RSS: A Quick Start Guide for Educators

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Introduction*

S o just what is RSS and how can it be used in education? Depending on who you talk to, RSS stands for *Rich Site Summary* or *Real Simple Syndication*. Either way, RSS is a real important technology that information specialists and educators would be well advised to harness sooner rather than later.

In simple terms, Weblogs (and an ever-growing number of other sites) generate a behind-the-scenes code in a language similar to HTML called XML. This code, usually referred to as a "feed" (as in "news feed,") makes it possible for readers to "subscribe" to the content that is created on a particular Weblog so they no longer have to visit the blog itself to get it. As is true with traditional syndication, the content comes to you instead of you going to get it, hence "Real Simple Syndication."

For instance, say you're a political science teacher and you've found 20 or 30 Weblog and media sites on the Internet that are consistently publishing

interesting and relevant information for you and your students. Finding the time to click through to those sites and keep abreast of any new information on a regular basis would be nearly impossible. But what if you only had to go to one place to read all of the new content on all of those sites? Wouldn't be so difficult, would it? Well, that's exactly what RSS feeds allows you to do by using a type of software called an "aggregator" or feed collector. The aggregator checks the feeds you subscribe to, usually every hour, and it collects all the new content from those sites you are subscribed to. Then, when you're ready, you open up your aggregator to read the individual stories, file them for later use, click through to the site itself, or delete them if they're not relevant. In other words, you check one site instead of 30…not a bad tradeoff for a typically harried teacher.

Here's another scenario: you currently get the headlines from *The New York Times* via an e-mail message that arrives each morning. But more and more, your e-mail box is being clogged up by spammers selling everything from pornography to mortgages. There are new virus warnings every day. That New York Times content is getting lost in the morass that e-mail has become. Not so with RSS. The New York Times, as well as hundreds of other newspapers, has a number of virus free "feeds" that your aggregator can collect. And in general, you know that everything in your aggregator is something you want to read because you subscribed to it. No ads, no spam, just new content from the sources you read.

Setting Up an RSS Feed Reader

Ready to start? First, you need to set up an aggregator to collect your RSS feeds. I would suggest the Web-based service from Bloglines.com. Why? While there are a number of great downloadable newsreader packages out there that can do wonderful things, the main advantage to Bloglines is that you can access it from anywhere you have an Internet connection. In other words, you don't have to be on your own computer(s) with special software installed to read your news. (Of course, if you do only use one machine, there are many aggregators with more features than Bloglines that you may want to consider. Check out http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_aggregator .)

Setting up a Bloglines account is easy. When you get to the site, use the "Click Here to Sign Up!" link in the middle of the page and follow the procedures. You'll get a confirmation e-mail to which you'll need to respond, and then you should be ready to go.

Bloglines has a few ways to subscribe to feeds. First, you can look at their listing of most popular subscriptions by clicking on the "Top Blogs" link under the "What's Hot" section of the Bloglines homepage. (Or, just go to http://www.bloglines.com/topblogs.) It will take you to a page of the 100 most subscribed to feeds among their users. You can preview the content, and then, while you are logged in, you can subscribe to any on the list by clicking on the "Subscribe" link under each feed description. Then, click on the "My Feeds" link at the top left of the screen, you'll see the feeds you subscribed to with the number of messages waiting to be read in parenthesis next to the name. Any time you come back, the feed name will be bold when new messages are waiting.

The other way to subscribe to feeds is to manually add them to your list by using the "Add" link at the top of your subscription list. (See Figure A.) To use this, you'll need to paste the address of the feed you want into the subscribe form that appears on the next page. For instance, if you wanted to track the new content on my blog, here is the feed to my site: http://www.weblogg-ed.com/xml/rss.xml. (More about finding feeds in a second.)

Figure A

Once you paste in a feed, Bloglines will ask you if you want to make a folder and whether or not you want other people to see your feed. (You have the option of letting others view your subscriptions. My public feeds are at http://bloglines.com/public/wrichard.) And, when you have some feeds to work with, Bloglines lets you rename them (among other things) by clicking on the "Edit" link at the top right of the right hand frame when your are viewing the results of one of your subscriptions. It's pretty intuitive, and if you start getting quite a few feeds in your list, you might want to take the time to get organized. (The "Reorder/Sort" link is useful for that as well.)

Finally, throw a link to Bloglines on your toolbar or in your Favorites folder. If you want up to the minute results, add the Bloglines notifier (http://www.bloglines.com/about/notifier) to the bottom of your screen which will let you know when new content has been posted to any of the feeds you are subscribed to. Either way, remember to check back often. Collecting feeds only works if you read the new stuff regularly! (For even more info, read the Bloglines FAQ at http://www.bloglines.com/help/faq#updates .)

Finding and Adding Feeds

Once you have your aggregator set up, it's time to find some relevant feeds to stock it with. Luckily, more and more news outlets and standard Websites are adding feeds for their content so there will be more and more to choose from in the future. The best newspaper list I've found so far is at The Media Drop (http://www.themediadrop.com/archives/001588.php#more.) There are links to RSS feeds for at least 125 national, local and university papers there. And dozens of print magazines now have feeds from their online sites. But for now let's just deal with blogs. First, understand that most Weblogs have a link to their feeds on their homepages. On many, it's a text link in one of the side columns that says "Syndicate this site (XML)." Or it might be a link that says "RSS 1.0 (or 2.0)." But most often, it's a pretty orange icon that looks like this: **XML** No matter which type it is, you'll need to click on it in order to get the address of that site's feed. Don't worry if the page that comes up is a scary looking mass of code that you can't make heads or tails of. All you really need is the Internet address of that page (the URL.) Just copy the address, go into Bloglines, click the "Add" link and paste it into the subscribe line at top of the right hand window, and subscribe. Next time you visit your "My Blogs" page, the feed for that site should show up.

If you're not sure what Weblogs to subscribe to, you can always use one of the blog search engines to find sites that might be relevant to your interests. Some of the better Weblog search sites include Technorati.com, Feedster.com, and Daypop.com, but there are many more listed at Weblogs Compendium at this page: http://www.lights.com/weblogs/searching.html. And once you find a few, Bloglines will also recommend some other feeds that you might be interested in based on what you're already reading. (Isn't that nice of them?) Just click on "Recommendations" at the bottom of your subscription list.

Using RSS Feeds in the Classroom

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 with<u>out</u> 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 <u>News</u> 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**](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@weblogg-ed.com if you want the instructions.

RSS Feeds for <u>Weblog</u> 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 <u>Website</u> 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 <u>News Group</u> 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) 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 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 gives this new feed a unique address that you can then take and use in Bloglines or however else.

- ## Including RSS Feeds in Your Weblog

Even though using Bloglines 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 Java script 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.

Cool RSS Feeds

Airport Delays via RSS: http://www.pubsub.com/airports.php
Weather via RSS: http://www.rssweather.com/
Earthquake Notification via RSS: http://www.pubsub.com/earthquakes.php
Techbargains via RSS: http://www.techbargains.com/rss.xml
Word of the day via RSS:
http://dictionary.reference.com/wordoftheday/wotd.rss
Ebay via RSS: http://www.rssauction.com/

RSS Resources

There are a slew of great resources for learning about RSS, some of which are mentioned above. Here are a few others:

RSS Resource page from Lockergnome:
http://channels.lockergnome.com/rss/

For a great introduction to RSS, try Fagan Finder's "Explanation of RSS, How You Can Use it, and Finding RSS Feeds" at
http://www.faganfinder.com/search/rss.shtml

Jenny Levine gave a great presentation at the Computers in Libraries Conference, and it's online at
http://www.sls.lib.il.us/infotech/presentations/2004/cil-rss.pdf

"RSS: The Next Killer App For Education" by Mary Harrsch (http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp?show=article&id=2010) is an article that has more scenarios of how RSS might be used by teachers and students.

*Portions of the introduction excerpted from "Blogging and RSS — The 'What's It?' and 'How To' of Powerful New Web Tools for Educators" at
http://www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/jan04/richardson.shtml