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Blogging about Books: What We Can Learn From Our Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate how the use of blogging in the language arts classroom influences student communication about independent reading novels. I was motivated to do this study by witnessing the enthusiasm with which my students discussed technology as well as their eagerness to use those resources to create technologically sound learning experiences. That inspired me to investigate socially-driven technology. Our classroom blog and accompanying blog comments were the primary sources of data collection for this study. Theories that helped frame this study include Social Constructivism and Transactional/Reader Response. The results of this study indicated that blog conversations benefitted students on academic and social levels.

The Bread Winner

November 2, 2011 @ 10:44 AM **22 COMMENTS** [Edit this Post](#)

Dear Ms Albaugh,

The book im reading is called the The Bread Winner written by Deborah Ellis. This is a realistic fiction book.

The chapter i just read flipped me like a pancake. [sic]

Introduction

Amy, whose blog entry appears above, is a student recently released from special education services. Her reading response turned into a continued correspondence with her classmate, Megan (all names are pseudonyms), who earned a perfect score in language arts literacy on last year's state test. After twenty-two comment entries, the energy still continued between Megan and Amy. Their interest in carrying on this conversation is an example of how technology is increasingly becoming an indispensable feature in the daily lives of students across Massachusetts, and arguably, the United

States. Teachers, in turn, must reflect upon their fundamental pedagogical techniques in order to reach this digitally literate generation. One technological tool that has made its way into the classroom is a weblog, or "blog." According to Heskett (2009), a blog "is a page on the Internet, a way to publish on the web"(p.3). Alvermann (2008) cites the Pew Internet and American Life Project by Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith (2007) that determines "the use of social media – blogging; working on a webpage for school or for personal use; sharing original content such as artwork, photos, stories or videos; and remixing online content to create new texts – is central to the

lives of many young people living in the United States.” Similarly, in his study of the effectiveness of using blogs in the classroom, Felix (2007) cites the Pew Internet and American Life Project, stating that “fifty-five percent of Americans between the ages of 12-17 participate in a social network such as blogging” (p.26). These results suggest that blogging is a popular feature of technology among upper-elementary and high school students.

Accordingly, the question guiding my research was, *How does blogging contribute to student communication about books?*

Theoretical Framework

As I began to look into blogging, key theorists repeatedly surfaced during my research of related literature. Frameworks that I leaned on to structure my own research include Social Constructivism and the Transactional/Reader Response Theory. Lev Vygotsky’s Social Constructivist theory, as relayed by Woolfolk (1997) in Tracey and Morrow’s (2006) *Lenses on Reading*, asserts that “[c]hildren’s knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and values develop through interaction with others” (p.108). Vygotsky believed that children’s learning and development are constructed from the relationships they have in their lives. As Glassman (2001) writes, “human inquiry is embedded in culture.” Inquiry acts as the basis for learning, and culture is the stimulus for that inquiry. According to this theory, social learning prepares students to function as culturally aware and interactive members of society, and education is a result of culturally aware and interactive pedagogy.

Though the interaction students have with each other through blogging is not face-to-face, their communication through technology creates opportunities to collaborate with their peers to form a deeper understanding of a text. Felix (2007) states that, “as students tap into the collective knowledge residing within a blog and then subsequently add to that knowledge they become able to express their knowledge as Vygotsky states on their own level of understanding” (p.41). Blogs can provide the platform for social interaction, a platform that has the potential to enhance the learning experiences for those involved. In Swanson’s study of blogs and motivation (2008) and Zawilinski’s research of the

effectiveness of blogging in the classroom (2009), the global industry in which students will be entering demands its participants to be collaborative and cooperative, and learning communication skills via the Internet is one way in which to prepare them.

Furthermore, using Vygotsky’s theory as a lens to analyze my research encourages me to examine the dialogic nature of blogging itself in the context of book communication and how that social interaction affects their comprehension of a text. In Miller’s (2011) study of blogging and adolescent literacy development, ascertains that the collaborative promise of blogs fosters socialization. Through these blogs, Felix (2007) believes that learning can be constructed in interactive situations. Felix (2007) prefaces this statement by asserting that Vygotsky had “laid the groundwork for 21st century educators to be ready for the type of learner now entering our classrooms” (p.42). From the viewpoint of Vygotsky’s research, social interaction and inquiry may be able to increase and authenticate learning experiences by using a socially interactive blog. Theoretically, the social learning perspective will provide insight into how my students are making sense of independent and classroom-based texts through their blog conversations.

The current research also relies on Louise Rosenblatt’s Transactional/Reader Response Theory (1978). According to Tracey and Morrow (2006), Rosenblatt’s theory states that “all readers have individualized reading experiences because each reader has unique background schemas” (p. 55). Specifically, this means that every reader has a unique experience with a text based on varying levels of background information with the content. No two readers will have the same interaction with a given text because meaning is constructed from within the individual. This perspective is significant because it gives readers ownership of the text that they read: they are empowered to comprehend text because their comprehension processes are steeped in personal experiences. Comprehension is the result of the “transaction” between the reader and the text. This has significant implications for blogging, as each of my students’ blogs is based on their responses to texts. Franklin-Matkowski’s (2007) dissertation on the

relationships between reading, blogging, and student thinking relates that Rosenblatt's theory makes unification of readers attractive to students because their experiences become significant to an understanding of text. She goes on to describe that "blogs offer students the opportunities to inform, advise, persuade, think aloud, record, and explore" (Franklin-Matkowski, 2007, 16). These opportunities are invaluable assets to the Transactional/Reader Response Theory, as students are able to share the meaning they are creating from a given text or from a classmate's blog entry.

The dialogic nature of blogs as discussed in the context of Vygotsky also applies to Transactional/Reader Response. Miller (2011) explains that "blogging is a form of dialogue" and "such interaction builds relationships with others and fosters the collaborative posing and solving of problems" (p. 24, 27). Students record their efferent (factual) or aesthetic (emotional) responses on the blog, thus inviting a dialogue with their classmates. As the dialogue develops, the benefits are twofold: both in meaning making as well as fostering collaborative, team-building relationships. Kingsley (2011) adds that "every reading act is a transaction; text implies meaning and meaning implies the use of text" in her dissertation about online reading interventions (p. 12). The blog simply acts as a medium for students to record their transactions; however, significantly, it also invites the responses of others.

Interestingly, as much as Vygotsky and Rosenblatt relate to blogging in the classroom, motivation seems to be a key factor in the success of blogs as a means of understanding text. Inevitably, in certain communities in which students have multimodal access to the Internet, blogs have the power to connect in and out of school literacies (Miller, 2011). Giving students the power to construct knowledge beyond the walls of the classroom can be extremely motivating. Felix (2007), Franklin-Matkowski (2007), and Swanson & Leguto (2008) contend that blogging is motivating as well as meaningful for students. In her article on adolescent online literacy, Alvermann (2008) agrees, believing that technological literacy is "so powerfully motivating that young people are more and more willing to invest a substantial amount of

time and effort in creating content to share with others online" (p. 9). I contend that as a cross-curricular educator, using these literacies in a meaningful way will increase student time and interaction with each other and with the blog, thereby aiding comprehension acquisition.

Research Methods

As a fifth grade teacher, I am particularly interested in the influence of technology on my students' lives and how I can use their experiences to enhance learning. Students are using technology in many different ways, and one of those ways is to blog. The purpose of this study was to understand how blogging can influence student communication about books. The study was conducted over a six-week period in the fall of 2011, involving twenty-three fifth grade students (twelve girls, eleven boys) in a heterogeneous, public school classroom setting. This particular school is one of three kindergarten-through-fifth grade elementary schools in a town that was ranked in 2011 by CNN as one of the best places to live in the United States. All of my students volunteered to participate in this study.

To begin, I decided to introduce my students to blogging by first using a paper format. They used construction paper to write "blogs" about their favorite foods. Students were encouraged to be as descriptive as possible in their personal paper "blogs," which were displayed in the classroom. I decided to encourage, but not require, students to write their blogs in a friendly letter format modeled after the Reader Response Journals that we had been using. After that, students were introduced to writing positive comments to post as feedback on classmates' posts. We discussed how to format their comments, focusing especially on how to politely disagree with and thoughtfully respond to classmates, and then used sticky notes to comment on one another's paper blogs. Throughout this process, I shared blog entries with my students from other fifth grade classrooms in our building as well as classroom blogs I found on the web in order to expose them to blog format and reinforce the atmosphere of community weblogs can create.

I then created an online blog for our classroom, using the website <http://www.kidblog.org>. This website was chosen because it had optional privacy

Table 1

Survey Results Assessing Student Familiarity and Access to the Internet

| | |
|---|------------|
| Has internet access at home | 100% |
| Has permission to use internet at home | 100% |
| Average reported time spent on internet daily | 0-2+ hours |
| Participates in social networking websites | 0% |
| Owns an iPod | 36% |
| Owns an iPhone or other smartphone | 27% |
| Prefers to text message when communicating with friends | 18% |
| Prefers to call when communicating with friends | 23% |
| Prefers to type assignments for school | 77% |
| Prefers to write assignments for school | 23% |
| Students who have experience blogging in school | 23% |

Note. All 23 of my students submitted this survey.

settings that I could use to keep conversations limited to members of our classroom only. The two main reasons I chose to enable the privacy settings were to ensure that student conversations stayed focused on books and to analyze the blog conversations with a theoretical lens that only involved our classroom community. Our blog differed from the others in our school because, as stated above, I did not require students to adhere to Reader Response prompts. I wanted my students to feel free to express themselves and their relationships with the books they were reading without the limitations of prompts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to beginning the study, I administered a student survey addressing several questions ranging from internet accessibility to blog experience (Appendix A). The results of this data suggested that all of my students have internet access at home, just over one-quarter of the class had an iPod or smart phone, and just under one-quarter had experience blogging. Seventy-seven percent preferred typing assignments as opposed to writing them (Table 1). These results provided a basis for me to introduce the blog concept, as well as affirmed for me the prevalence of technology in my students' daily lives.

I did not design a schedule or impose a minimum or maximum number of blogs and comments. Because

I sought to examine how blogging was enhancing student communication about books, any posting requirement would interfere with the validity of my results. Essentially, I gave them “free reign” over when they blogged, how they blogged, what books they blogged about, and who they commented with. Assigning this freedom gave me much insight on student blogging themes and patterns.

I began to discover several themes in the blog entries and feedback comments made by the students. As displayed in Figures 1 and 2, one of the trends discovered through my analysis was the blogs submitted by the girls in the class accounted for sixty-three percent from the total six-week period. Similarly, the comments submitted by the girls accounted for sixty-eight percent of total comments posted (Figures 1-2). The girls in my class were also more likely to engage one another in on-going conversations about books. I consider a blog “conversation” any blog with more than two comments submitted by the same pair of students. For instance, students Megan and Amy discussed our classroom read aloud, *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis, over a twenty-two thread conversation! (A sample of this blog conversation appears at the beginning of this article.) However, out of all of the blog-comment posts, only twenty-four resulted in conversations. Interestingly, thirteen out of my twenty-three students varied their comments by engaging three or more different classmates (Figure 3). Four students commented on

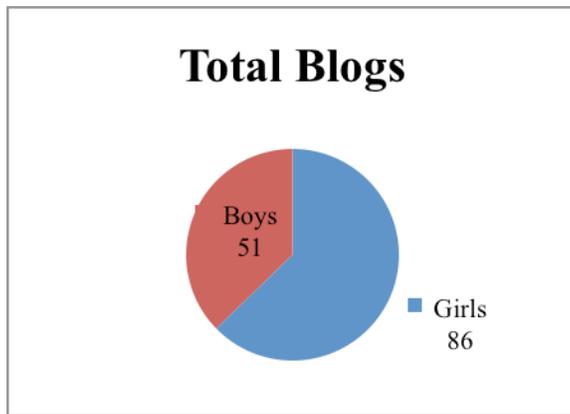


Figure 1. Total classroom blog entries after six-week research study.

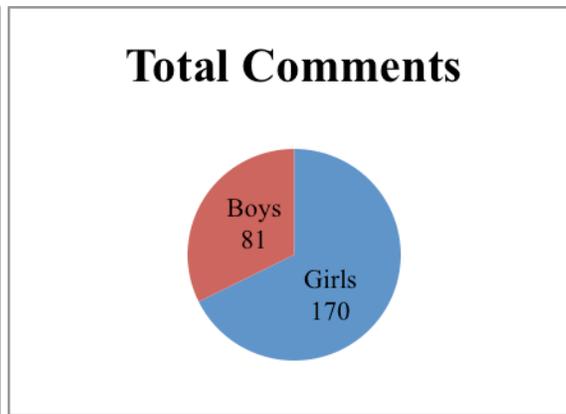


Figure 2. Total classroom comment entries after six-week research study.

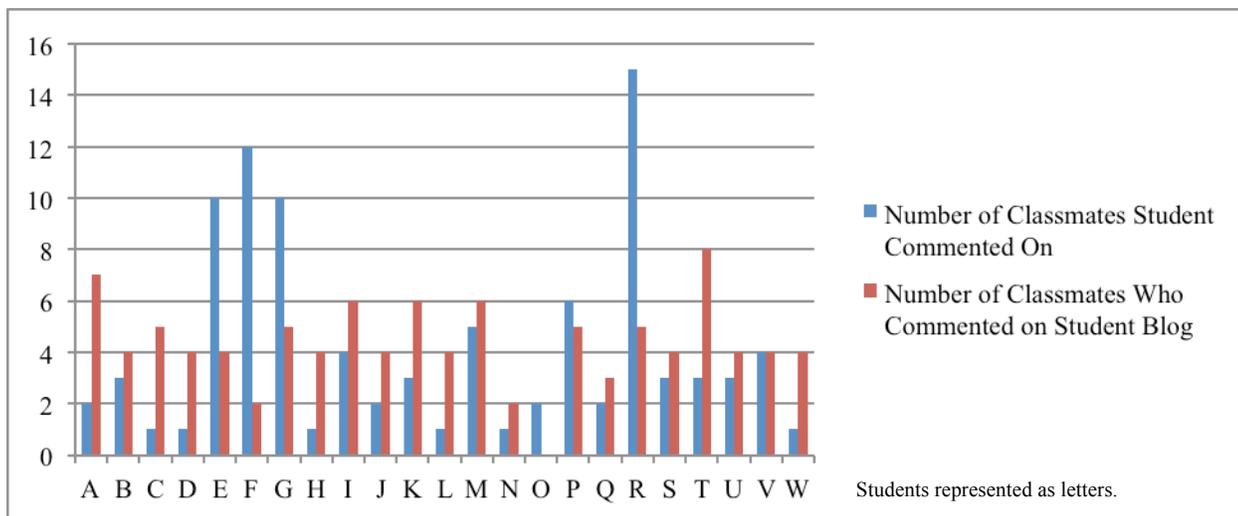


Figure 3. Number of classmates each student commented on and number of classmates who commented on individual student's blog.

two different classmates' blogs, and six students only commented on one other classmate's blog. While the average number of different students commenting on a blog was four, two students received only two different comments, and one student did not receive any comments from classmates.

Grammatically, all students wrote in complete sentences in each of their blogs. They did not, however, consistently use appropriate capitalization or punctuation while blogging. Their posted feedback comments, though, were much more likely to contain correct capitalization and punctuation. Additionally, without following any prompts, students were using comprehension strategies we had discussed in class. For example, many students

wrote summaries, made predictions, personal responses, text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world connections, asked questions, described making mental images they constructed, and made recommendations. While the girls in my class were more likely to engage in blog conversations, both boys and girls submitted entries of about equal quality in terms of comprehension strategy use.

Furthermore, my students receiving or recently released from special education services thrived while blogging. Most strikingly, many of these students appeared to gain confidence in oral participation during our language arts block. Students who had remained silent observers for the first two months of school were suddenly moved to make predictions or inferences and ask questions

during class discussions. Many of their comments were related to their blog posts.

Brianna is one such student who has thrived since we began blogging. When I met Brianna in September, she was extraordinarily withdrawn and rarely volunteered. At the beginning of the study, she did not reach out and comment on classmates' blogs and blogged infrequently herself. As the study continued, however, her blogs and comments became more frequent and varied. Brianna's first blog entry, for example, was 155 words and consisted almost entirely of a quoted portion of the text. Her final entry before the close of this research period was 216 words! Although it was still nearly all summary, Brianna had taken information from the text and summarized it in her own words. Simultaneously, I began to notice a change in her classroom behavior. Brianna began to share what she was reading with classmates and engage them in discussion. She also began volunteering more confidently while asking questions or providing connections.

Additionally Nick, whose blog sample appears at the end of this article, is another example of a student who thrived as a result of his blogging experience. Nick's mother had approached me at open house expressing her concerns about his shyness. In the months prior to the study, I noted that Nick spoke only in whispers when called on in class. He, like Brianna, rarely volunteered answers or comments. As we began blogging, though, his confidence and personality began to blossom. For students like Nick who are uncomfortable in front of peers in a classroom setting, blogging provides a buffered platform for social interaction. This in turn, supports shy students in socially constructing meaning from text in the controlled and comfortable setting of their own homes.

Conclusion

Teaching students in an increasingly digital world has opened an entire new realm of pedagogical techniques for reaching students of all ability levels. Using a blog as a supplement to language arts literacy instruction allows students to interact with a medium that is accessible and enjoyable. However, blogging is not limited to strictly conversations about books; it is a valuable tool that has cross-

curricular, differentiated learning opportunity potential.

The use of blogging in the classroom has major implications for teachers, from both Social Learning and Transactional/Reader Response perspectives. After reviewing research related to blogging in the language arts literacy block as well as examining my own students' communication via blogging, it is evident that using this social networking tool has many positive classroom influences. A blog is the channel that invites readers to express their connections to a text in a nonthreatening and responsive environment. For example, blogging allows for built-in scaffolding between students, pushing them within their zones of proximal development to discuss and understand text.

I feel that the most important aspect of blogging, from the perspective of this experience, is gaining unique insight into my students' lives. Amy is just one example of a student who I was able to connect with outside of the classroom. As with Brianna, her blog entries increased in both word count (from 152 to 363) and content. Throughout her blog entries, Amy asked me questions and my opinion, made predictions, and connected with the novels that she read. Additionally at the close of each blog, Amy wrote that she enjoyed her blogging experience for reasons that ranged from, "i love a start to a good book and i enjoy reading pirate books" [sic] to "I loved this blogging experience because Ramona books are one of my favorite series and i love her personality" [sic]. As her language arts literacy teacher, I was able to recommend novels based on her interests, engage her in active and ongoing conversations, and forge a relationship that reinforced how much I value her opinions and thoughts on the books she is reading. Amy felt safe to honestly offer the processes she encountered while reading in our blogs, and I was able to support and guide her in authentic ways.

This study, though, was not without limitations. For instance, I feel six weeks was a very brief amount of time for students to fully experience communicating with each other via the blog. Another limitation may be the effect of my pedagogy on the content of the blog. If I were to repeat this study, I would investigate the strategies

being taught in class as a correlative to the conversations students were having about books on the blog.

Moreover, I would reach out to the boys in the class who were less inclined to participate in order to increase their interest and involvement. Strategies that could support the boys' involvement in the blog community include increasing my feedback to individual students in blog comments, planning time to blog during language arts centers, and using blog entries as a springboard for classroom

discussion. These strategies can also improve the overall quality of the students' blogs. In order to motivate strong student responses, I could provide a list of suggestions for blog content that would remind students to record their connections, questions, and predictions in their entries.

Despite these limitations, I believe that blogging is a vehicle for readers to enter a community in which they can express their efferent or aesthetic responses, and then communicate with each other to continue to build upon their knowledge stores.

Mr. Stink

October 26, 2011 @ 4:24 PM **3 COMMENTS** [Edit this Post](#)

Then things start to get a little out of control. (Would you like to find out? Read the book!) [sic]

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Appendix A: Student Technology Survey

1. Do you have internet access at home?
2. Are you allowed to use the internet at home?
3. How often are you online daily? (approximately)
4. Do you participate in social networking websites, such as Facebook or MySpace?
5. Do you have a smart phone, such as an iPhone or Blackberry?
6. When using your cell phone (if you have one), which do you do more often: text message or call your friends?
7. If you had to choose, would you rather type or handwrite assignments?
8. Have you ever blogged before in school? For what subject?
9. Did you enjoy the experience? Why or why not?