There is much wrong with American education. I knew this from my own schooling even before I decided to become a classroom teacher, but that experience intensified my belief that we need to rethink our schools. And before switching careers in my late 40s by getting a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), I had already begun to participate in discussions about education in online listservs and bulletin boards. Once in the classroom, I began studies toward a doctorate in educational policy because I wanted to have the “union card” to get my voice heard on policy matters. At about the same time, I’d gotten to know Jay Mathews, the Washington Post’s writer on education, and at his behest wrote several pieces that appeared in papers in the D.C. metro area. When Jay suggested that I turn some of my research into a piece for his paper, I said that I was thinking of submitting it as a journal article.

“Why do you want to send it to a peer-reviewed journal?” Jay said. “They take forever to publish anything, and who reads them? You have an ability to write about education in a way that ordinary people can understand. You can make things real for them. You can have just as much of an effect doing that as you would as a scholar.”

Those words changed everything for me.

Since I already served as a peer-reviewer for several publications, I realized that Jay was at least partly correct—the time lag was significant, and so was the limited nature of the audience. And while I may have the mind of a scholar, I really lack the appropriate temperament.
I began to rethink how I could contribute to the nation’s debate on educational policy. I wanted to reach the widest possible audience, parents and other teachers and members of the public as well as academics and policymakers, and I decided that scholarly discussion wasn’t going to enable me to do that. I knew I could keep publishing the occasional letter to the editor or op-ed piece. I knew that would open other doors. But would even that create a dialog with a broad, consistent audience?

I didn’t realize it at first, but the medium I was looking for was already in front of me. I had always been active in politics, and when I was in New Hampshire in late 2003 volunteering for Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, someone showed me a group blog on progressive politics called Daily Kos (see Figure 24.2).

Anyone could write for it; the only criterion for reaching its burgeoning online community was that readers had to recommend what you wrote in order for your work to stay visible. I started to post blog entries on Daily Kos—diaries, in the Daily Kos terminology—just as it was becoming the biggest and most widely read site on the progressive side of the blogosphere. Only part of what I wrote was related to teaching, schools, and education, but because everything I do comes back in the end to what happens in my classroom, a lot of passion and thought went into those posts.

My diaries began to get a response—for some reason my words connected with many of those who read them. Some of those people were educators. Others wrote from their own experiences as students or as parents. I found my diaries often became an occasion for intensive discussions in the “comments” threads that flowed from each diary: my words were merely a convenient starting point for something in greater depth, far more intense. For example, I might write about teachers who had had an impact upon me, and others would share their memories. From that starting point, folks would begin to discuss what kind of teacher made the biggest difference and why.

People began to ask what I thought about many different aspects of education, and as the planning began for the first Yearly Kos convention, I argued for at least one panel on education: reauthorization of No Child Left Behind was scheduled for the Congress elected in 2006. Because by then I was considered the most prominent writer on education at Daily Kos, the conference planners asked me to organize a panel, and I did—with educational advocate and former businessman Jamie Vollmer and with Governor Tom Vilsack. Since then I’ve organized...
additional panels on education at subsequent Yearly Kos gatherings and at its successor, the Net-
roots Nation meeting. These conventions now draw hundreds of participants and many of the
nation’s most prominent progressive politicians. I have been invited to present at conferences,
or to attend conferences and write about them. People ask me to write about books on educa-
tion; authors and publishers believe that my writing may entice or persuade others to read what
I recommend.

All of this is gratifying, as are the relationships I have been able to develop with politicians
with responsibility for or concern about education. Remember, I started a doctoral program
because I wanted to have a voice in educational policy. I felt too often the voice of those of us
actually working with students was not part of the discussion when policy was being designed.
Blogging about education has caused that to begin to change.

Consider an exchange I had at that meeting at Starbucks. I reminded Tom Vilsack about a
recent meeting on education he and the other governors had had, each governor bringing a busi-
ness leader who was concerned about education. Why, I asked, had each governor not brought
teacher or a principal or even a student? Why were the voices of those directly involved with
schools and education not part of the discussion? Tom looked surprised, and acknowledged that
he had never considered such a possibility.

So there are times when my blogging enables me to have an infl uence on the thinking of
those in a position to make or change educational policy. That potentially improves the lives of
all teachers and all students. Perhaps it is because of my blogging that I got an invitation to meet
with congressional staff to talk about education. Or, as happened recently, I got to participate in
a focus group to help set the next year’s direction for a major professional publication. Through
my blogging and my connections in various online discussion groups I have been able to be a
conduit between the educational community, including teachers as well as policy folks, and
many people responsible for policy in Congress and elsewhere.

I have no pretensions that my blogging will ever become my primary source of income. I
rarely get paid for what I write, although I enjoy the few such opportunities that come my way.
I am satisfied, even gratified, with the ability to make a difference, perhaps in the thinking of
others, even when we disagree. Even better, occasionally I experience that my words unlock
something for some readers, thereby empowering them.

I blog in part because I am a blabbermouth. That is, I have ideas that I want to share. Some
are mine, but many are those I have encountered from others, about which I want to converse.
Blogging provides an opportunity to engage in discussion and learn from those who challenge
me with their comments and questions, or offer points of view I might not have considered or
ideas I had not encountered. The exchange enriches all of us, including the many who never
comment, but who will occasionally come up to me at conferences and thank me, or who drop
me a message via the email address I list with my blog posts.

The online dialog is not always so sanguine, however. One runs the risk of people “stalking”
you across the blogosphere, seeking out your diaries and comments to attack you. And since I
do not hide my identity and provide a real email in my profile, I often get off -blog communica-
tions. Most are heartfelt, some are not. Some expand my thinking. Others eventually oblige me
to block their writers’ email addresses because I don’t need such grief in my inbox.

I write a lot about issues other than education. I am passionate about civil liberties. I majored
in music in college. There are people in other fields whose life and work I admire. Regardless of
subject, certain things are common to everything I write—above all, my passion for the topic
and my desire to connect with others. For as hard as it is for some to believe, I am basically shy;
blogging enables me to connect with a wider range of people, to form ways of being connected
I Blog Because I Teach

I think of what I do as an extension of how I teach. On the first instructional day, I ask my students “What is justice?” and regardless of the quality of the answers they give, I challenge them to think more deeply, to go further. I do this by raising further questions: if a student answers that justice is “to punish those that break the law,” I may ask if that means that Harriet Tubman should have been fined or imprisoned for all the slaves she helped escape from the South? My purpose is to help my students realize that true education is far more than merely learning a series of facts. I want them to be able to think more deeply, to ask what any fact or set of facts might mean. In the process of doing that, they may offer me back a perspective I have not considered—that is a benefit I gain from the exchange. For them, they will begin to develop skills that will enable them to challenge themselves, their own ideas and thinking. And thus they will begin to able to educate themselves. The students may experience some discomfort—for many this is the first time they have encountered the Socratic method. I am willing to risk their discomfort in order to challenge them. If we are too comfortable, we are far less likely to take the risk of exploring new ideas, new ways of thinking and perceiving, ways which are a key component of intellectual—and moral—growth.

Readers often comment on my online teaching: that is, in my blogging and in the comments I post they see me as engaging them in thinking, in being willing to dialog. I am not by nature a “drive-by poster,” someone who puts up a post and then leaves it alone. Instead, I stay around to engage in online conversation. Perhaps because of that people will often read what I post as the starting point, an invitation to respond. The blog format allows multiple people to participate in the conversation, jumping in and out with their remarks as they deem appropriate.

The ability to respond immediately in the comment threads is a large part of a blog’s appeal, both for readers and writers. I experience the impact my words have, and blogging does indeed become a form of teaching, which is perhaps the most important reason why I do it at all. As in my classroom, my ultimate purpose is not to disseminate information, although occasionally that is key. Rather, it is to challenge thinking, to help others realize that they have the power to learn—and to teach and to persuade—without the blessing or control of designated authorities. I want to make people somewhat uncomfortable, in the hopes that that will move them from stasis to growth—I suppose in that you can see my affinity for Vygotsky as well as for Dewey. Sometimes that leads to challenges, and to people who reject what I offer, which is fine with me. In any case, what is in many ways the most interesting for me is to watch the conversations that start among the readers, without my direct involvement. They work toward the building of community, part of what brings people back to my postings and to those of other writers whom they come to know and appreciate.

That is why, I suspect, my writing has now built up a consistent audience. One builds that audience over time—primarily by the quality of the writing and of the ideas and of the conversations that result. Since I write largely on a blog focused on politics, I am never quite sure who will read and respond to my work on any given occasion when I write about education. Some of my readers will be other educators, many will be parents, some will be people interested for other reasons. The only assumption I can safely make is that the vast majority of my audience will not be professional educators. And thus my language must be clear, my terminology explained, my ideas organized in a way that allows others to follow my thinking. Because most of my audience does not consist of educators, my writing has a greater impact.

That is what makes blogging so empowering: you don’t have to have a readily identifiable name or externally certified expertise to develop an audience. People notice you, tell others,
and then they, in turn, read and join the conversation. One’s blog name becomes something of a recognized brand, inducing people to glance at the beginning of whatever you write. Then? Whether readers persist through the piece, or ever click again, is a function of the quality of the writing and the thinking.

I have now been “blogging” for more than five years. In that time I have written several thousand posts, of which about 20% have been about education, teaching, school, and related subjects. The vast majority of my writing has appeared on Daily Kos, though as the blogosphere has evolved and the lines between traditional media and new media have continued to blur, I’ve gotten opportunities in much older venues that would never have been possible a few years ago. Even the New York Times has blogs now, and in the summer of 2008 I was asked to participate in its re-established Lesson Plans blog. The Times experience enabled me to converse about education with an additional community.

In the end, I have experienced blogging as a way of teaching and building communities with people I would never otherwise encounter. I have had the experience of immediate feedback from a variety of perspectives I might not have considered, which has expanded my knowledge and sharpened my own thinking. I have been part of a process that has helped change politics and policy, at least in part. The ability to quickly build virtual communities of like-minded people allows those otherwise not included in normal policy discussions to have their voices heard. After all, Tom Vilsack’s Internet guy reached out to me precisely because I had an audience; I was part of a larger community. The ability of people to reach positions of influence based only on the quality of their work, and not by getting past the obstacles of self-perpetuating groups of gatekeepers, is incredibly empowering, and very small-d democratic.

Does blogging make a difference? By itself it could be destructive, a way of avoiding real engagement with the problems that confront us. But as I have increasingly found over the years, it can also mean connecting oneself to real debates in the real world, and drawing one into actions that goes beyond words.

In November 2008, after reading responses to Barack Obama’s election by famous op-ed writers and ordinary folks alike, I wrote a diary that was not specifically about education but that expressed as well as anything I have written why it is that I blog:

Words have the power to inspire. If we have learned nothing else from this campaign, it should be that. It is never “just words” any more than simple human kindness is an ordinary act. Like all acts, those of kindness are extraordinary. As all people are, at least potentially, themselves extraordinary, capable of incredible things. First one has to believe, to have vision.

That is why I am a teacher—to help my students have that belief in and vision about themselves.

It is also why I write—in the hope that my fumbled connections of words perhaps may in someone else unlock a power in them that will connect them with what a former president once dismissed as the vision thing.

Peace.

The entire text above was posted as a diary at Daily Kos (http://www.DailyKos.com) on Sunday, December 14, 2008, where it generated a somewhat lively discussion of more than 100 comments. It is discussions like this that make the interactive nature of blogging such an interesting phenomenon. In what follows, I’ve compiled a small selection of the commentary, including interchanges in which I participated, to give a sense of how these discussions work.
The interchange in Figure 24.3, for example, includes what is called a “tip jar,” the first comment by the diarist. In this I invite people to participate, which you can see immediately engenders a response. I offer this not because it is complimentary, but because the response shows that this form of “teaching” finds a ready audience online.

Figure 24.4 shows how one reader connects what he has read with his own experience of teaching.

Sometimes the responses may seem a bit off topic, but then one can see the kind of humor—often self-deflating—that can keep us from being too serious (see Figure 24.5).

And to offer one more example, Figure 24.6 is someone who has a different experience in education, but because of feeling welcome in previous interchanges chooses to offer a different perspective that is beneficial for the rest of us to experience.
I have chosen to use blogging as a form of public discourse about education, to broaden the discussions about how to best improve our schools and our teaching. I also use the medium to initiate discussions on other topics, for example, to share ideas about policies beyond education, or to inform: I have also written diaries about music and books I want to encourage others to explore. In return, they often offer me suggestions or point out weaknesses of my presentation. As in much of the best pedagogy, the process of learning is not unidirectional.

My primary pedagogical forum remains my classroom, filled with high school students. It is the experience of being with them that informs and motivates much of what I write online. In that sense, all of my pedagogy is public, open to discussion, thus enabling me to continue to learn, and thereby become a better teacher for those entrusted to my care in the classroom. Peace.