

RSS, Social Bookmarking and Other Social Tools for Classrooms

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<http://static.hcrhs.k12.nj.us/gems/tech/RSSFAQ4.pdf>

Will Richardson <http://www.weblog-ed.com>



So, you've got your favorite Weblog and media feeds in your aggregator, and you're starting to get the hang of this "getting the good stuff when I want it" concept. How can you start using this in your school and in your classroom? Well, there are a number of different ways that RSS feeds can add to your knowledge base, help you communicate, and make your teaching better.

• RSS Feeds with Student Weblogs

If you already use Weblogs with your students, the uses of RSS should be pretty apparent. Instead of checking out all 25 (or 30, or more) student Weblogs every day, you could just collect their work in your aggregator using their RSS feeds. That way, you can scan through all of the class content in one place, make sure it's all appropriate, and click through to a particular post if you want to comment on it. My use of student feeds in this way has drastically reduced my reading time and allowed me to make all of my classes paperless. In addition, you can provide individual student Weblog feeds to parents or counselors or whoever else might be interested in that student's work and be savvy enough to know about RSS. (Don't worry, pretty soon most people will know.)

With some Weblog packages, you can even subscribe to feeds that show new comments on the various sites, or even to just certain topics. In other words, you can track just about everything going on in your student blogs using RSS.

In addition, Weblog software like Moveable Type and Manila allow you to import RSS feeds into pages you create for your or your students' sites. While it takes a little bit of code to make it work, the benefits of bringing topic specific feeds right into student (or teacher) work spaces is something that you might want to explore. (See also the "Including RSS Feeds in Your Weblog" later in this guide.)

• RSS Feeds without Student Weblogs

Even if your students don't have Weblogs, you may want to have them set up their own Bloglines account. With more and more news sources producing feeds for aggregation, the breadth of current events and even topic-specific research that students could collect could go a long way to assisting them with research or further study. (It's one reason why I think RSS could be a great help for the lack of media and information literacy skills students have.) And, if you use a Weblog, they can include your feed in their aggregator to stay abreast of what is going on in class.

• RSS Search Feeds

The idea of creating RSS feeds for search terms is especially interesting. Say you have a student that is doing a project or a paper on global warming. That student could actually create an RSS feed that would bring any news about global warming to his aggregator as soon as it was published. Kind of like doing research 24/7, only the RSS feed does all the work. And you can create a feed about any topic you want. Here's how:

• RSS Feeds for News Searches

If you want to create a feed for what's in the daily news about a particular topic, you can make a syndicated feed of search results of Google News. Just take the following feed address and add your search terms where indicated. <http://www.justinpfister.com/gnewsfeed.php?q=your+terms+here> So, for instance, if you want to have a feed for the search term "journalism and weblog" it would look like <http://www.justinpfister.com/gnewsfeed.php?q=journalism+and+weblog> Copy that address and paste it into your Bloglines aggregator, and you'll start getting any news that's in the media about your topic right away. When you start getting results from your feed, you may want to refine your search until you get a manageable number of posts. And remember, you can create as many of these feeds as you like, with as many terms as you like (as long as they are separated by a plus sign.) (Thanks to Justin P. Fister for providing this service.)

You can also limit your news search feeds to just one publication. Say you want to follow the phrase "global warming" in, say, the *New York Times*, you can go to the Google News 2 RSS site at <http://www.justinpfister.com/gnewsfeed.php> and enter the following into the search query form: "global warming" source:new_york_times. That would produce the following feed: http://www.justinpfister.com/gnewsfeed.php?q=%22global+warming%22+source%3Anew_york_times. Now I know that looks long and ugly, but if you take that address subscribe to it in your Bloglines account, you'll be notified every time the *New York Times* mentions global warming. And Google has about 4,500 news sources that you can choose from. (Note: While Google does not publish this list, you can find a growing list of Google's sources at: <http://www.privateradio.org/blog/i/google-news/index.php?ord=count>) So, you can tweak that ugly URL in any number of combinations to change your request. For instance, for stories in the Seattle Post Intelligencer that have the words education and technology, the feed is http://www.justinpfister.com/gnewsfeed.php?q=education+technology+source%3Aseattle_post_intelligencer (For a complete step by step rundown of how to do this, try Steve Rubels "An RSS Hack for Sites That Don't Offer Feeds" at http://www.micropersuasion.com/2004/09/an_rss_hack_for.html. Just remember to use the Justin Fister site in Step #3) If you think about it, this could be an incredibly easy way to track any number of topics. And the best part is, once you set it up, the results come to you. And if you ever want to stop receiving the feed, just delete it from your aggregator. (If only we could do that with spam, right?)

Ok, say you're not a Google lover and would rather use Yahoo News instead. No problem. Just go to <http://news.yahoo.com>, put in your search terms, and look for the little orange XML icon in the right hand column. (You may have to scroll down.) Now it's a bit harder to hack out just one publication for this search. Just e-mail me at will@weblog-ed.com if you want the instructions.

• RSS Feeds for Weblog Searches

Getting a regular feed of searches in the blogosphere is just as easy, but you need to remember that the results aren't always going to be as, shall we say, appropriate. Obviously, the vast majority of Weblogs are not edited for content by someone other than the author, and invariably there will be some questionable posts that will land in your aggregator. Still, Weblogs offer up some really great potential research, and you might want to experiment with searching them on your own before bringing students into the fray. To do so, the easiest way is to go to Feedster.com and type in your search terms. On the page of results, you'll see a little 2.0 RSS box that when you click on it will give you a number of standard newsreaders to choose from. If you're logged in at Bloglines, just click the Bloglines link and it will automatically add it to your account. Otherwise, click on the 2.0 RSS box and grab the URL from

the next page. You can go through pretty much the same process at Bloglines, Blogdigger.com, Syndic8.com, pubsub.com and other Weblog search sites.

Another option is Technorati.com which is a leader in indexing weblog content. Once you've signed up for a free membership, you can create what Technorati calls "Watchlists." Each watchlist you create has it's own RSS feed that you can add to Bloglines.

• RSS Feeds for Website Searches

There's more. You can even create an RSS feed from a search of Google sites (not news, sites.) So, if there is new content about global warming added to a site that's already on the Internet, or if there is a whole new site created about the topic, you'll find out about it in your aggregator. Here's how. Go to Googlealerts.com and sign up for an account. It's free. Once your registered, you can create up to three searches that can bring back up to 150 results total. Just fill in the form with the search terms you want, click "Go", and then click "Feed Settings" on the next page. All of your searches will come up, and you can check the box that says "RSS Feed" next to each one of them, then click "Update" at the bottom. Then, take the feed address that appears in each box and copy it into your Bloglines account. (No page that comes up with that scary looking mass of code that you can't make heads or tails of this time.) MSN search now sports RSS feeds for the results as well. Just go to <http://search.msn.com/> and type in your search. At the bottom of the results page you should see one of those orange XML buttons. You know what to do by now...

• RSS Feeds for News Group Searches

You can also search Internet news groups and get an RSS feed of the results. (Where does it end?) To do this, go to Pubsub.com. (The specific address is <http://www.pubsub.com/newsgroups.php>) Put in your search terms, and click "Create My Subscription". On the next page, either click on the little Bloglines icon to add it to your aggregator, or copy and paste the subscription link that is provided. Pretty cool. But beware that a search feed of newsgroups can bring back all sorts of irrelevant content and you may want to spend some time refining your search to match your interests.

• RSS Feeds for Other News Outlets

Now as I said, a number of more traditional news outlets are starting to provide RSS feeds of their content including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *US World and News Report*, *Rolling Stone* and many others. Aside from The Media Drop address that I gave you earlier, many of these can be found at the Weblogs Compendium site at this address: <http://www.lights.com/weblogs/rssfeeds.html>. If you want to find out if your favorite publication has an RSS feed, do a Google search with the publication name and "RSS" and see what comes up.

Another way to get continually updated news about various topics is to use the feeds provided by Moreover.com. It provides a huge list of predefined topic searches at http://w.moreover.com/categories/category_list_rss.html. You can find even more of these types of Moreover feeds (including ones for your favorite sports teams, the state you live in, and your favorite presidential candidate) at this page on the Syndic8.com site: <http://www.syndic8.com/feedcat.php?Scheme=Syndic8>.

• RSS Feeds for Bookmarks

One of the more recent uses of RSS has been to syndicate the Internet bookmarks you keep of your travels. You can do this using a site called Furl.net. With a Furl account (which is free) you can save, annotate, rate, organize and share the best links that you find on the Internet. And, even better, you can

create RSS feeds for the unique departments that you store those links in. Here, for instance, is the RSS feed for the “classroom weblogs” folder in my own Furl account:

<http://www.furl.net/members/willrich/rss.xml?topic=classroom+weblogs> So, every time that I read about a new weblog in education and save it to my Furl account, you would be notified.

Let’s use our global warming example. Every time you come to a site that has information on global warming, you can “Furl it” and save it into your global warming folder. (Instructions on how to do this are on the Furl site...it’s easy!) Now, anyone who may be subscribed to the feed that Furl.net creates for that global warming folder (like, maybe, your students?) will get automatically updated when you add a new link to it. If you wanted to follow what all Furl members are bookmarking about global warming, here is the feed address: <http://www.furl.net/members/rss.xml?topic=global+warming> Obviously, just substitute your own interests.

Take it one step further. Say you set up a classroom Furl.net account, and you and all of your students added links to a variety of topic specific folders as you found them. You could all keep track of those links by subscribing to the feeds that were most relevant in your Bloglines account. And Furl offers a whole bunch of other ways to share your bookmarks as well. Another similar service is at del.icio.us. (Just type it in as written...trust me.) del.icio.us doesn’t give you as many features as Furl, but it’s really easy to follow what people are reading via RSS. At del.icio.us, people add tag words to whatever link they save, and subscribing to all of the links under a particular tag is as simple as pasting the following into your aggregator: <http://del.icio.us/rss/tag/blogs>. In this case, you’d be following all bookmarks that were tagged with the word “blogs.” But you can substitute whatever word you want, i.e. <http://del.icio.us/rss/tag/springsteen>.

• Combining RSS Feeds

Now let’s say you have a classroom full of students who each have their own Weblogs. They also have set up accounts at Furl so that they can collect relevant Web pages for the work they are doing, and they have a number of search feeds that they are tracking to collect even more information. From a teaching standpoint, if you wanted to monitor all of that information flow, it would take quite a bit of time and work. But here is a way to combine all of those collective feeds into one so that you can keep all the related work together and get a clearer picture of a student’s workflow.

[Blogdigger.com](http://www.blogdigger.com) (<http://www.blogdigger.com>) has a way to create what they call groups of feeds, blending as many different feeds as you want into one. Just go to the [Blogdigger](http://www.blogdigger.com) site, click on the “Groups” button, click on “Create a New Group,” Fill out the information on the form that follows, then on the next page enter the various feed addresses that you want to combine. [Blogdigger](http://www.blogdigger.com) gives this new feed a unique address that you can then take and use in [Bloglines](http://www.bloglines.com) or however else.

• Including RSS Feeds in Your Weblog

Even though using [Bloglines](http://www.bloglines.com) or some other aggregator is the easiest way to collect and view your feeds, with a little bit of work you can actually get feed results to show up on your Weblog or other Web page. Some Weblog packages have built-in ways to do this, and the instructions vary. But I’m going to show you one way to create a piece of JavaScript that you can then take a drop into your page wherever you want to put it. This little “Feed to JavaScript” tool comes courtesy of Alan Levine who is the tech guru at the Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction in Arizona. You can find it at <http://jade.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/feed/index.php?s=build>. Just enter the feed you want to display, fill out a few more parameters, and voila, the JavaScript is created for you. Just take it and drop it into the HTML of your blog, and your feed results will start showing up right on the page.