blog (separate email addresses with a comma):

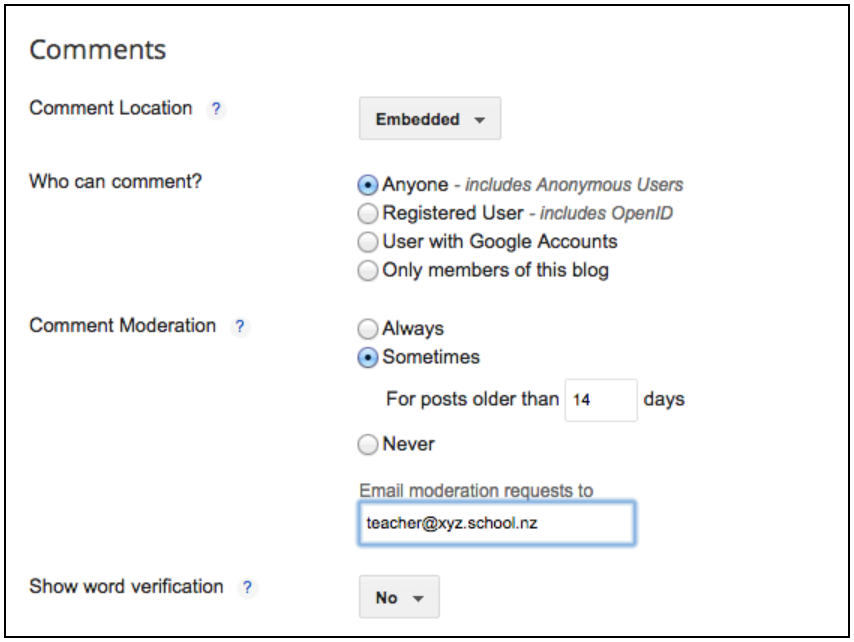


Posts and Comments:

We set comment to Anyone to allow for commenting from families without email accounts, too.

I like comment moderation for posts older than 14 days to cut down on spam comments - you might prefer to have it as always or never. Depending on your students, you might send moderation requests to the teacher's email and / or the student email account.

Word Verification is one of my little pet hates, so I always turn it off (you don't want to put obstacles in the way of students or whānau commenting on the work).

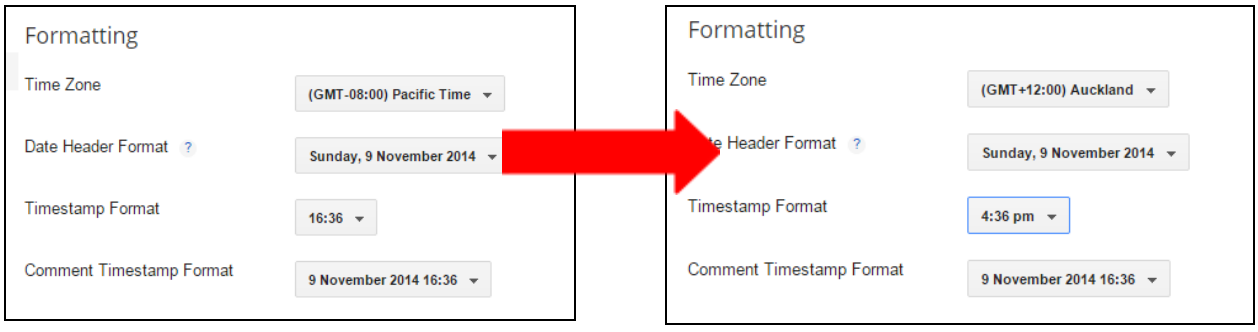


Please add a welcoming message to the Comment Box. If you have chosen to moderate comments, please let people know here (so they don't expect their comment to appear immediately).

Language and Formatting:

Until Blogger offers English (New Zealand) and Te Reo Māori, English (United Kingdom) is the most suitable setting for our students.

Select the correct timezone for your location, and choose the time format most familiar to your setting:



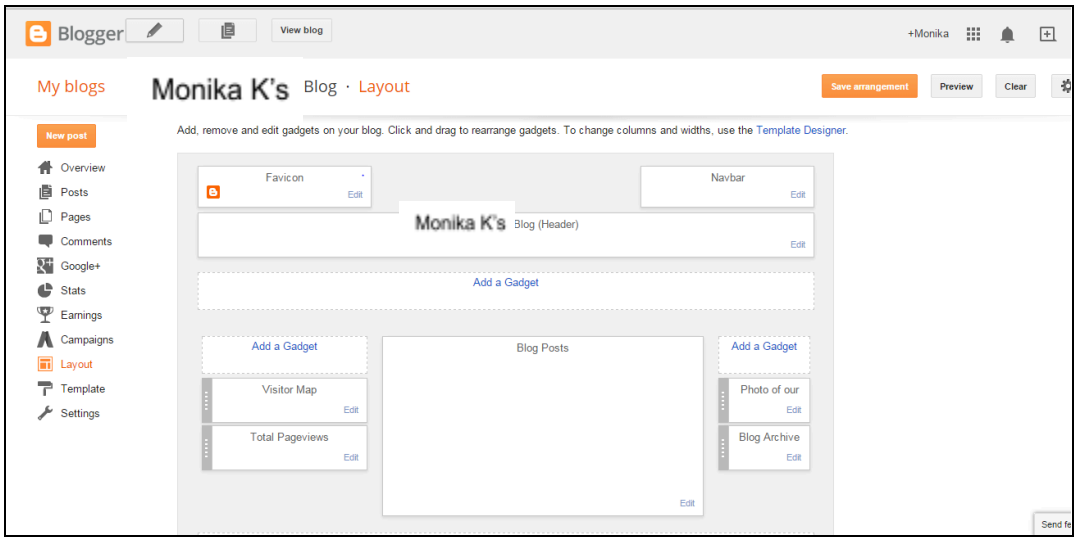
Don’t be surprised, your time will only change once you have clicked Save Settings at the top right hand corner of your page:)



Populating the external content of gadgets on each blog

(This has to be done for every single student blog).

Back on the blog dashboard, select Layout:



Click on the Visitor Map Gadget, click edit, paste in the external HTML content for this blog, save (you could use the spreadsheet to store the HTML content for each blog).

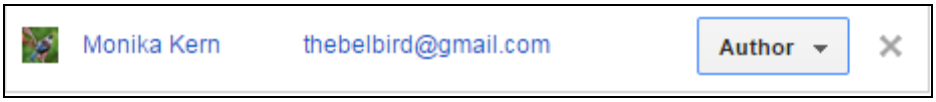
Click on the Photo of our School Gadget (or whatever other image you had selected for your template), edit, add the image, save.

Accepting Author Invitations:

Both students and teachers need to accept the invitation. Go to your Gmail, find the invite email, accept the invitation (if you have multiple blogger accounts already, make sure you are logged in with the correct account before you follow the link).This will lead to a new window, children under 13y old MUST select Create limited Blogger profile (if they select Google+ profile, their account will be automatically blocked by Google due to their age). Enter first name and first letter of their last name (unless you have chosen a different naming convention at your school). Untick the notification box. Confirm and you are ready to go!!! Please note: Invitations expire after 30 days!

Setting up additional Admins:

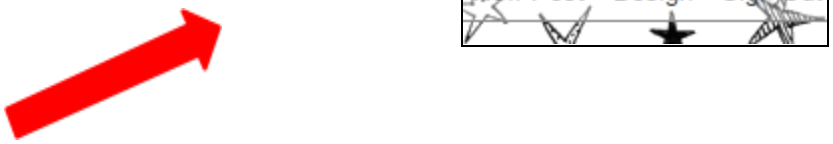
Once the invitation has been accepted, they will appear as Blog Author in Settings - Basic:



The current Admin (Blog Admin) can now choose to make this writer Admin (for the teacher). Note: You can have multiple Admin on a blog. Only Admin(s) can change blog settings.

Blogging:

I recommend for each child to bookmark their blog URL in their browser. To write a Blog Post, they click on New Post top right of the browser (making sure they are logged in first, of course).



Setting up more blogs:

Nothing will prevent your students to set up more blogs from this account (blogger.com). If you are concerned about this, go back over your Digital Citizenship lessons with them.