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The Influence of Classroom Blogging on Elementary Student Writing

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Abstract

Blogs in classrooms are a new genre that is developing and changing daily. Scholarly literature explores the use of blogs in educational settings, often however at the secondary and college levels. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore how blogging influenced student writing development at the elementary level. Fifth graders' pre- and post the blogging project writing samples and other student blog posts were the primary data. A qualitative content analysis was applied to explore the following areas of interest in student writing: attitude, content, voice, connections and relationships, thinking, and craft. The findings indicate that student bloggers became mindful of and connected to the audience, were exercising agency in a community of bloggers, and were learning to take ownership of the writing process and the writer's craft. Refraining from putting a heavy focus on correcting writing conventions during this formative time of writing development enabled students to concentrate on writing that they filled with opinions, humor, expression, and playfulness as they learned to rethink their concepts of writing and its meaning in their lives.

The Influence of Classroom Blogging on Elementary Student Writing

Blogs in classrooms are a new genre that is developing and changing daily. When focusing on student writing growth, blogs can bring different dynamics into the classroom as writing becomes public, participatory, and constantly developing (Boling, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Penrod, 2007). Scholarly literature explores the use of blogs in educational settings, often however at the secondary and college levels (Boling, 2008; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Studies have supported the value of blogs for reflection (Ray & Hocutt, 2006), classroom dialogue (Khourey-Brown, 2005), and social networking (Efimova & de Moor, 2005). There is less research on the efficacy of blogs in writing development at the elementary school level (Glewa & Bogan, 2007), even though studies have been published recognizing their effectiveness for writing in other disciplines (Dieu, 2004; Hogg, Lomicky, & Hossain, 2008). The purpose of this research was to explore how blogging influenced student writing development at the elementary level. This article describes the findings from this exploration. It also includes recommendations for writing pedagogy.

Blogging as Writing Literacy for Schools

Blogging brings outside school literacy practices into the classroom (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005) and it has the potential to become a literacy, not a technology, issue in schools (Leu, 2005). This is because such technology "capitalize[s] on the strengths of authentic writing, the power of the writing process, and the engagement of collaborative writing" (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008, p. 504).

Blogs can also facilitate literacy development through storytelling and dialog, because their format encourages self-expression and recounting of personal events to the blogger community in other than oral situations (Huffaker, 2005). Viewed in this way, blogging is about

communication and interaction. Since much of this conversation in the school context is grounded in the curriculum and about critical thinking in student learning, it needs also to be seen as an academic practice, which is different from blogging for merely personal purposes (Boling, 2008).

Much of personal blogging is about sharing items of interest, news, and personal information (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). While sharing news and personal insight are important to academic blogging, like Williams and Jacobs, we believe that there is much more to it when adopted for classroom practice. Academic blogging is a space for modeling and developing the literacy processes, critical thinking, reflection, questioning, and social practices engendered by the affordances this new communicative technology provides to the blogger (Merchant, 2005). Most importantly, it is a place for ideas to develop and refine before they fully are crystallized in the writer's mind. Davies and Merchant (2007) describe this process as the "discussion of ideas in embryo" (p.170). Viewed in this way, blog writing is also a place to develop and nourish a community of writers who keeps their readers in mind (Author, 2009). This is fostered by the unique collaborations and relationships that academic blogging enables (Miller & Shepherd, 2004)

Writing and Writing Instruction in the Elementary Classroom

Process- oriented writing researchers and educators such as Donald Graves (1983), Lucy Calkins (1994), and Ralph Fletcher (2000) suggest that young writers learn to write by writing, that young writers need to understand their writing processes in order to develop strategies for monitoring and improving their own writing, and that writing development occurs over time.

Research also suggests that young writers need to learn to comprehend and use to their benefit the reader writer relationship and the audience expectations as they make meaning for

their readers (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1978). Cognitive and literacy research has indicated that awareness of the audience can correlate to the quality of writing (Corden, 2007). Barritt and Kroll (1978) argue that good writers have a very clear picture of the audience and write for it while poor writers lack such awareness, which leads them to focus on the self, losing other people's points of view. We know that writing is as much an individualistic as a social process (Vygotsky, 1978). The latter process is an artifact of collaborative knowledge creation (Bruffee, 1984). Writers write for others; and they need their readers' feedback to continue to refine both their ideas and craft.

Although conceived in reaction to traditional product- oriented rhetoric (Crowley, 1996), the process-oriented epistemologies of writing and writing development (Dorn & Soffos, 2001) do not negate the importance of the product, the outcome of the writing itself. Rather, they bring a balance to the product-centered pedagogies that tend to overemphasize the teaching of grammar and style at the cost of content and idea development. Effective writing instruction gives attention to idea development and content (Graves, 1983) and creates opportunities for authentic writing tasks and interaction with a real audience (MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2005).

While educators and classroom teachers endorse many of the findings from this research, they often struggle to implement them in their elementary classrooms. Obstacles are many and diverse. Standardized testing associated with the No Child Left Behind Act (Applebee & Langer, 2009) and its emphasis on reading, rather than writing or literacy, pushes teachers into a culture of formulaic writing (Kixmiller, 2004). It also eschews process-oriented authentic writing activities, including brainstorming, conferencing with others, and multiple revisions (Applebee & Langer, 2009). In a recent study of writing instruction in the elementary classroom, the trend

of "non-process writing activities" leading to "one-draft products created with limited teacher assistance and no expectation for revising, editing, or publishing" (Billen Thomas, 2010, p. 2) was still evident among the teachers who favored product-oriented pedagogy in eight school districts.

Additionally, in a national survey on teaching writing, grades 4-6, elementary teachers reported lack of preparation for teaching writing in teacher education programs (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Teachers in this survey also worried about being able to teach writing for only 15 minutes a day and that their students have only 25 minutes a day for composing paragraph-long texts. Understandably, under such time constraints, there is not really much room left for teaching metacognitive thinking about writing and idea development (Kixmiller, 2004).

Looking yet from another perspective, acquiring audience awareness, especially the ability to anticipate the readers interpretation of the writer's text, is a particularly challenging cognitive process to developing writers throughout childhood (Beal, 1996; Kellogg, 2008). Writers at this early stage in writing development tend to focus on their own thoughts rather than on how their writing reads itself, or more importantly, how it would appear to their readers (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Kellogg, 2008).

Interventions that prompt young writers to imagine the reader's point of view can help young writers to learn to revise their writing with their readers in mind (Holliway & McCutchen, 2004). Such interventions are necessary, but often difficult to execute with the teacher serving as the primary audience/reader in the typical classroom environment. The blogging platform can aid elementary teachers in securing access to the larger audience for their young writers. If carefully planned, it can also provide young writers with the opportunity to write for an extended period about the ideas of interest to them and to their readers. The readers, in turn, might serve as an

external intervention that indicates to the developing writers the areas that need improvement

and teaches them the ways the readers make sense of their writing (Torrance, 2007).

<div align="center">Methods</div>

Purpose

      This qualitative (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) study was developed to address the following

broad research question: What happens when 5th-graders blog and converse about literacies in

class and beyond? In particular, the researchers sought to examine the influence of blogging in

supporting writing and literacy development. Participants were also asked to reflect on

themselves as readers, writers, publishers, and learners and how blogging helped them to

advance these literacies. This work focuses on describing the influence of blogging on student

writing development.

Participants and Setting

      The students who participated in this study were fifth- grade elementary students. There

were nine girls and seven boys. The ethnic breakout was six Hispanic, nine Caucasian, and one

African American. One was a special education student and two were in the gifted program.

According to the classroom teacher, for the most part, students were on grade level. They

interacted well with each other and were receptive to trying new things. The teacher found them

strong in the language arts area, with writing requiring closer attention. She also noted that

student critical thinking skills were very low, and attributed this to the culture of testing and

assessments that required low- level types of knowledge from students. Table 1 is a summary of

the individual student bloggers' ethnic background.

Insert here Table 1

<div align="center">7</div>

The study took place in a Title I elementary school located in the far northern portion of a southern state. At the time of the study, the school housed 680 students with 81% considered economically disadvantaged. Four hundred of the 680 students were Hispanic, which accounted for 36% of the student population identified and served in the English Language Learner Program. The rest of the student population was 16.5% African American, 21.3% White, and 3.1% multi-race. In 2008, the school received recognition for academic achievement in reading, math, and English language arts.

The Blogging Project

The teachers of these students were interested in blogging with a whole class. One was the classroom teacher and one was the instructional technology specialist. Additionally, one member of the research team provided instruction that involved the use of blogging for literacy development purposes. This researcher (referenced as *the blogging teacher* throughout this article) used web-authoring tools and processes to help students to *write to learn* about what they were studying in their class curriculum. The second researcher (first author in this work) provided informal feedback to student blogger writers and interviewed them on their blogging experiences. This researcher also observed classroom blogging sessions and interviewed the teachers. Graduate students from the second researcher's methods courses served as commenters and mentors to student bloggers throughout the blogging project. They offered advice, asked questions, and shared writing tips and resources with student bloggers. Other commenters were retired teachers who had participated in previous blogging projects conducted by the blogging teacher, readers who emerged from the larger blogging community, and even Harley, a dog with a kid-friendly personality, who also blogged. This "dog blogger" was created by one of the participating retired teachers.

Prior to this project, the class curriculum focused on the review of the fourth- grade basics in sentence structure, nouns, verbs as well as fictional story writing. For the duration of the blogging project, the class met in a language arts block period once a week for four hours in a computer lab, with a total of thirty-two blogging class sessions conducted in one academic year.

Typepad software was used for this project for two reasons: 1) access to unlimited accounts for educational use at the researchers' university and 2) the ability to monitor student activity on their blogs and to invite students to conversations about safe and responsible blogging in cases of inappropriate comment or behavior observed in blog posts/comments. Students designed and personalized their individual blogs. They also had access to the class blog maintained by the blogging teacher.

The Blogging Teacher's Writing Pedagogy

At the very beginning of the project, the blogging teacher introduced student bloggers to blogging through a web quest activity that familiarized them with the following aspects of blogging: questioning, thinking, writing, collaborating, reflecting, commenting, linking, and proofreading. The blogging teacher provided safety tips and guidelines using class wiki. The wiki introduced the students to the socio-cultural practices of a blogger community (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Penrod, 2007) and to the concept of responsible blogging. Central to this learning were the following roles and traits of responsible blogging that student bloggers in this project were charged with:

- accepting the challenge of blogging and striving to do their best
- understanding the conventions of public writing
- giving credit to others' words by linking and quoting
- respecting others by developing the ability to write responsibly

- understanding the power of communication with a larger audience

- developing their own unique voice and not being afraid to take risks

- celebrating their own and their peers' successes

- recognizing the contributions of their readers

In addition to these initial activities, the blogging teacher created a class blog to scaffold student blogger writing development (Vygosky, 1978; Dorn & Scoffos, 2001) and to model communicating with a larger audience. Typically, the blogging class started with a discussion around the posts on the class blog. These posts centered on the activity for the day, and they provided reinforcement of certain aspects of writing/blogging from previous sessions. Examples of writing foci in class blog posts included: using descriptive words to make writing come alive and/or using linking words to make writing sequential, developing vocabulary, or offering tips on sustaining dialogue with the audience.

Strong pieces of blogger writing were discussed and celebrated. There were many conversations about what student bloggers had learned, how they could improve, and what could be done to bring their voices to the forefront. This helped student bloggers to brainstorm ideas and content for their new posts and responses to earlier posts. Each class ended with goal setting for the next session and homework was assigned to support these goals.

Additional time was spent with students outside the computer lab on an individual basis and in small groups. This involved support activities such as interviews, projects, conversations, and writing and technology assistance. Other interactive web-based components were incorporated into the blogging sessions. Examples would be podcasts with peers and readers, Skype and Gizmo conversations with classes in Canada, ~~or~~ and a Google maps display of places where respondents resided, including student blogger annotations about these places.

Connections were made locally and globally and student bloggers actively participated in forging these connections.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary source of the data for this work were the pre- and post- blogging project writing samples as well as blog posts centered around the process of blogging. Additional data included student and teacher interviews. These latter data served as a member check (Creswell, 2003). Initially, student pre- and post- blogging writing samples were analyzed in a quantitative content analysis fashion (Weber, 1990). The Flesch-Kincaid formulas were used for this purpose, which allowed comparing pre-and post- writing in terms of length and readability. Table 2 displays these quantitative results, which indicated that most students improved in grade levels. Obviously, Flesch-Kincaid formulas could not describe the attributes of student writing.

Insert here Table 2

To be able to describe the attributes of student writing, a qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2003) was applied. This analysis began with developing a coding scheme with major codes (domains) and their descriptors. These domains included the following areas of interest in student writing: attitude, content, voice, connections and relationships, thinking, and craft. While the major domains were grounded in the traditional literature on writing and writing development (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Elbow, 1997), some supporting categories with specific domains were heavily informed by the emerging literature on blogging (Davies & Merchant, 2007; Penrod, 2007; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and newer literacies studies (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Leu, 2005). The latter body of literature allowed adding the categories that were emerging as new or important to blog writing specifically. Examples of such categories were social networking or hyperlinking. Table

3 provides an overview of the coding scheme for this study that consists of the main domains, supportive categories, and their descriptors. While this coding scheme served as an analytical framework for the data analysis in this work, the blogging and newer literacies studies provided theoretical grounding for this analysis.

Insert here Table 3

The two researchers for the blogging project coded student pre and post blogging writing samples first individually using the above-mentioned analytical framework (see Table 4, for an example of coding). The researchers analyzed the teachers' and students' interviews to member check the emerging themes in student writing. The researchers used NVivo (Ozkan, 2004) software for coding and storing data throughout the research project.

Insert here Table 4

In an attempt to establish inter-coder reliability (Creswell, 2003), the researchers compared their individual coding and discussed points of difference and similarity in their coding. Some adjustments were made to the original coding framework that helped to refine the domains and their descriptors. The revised coding framework then guided the researchers' re-coding of the student writing data. Concurrently to the second round of coding by individual researchers, analysis memos were developed. These memos included summative statements about the specific domains present in each sample of student blogger writing (See Table 5 for a sample of such analysis).

Insert here Table 5

Finally, individual researcher memos and writing samples were re-analyzed using the revised coding framework to determine the themes in this work. The themes included: 1) becoming mindful of and connected to the audience, 2) exercising agency in a community of

bloggers and 3) taking ownership of the writing process and the writer's craft. Although we discuss them separately in this work, they inform and complement each other.

Findings

Becoming Mindful of and Connected to the Audience

Student bloggers in our study began the year with a weak sense of the audience. In their pre-writing samples, the audience was seen as an abstract concept and as such was given little attention. As a result, the writing they composed was directed to no one in particular. Tina's excerpt illustrated this kind of detached writing. It read like a list of disjointed ideas, and lacked a narrative structure and associative thinking, typical in writing of young children (Newkirk, 1987).

I think I'm a great writer and I think I am a good reader. I enjoy writing alot. I also enjoy reading alot. I think it will help me alot about my reading and writing skills. I've always wanted to be a student blogger. I think it should help me in a few spots I'm not very good in. I'm sure I'll improve a lot. [Note: Spelling in all student excerpts is quoted as in the original student writing]

This example indicated yet another common feature in many of early student writings in this research. It was self-centered (Moffett, 1989), as it focused primarily on the bloggers' own needs as learners and writers and it did not consider the needs of readers.

If there was any audience under consideration in our bloggers' early writing, it was the teacher. The teacher was, however, invoked mainly as an evaluator of their work. This was true when student bloggers mentioned grades or made plans for improving literacy skills. Such a perception of teacher as reader was visible, for example, in Johnny's writing: "I think blogging will really help me in the areas of communicating, spelling, and neatness" or in Emmy's writing

as well: "I think blogging will help me get ideas of how I need to fix my writing and how I can improve it." Repeated phrases about the craft of writing in these statements are what these bloggers had previously heard from their teachers and what they had internalized as part of their grammars of schooling (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Unfortunately, since such phrases often did not have any relevant connections to their own ideas, they did not make much sense in their writing either. Eddie's initial post on blogging reflected such incoherent prose: "Then my skills in writing will improve then disimprove."

Active engagement with the audience through the commenting feature in this study helped our student bloggers to realize that out there was an audience other than the teacher and that they as writers were in a relationship with this audience. This audience was viewed as real people and for many of these bloggers, as friends too. This participatory relationship with the audience was apparent as Mia shared the feeling of connectedness and social interaction in an end of the year post, "My farewells buddies:"

> Hi and bye everybody this is MIA an almost 6 th grader. I'm here to tell Lani, Toni, Ms. C, A April, and every one else who as been commenting in my blog. Ya ll are so special to me. It is so hard to leave behind some thing you love so much.

GOOD-YBE FOR NOW MY FRIENDS

As Mia did, other student bloggers connected with their audience members, were interested in where they lived, what they did, and why they blogged. They shared a great deal about themselves too. To illustrate, Anni's post, "My Passion," described her love of monkeys,

> My passion would have to be about monkeys. They are cute, cuddly, and smart. I hope that when I grow up I can work with monkeys at a zoo. They are funny because on T.V. like animal planet they do thinks like flips and when they make noises it is funny. It does

not matter what kind they are, but I am scared of one Gorillas!!! My most favorite

monkey is the Orangutan.

This reflection resulted in a personal response from an Australian commenter. She shared with

Anni not only her passion for monkeys but also some facts from her personal life, such as getting

married at a zoo, studying animals and completing a project on chimpanzees in graduate school.

As those personal relationships continued to develop, the student bloggers in our

research addressed their audience with care and attention. These feelings were often reflected in

advice that they had for their readers on various matters. For instance, when Cena learned that

eating junk food was not healthy, he immediately shared this lesson with his readers, instructing

them in a very direct manner: "You need to eat less of all that sweets fat and calories. You can

eat that but not all that much. ...If you have any of that food don't eat it at once."

As student bloggers came to know their audience better, a sense of community and

belonging emerged. The back and forth comments stimulated the conversations and nourished

active participation within this community. Mary's exchange with Ashley, another student

blogger from Canada, reflected such participation:

Ashley, your answers are just terrific! ☺ Thanks for the proofreading tips. 'Your favorite

thing about blogging is writing'. That is really neat, because it just so happens that is my

favorite thing! I disagree with #3, where you said 'it depends whether you feel like

typing' because I never ever feel like not typing! ☺ I defiantly, agree with #4, where you

said 'blogging is a good experience' I also think that blogging gives you important

experiences. Blogging is a happy place☺. Guess which question I did. ☺ Everyone

deserves a shot at it. Your opinions are awesome!

In this exchange, Mary's voice was powerful and readers could see the dynamic relationship between the two student bloggers. In another dialog, Victoria engaged her readers through her questions on her post, "Up! Goes Our Population":

> The Genus Bureau's Population Clock hit the number 300,000,000 at 7:46 am in October 2006. …The U.S. is the 3rd country that has the most population of people in the world. Our population in the U.S. has grown so much in the couple of years. Can you belive that there are more than 3 million people just in the United States of America? Do you think it is a good thing that our population is growing so fast? Why or why not?

> Because of such active engagement with the audience, and the nourishing element they discovered in that community, student bloggers in our research began to feel empowered and motivated.

Exercising Agency in the Community of Bloggers

As previously mentioned, at the beginning of this research, many students felt confident as writers, but their writing was mainly for the teacher, lacking authenticity and content. Over time, student bloggers' sense of agency burgeoned, particularly at the end of our research. It took many forms and shapes, too. For example, it was manifested in growing levels of confidence and motivation as student bloggers received more and more comments and forged new connections and friendships with their readers. Dulce Maria's post, "My thank you comment," reflected both her confidence in the ability to improve her writing, due to the constructive feedback she received on her stories from readers, and her motivation to work even harder. She wrote:

> **mY THANK YOU COMMENT**[emphasis in the original post]

> I'm thanking to everybody who comment me and I'm so glad people really did. The first person I'm thanking to is Lani you said alot of nice comments and I 'm glad you liked my

story's. Did you know your were the first person to blog me? The next person was realy special to me and her name is Ms. Best. I think you tried your best in everything too and I 'm very glad your glad to be a Latino. I 'm Latino and I'm very happy about my culture too...

Blogging also boosted confidence in students like M.V., who was shy, and who in his initial writing response found writing in general to be "hard," even though he believed that he was good at "com[ing] up with good ideas out of nowhere." MV explained this change in him in his own words:

Blogging also helps you if you're a shy person because you have to open up and you can talk to people around the world and they can give you suggestions. Blogging is also an inspire to me because you make people think and you can be blether with people.

Increased confidence and motivation levels encouraged many student bloggers to take risks and to explore new subject areas in their writing. For example, Eddie's fascination with the language of math led him to explore a Canadian teacher's high school blog and to aspire to learn some of the material his students were studying. Eddie exclaimed, "The stuff that his student's learn make me want to learn more. I cant wait to get in high school!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Student attempts to take a stance with respect to the content and ideas discussed was also indicative of their empowerment as writers and learners. For example, Mary's passionate post about recycling was peppered with strong positions on the reasons why people should recycle. In it, she proclaimed that "Responsibility is the key:" Mary explained:

I strongly feel that all elementary schools in my county should have a recycling program. **You** [emphasis in the original post] should help out with recycling. You would be

helping the environment. The recycling program will improve the quality of the city and school environment.

Many comments were made in response to her post. While Mary agreed with most suggestions, she did challenge one. Michael suggested, "Perhaps you could write a persuasive letter to convince the county officials that recycling would be an important program to implement in all the elementary schools." Mary turned the tables with this response, "I have a recycling program. Why don't you make one at your school?" She did not reject the idea itself but opened the invitation to him and others as well. One might conclude that Mary was learning to write responsibly and proactively in a public setting and she was not afraid of taking ownership of such writing.

In the same vein, Rosalinda and Emmy demonstrated assertiveness as they communicated their opinions on selective issues. Rosalinda called for compassion and action from her readers in situations that required intervention, or as she put it, "If you see somebody in trouble, help them, because in the future when you are in trouble somebody will help you." Emmy, on the other hand, disapproved of dirty bathrooms, and called for a change in this behavior from the public: "Dirty bathrooms ewe!!! Amanda has said it and so have I. Dirty bathrooms GALORE! I don't want my children there."

A similar sense of self- agency allowed Johnny to question priorities in learning when he posted about his passions, music and guitar, and Lani complemented him but finished with one question: "Shouldn't a man such as yourself, with such a passion for his instrument spell it correctly?" In his response to this challenge, Johnny defended his stance: "I know but i always get it mixed up with the spelling of my instrument. But i can play it does that matter better then

the spelling it?" Lani acknowledged his talent being most important but went on to give a reason

he might consider for correct spelling:

> I think I was thinking on down the road, when perhaps you might want to market your
>
> musical skill or your band....Don't you think that spelling guitar correctly might be
>
> awfully important then, especially in terms of possible income for you?

> These and similar experiences of bloggers' agency in our research precipitated emerging

changes in the writer's process they used for composing on their own blogs. These changes are

presented next.

Taking Ownership of the Writing Process and the Writer's Craft

As mentioned earlier in this work, at the beginning of this research, student writing

lacked connection to the real audience since it was addressed to the teacher as the sole reader.

Having access to an audience through blogging motivated however student bloggers to write for

and engage this audience. This was true for Mia, whose work began as teacher-oriented writing:

"[blogging] eill help me to be a better reader and writer. it will also help me on useing my

keyboard right." However, her writing was transformed once the reader was acknowledged and

invited to join the conversation. It became purposeful and more complex with elaboration,

transition, and organization. She was also playful with the language and used a metaphor of a

traveler to illustrate her writing journey, as illustrated in this post:

> I see myself as a reader by reading other people blogs and picking out important
>
> sentences. I also see myself as a reader when I'm making a new post I put myself in the
>
> reader shoes. I make sure that my reader won't get bored after he/she is finish. Also I
>
> make sure after they finish reading the post, that they understand it.

> Both awareness of the real audience and a special connection to them, encouraged

questions about the writer's craft, as illustrated in Michael's post to Randy, another student

blogger from Canada:

> Randy, those are some long answers. How do you stretch your answer so far? I keep my
>
> very short. But you inspire me. I think my replies should be 5 sentences long. Do you
>
> think that is OK? When I read the Q & A then I was amazed. When I heard I was
>
> supposed to make this post I got straight to work.

As they began to believe in themselves and the power of the written word, their voices

became more powerful too. This was true for Victoria, who became captivated by the power of

commenting. She wrote:

> One thing I enjoy doing in blogging is commenting! I like commenting to other people
>
> because you get a chance to see what others are writing about and tell them why you like
>
> their writing! And I also like getting comments because you can learn what you can do
>
> better on by other readers!

In this posting, Victoria's voice was clear, engaging, and personal. She used direct language to

that effect. Her voice was particularly strong and playful in this imaginary exchange that she

engaged with her readers: "If we blog in schools I guarantee you that students will improve in

reading and writing. And you practice a lot! As everyone says practice makes perfect!"

Likewise, Mia's voice became direct, playful, engaging, and even instructional, as when

she queried her readers about the use of the six traits of writing in their writing, trying to

convince them about their importance in the following post:

> How many times have you use the six traits of writing. A lot, a little, or all the time. Don't
>
> say never because whether you notice or not you are using your Six traits of writing even
>
> if you are not writing. Well, the six traits of writing…

Like Michael, Tina was learning how to use idioms and other figurative language in her attempts to make writing come alive for her readers, as reflected in this exclamation, "The best comment I've ever gotten snatch my socks right off my feet and I got it from a very wonderful friend named Lani on my post "Fun thing I learned" well here you go."

This experimentation with language, as illustrated in the posts above, often resulted in less clear or polished writing, yet it was more engaging to the reader. This is because these bloggers were taking steps to rich, engaged, and creative writing. This writing was obviously in the emerging stage.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, student bloggers developed a new understanding and appreciation of the audience. Initially, their primary audience under consideration was the teacher, confirming the evidence from previous research (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Cowie, 1984; MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2005). The teacher as reader was also seen as "the arbiter of correctness, standard usage, and proper form, the ultimate and only reader "(Garret, 2009). Such a perception of the teacher reader was evident when student bloggers mentioned grades and made plans for improving certain literacy skills in their initial responses.

Student awareness and understanding of the audience changed however dramatically in this research because of developing a dynamic relationship, and in many cases, friendships with their readers, through the blogging experience. The audience was no longer an abstract concept to these bloggers, as often it is in many classrooms (Walker, 2005). The audience they blogged with were real people, with whom they shared interests and passions, and with whom they were learning about blogging and different subject matter.

The members of the audience played an active role too in this research. They were a transforming audience (Hartley, 2007) in that they influenced the blogger's ideas, thinking, and writing. They also encouraged student bloggers to revise their writing to be more effective. At the same time, the active and participatory components of blogging in this research invited student bloggers to express and support their own ideas and opinions in a public forum (Mortensen & Walker, 2002). This resulted in blurring the traditional concepts of the reader/writer relationship and writing purposes and spaces (Merchant, 2008). As bloggers, these students were learning to write in the readerly way, by attending to their readers' needs and interests. In a similar fashion, as readers of posts from the audience, these student bloggers were learning to interpret their posts in the writerly way (Swenson, Young, Author, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006), looking for ideas to comment on and questions and issues to which they could respond. Understanding the complexity of this new relationship and the authorial positioning of the reader and writer is critical to writing and writing instruction in today's world.

The blogging teacher in this research understood how to orchestrate such interaction in her classroom. She knew how to use the affordances of the blogging technology not only to tap into the students' desire to write but also how to develop activities and solutions to foster their growth as writers and communicators with the larger audience within the blogging community. This in turn nurtured these bloggers' growth as writers and communicators.

Student bloggers in this research became empowered and motivated learners too. They acted as agents of their ideas that "inform[ed], change [ed], and shape [ed]" their blogger community thinking (Schneider & Evans, 2008, p.1). They became confident and were willing to share with their readers their passions, interests, and opinions on various topics. As words and language began to have authentic meaning for them and resonated with their readers, they were

beginning to feel ownership for their learning, ideas and writing process (Cowie, 1984). They were also making plans for improvement of their writing craft, setting personally- relevant agendas for themselves as writers and what they wished for their audiences. This increased self-agency in mastering the writing skills. This was due to the support these bloggers received from the blogging community at large and from the teachers who reached out to this community.

The blogging community in this study was developed both within and beyond the classroom, and it was planned with ongoing classroom dialogue with the students about their writing process. The teachers in this research facilitated such community development, but were one of many voices within it (Walker, 2005). Such collaboration required the blogging teacher to shift from a traditional pedagogy to a participatory pedagogy (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotm, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006). Within this new pedagogy, the teacher fulfilled the traditional roles of a teacher in a classroom as an insider who recruited and guided the blogging community in the learning process as well the new role as an outsider who left comments on student blogs (Davies & Merchant, 2007). Further research needs to focus on ways to recruit and empower a blogging audience to be part of the blogging learning community. Teachers will also need professional development in support of such participatory pedagogy.

In terms of the writing craft, student bloggers' active engagement with the audience supported their cognitive growth as writers as they began to move away from self-centered writing. After Moffet's (1968) theory of cognitive development, Blau (1983) called this process "decentering" (p.300), which is associated with the writer's ability to reflect upon writing and adjust/rework it with the readers in mind. They were also exploring various ways to invoke and speak directly to their readers, who were no longer only teachers. As a result, their writer voices were also developing distinctive features, becoming engaging and personal, filled with opinions,

humor, expression, and playfulness. They enjoyed experimenting with ideas in ways that had not occurred to them in the past. Writing suddenly had a purpose and meaning other than to please the teacher or to earn a grade (Penrod, 2007).

It needs to be noted though that their writing was not perfect, for it included many spelling and grammatical errors typical in the early stages of writing development. The teachers and respondents to student writing in this research kept their comments on grammar, spelling, and style to the necessary minimum, to help these bloggers to communicate their ideas to their readers. This withholding of the red pen on the respondents' part provided, in turn, an ideal space for these student bloggers for a "discussion of ideas in embryo" (Davies & Merchant, 2007, p.170). While writing within such a context became "interacting – dialogue, intimacy, and risk-[taking] "(Whithaus, 2005, p.84), the formative assessment that accompanied it strengthened dialogue about ideas with the authentic audience (Whithaus, 2005).

Such an approach to writing and its formative assessment in this work "give meaning to the act of writing and help students to develop new habits of thought about writing and its role in their lives" (Clark, 2010, p.8). At the same time, state-or federally mandated standardized testing in today's classrooms has had the effect of reducing the definition of what good writing entails (Herrington, Hodgson, & Moran, 2009, p.7-8), and of narrowing the definition of how it should be evaluated (Genishi & Dyson Hass, 2009). Yet writing instruction of the kind described in this study must be pursued if we wish our students to become motivated and effective writers now and in the future, in the classroom and beyond it. A carefully planned blogging experience allows us to re-imagine a place where such pedagogy can be practiced.

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